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Representing Australian Indigenous Voices: Text Selection in the Senior English Curriculum.

Abstract:

This paper reports findings from a study investigating trends in character, historical setting, authorship and themes across VCE text selection lists between 2010 and 2019. We address the fictionalisation and imagining of Australian history through narratives about Indigeneity and settler-colonisation. While we will describe positive trends that have emerged over time, by and large this study agrees with Leane (2016) and Langton's (1993) assertions regarding the transmission of knowledge and representation of Indigeneity and Australian history in the classroom; namely, there is an under-representation of Indigenous authors, poets, playwrights, film directors, and complex, non-stereotypical character-types and an over-representation of non-Indigenous authors representing themes and stories of Indigeneity, reconciliation and colonisation.

Introduction

This study investigates trends in characters, historical setting, authorship and themes across the senior Victorian English curriculum, the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) text lists between 2010 and 2019. We address the fictionalisation and imagining of Australian history through narratives about Indigeneity and settler-colonisation. We consider how the selection and representation of Indigenous voices and stories are linked to the wider historical context of how narrative can represent, and misrepresent, Australian history.

Scholar Jeanine Leane (2016) explores this issue from the perspective of both herself as a young student, where she was exposed to "a catalogue of misrepresentations of me and my people" (p. 42), and as an educator, where she witnessed complex and conflicting emotional responses from non-Indigenous students when they encountered narratives that disrupted stereotypes and benign representations of colonisation. Leane's work focuses on the tensions and conflicts that emerge where non-Indigenous Australian authors and filmmakers represent and fictionalise Indigenous characters. She emphasises, alongside scholars such as Marcia Langton (1993), that this is a form of appropriation, a reinforcement of stereotype and of the dichotomy of powerful vs powerless, which extends back to the beginning of colonisation: "such representations are more accurately seen as a manifestation of white consciousness of Aboriginal Australians, rather than of Aboriginal Australians" (Leane, 2010, p. 33).

Policy documents mandate that schools in Australia focus on Indigenous cultures and histories. The preamble to the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008), a policy document created and signed by all Australian Education Ministers, for example, begins with:

As a nation Australia values the central role of education in building a democratic, equitable and just society— a society that is prosperous, cohesive and culturally

diverse, and that values Australia's Indigenous cultures as a key part of the nation's history, present and future (p. 4).

The document elaborates on this goal, arguing that for students to grow into active and informed citizens, they must understand and acknowledge the value of Indigenous cultures and history, and that the content necessary to achieve this growth must be accessible to all Australian students.

This position manifests in the most recent iteration of the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2019) which mandates cross-curriculum priorities associated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Culture. The curriculum requires this priority to be taught throughout all learning areas, emphasising the importance of developing an awareness, appreciation and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature within subject English.

In the state of Victoria, all students who wish to complete their senior school certificate are required to study at least one of three English subjects (English, Literature and English Language). The majority of these students, over eighty-five percent (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2018a), study the mainstream subject 'English' and must engage with texts from the mandated text lists. Each year of the curriculum is aligned with a new list, with small revisions made to ensure that no texts appear for more than four consecutive years. The list is a product of extensive consultation and negotiation with a range of stakeholders and involves over twelve months of meetings and debate. The list must meet the demands of the curriculum, as well as adhering to policy documents which outline the principles, guidelines, and procedures that influence text-selection processes. For example, the *VCAA principles, guidelines and procedures for prescribed VCE text lists* document (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2018b) dictates the rules that must be followed when selecting texts for addition to each year's list. It states that texts must, amongst other things, have literary merit, be an excellent example of form and genre, and raise interesting issues and provide challenging ideas (p. 7). The guidelines further state that the list as a whole will "include texts by or about Australians, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples" (p. 3). The texts selected for inclusion on these lists must be the focus of all students' high-stakes final year Examinations, and for this reason, and many others, they take on a canonical status that reveals a great deal about what constitutes the 'right' kind of literature, worthy of study.

The curriculum itself also requires particular outcomes with regards to the selection and study of texts. A total of four texts must be studied from the provided lists in order to meet the demands of the curriculum. This includes an obligation to study at least two texts which adhere to the categories of novels, plays, collections of short stories or collections of poetry. Additionally, no more than one multimodal text may be selected, either a film or graphic novel, and at least one of the selected texts must be by an Australian, although this need not be an Australian of Indigenous background.

Literature Review

The purpose and content of subject English has long been the source of contestation amongst academics, the community, the teaching profession, and politicians alike (Cox, 1991; Green,

2003; Thompson, 1998). We need only look to a recent review of the first national Australian curriculum to see evidence of this. Conducted by Australian poetry Professor Barry Spurr, the Australian government-sponsored review of the English component of the curriculum (Spurr, 2014) reported that it was “seriously unbalanced in ... its apparent bias against the historical and canonical components of the discipline and in the patchy representation of the various forms of literature” (p. 4), and that this could be rectified through the inclusion of Middle English lyrics, the works of Chaucer, and the study of the Bible. There is no mention in Spurr’s review of the value of Indigenous literature. Rather, his belief that “the impact of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on literature in English in Australia has been minimal” (p. 10) is used to support the notion that there should be less Indigenous literature.

What is obvious is that texts play a crucial role in mediating the work teachers and students do within the walls of the English classroom. Since the time when English was installed at the ‘hub’ of early twentieth century school curricula in Australia, texts have had a role in mediating the pastoral and moral development of the individual (Patterson, 2002). Texts are not ideologically neutral (Misson & Morgan, 2006), nor do they function in isolation from the institutional and curricula ideologies that constrain them (McLean Davies, Doecke, Gill, & Hayes, 2017). Texts and text-selection practices are crucial to understanding the cultures and histories students will encounter through literature, theatre and film.

Attention has turned towards what appears on, and is selected from, senior school texts lists. Patterson (2012) investigated the popularity of Australian texts which students were selecting to respond to on senior examinations in Victoria between 2001 and 2010. This study found that, despite a slow start, Australian texts were more frequently studied in the latter years of her sample (p. 12), although no distinction is made between indigenous and non-indigenous texts. In *Required Reading: Literature in Australian Senior Secondary English Since 1945* (Dolin, Jones, & Dowsett, 2017), a range of authors report findings from the ALIAS database (*Analysis of Literature in Australian Schools*), which includes all texts found on prescribed reading lists for senior secondary school curricula across Australian English and Literature courses since 1945. The collection documents the literary texts which characterised upper-secondary English studies for many students, and shows how attempts in Victoria to provide opportunities for all students, through the inclusion of texts that reflected the social and ethnic diversity of Australia, were challenged (McLean Davies et al., 2017). Other analysis of the database has revealed that the prevalence of canonical texts, such as Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, has impacted on the cultural identities made possible in and through subject English (Martin & McLean Davies, 2017). In a sense, the analysis of text lists offers insight into policy intentions about subject English and the recurrent presence of particular texts on lists over time, and across States, “can be read as a proxy for perceived value and popularity” (McLean Davies & Buzacott, 2018, p. 30).

Questions about the presence and use of Indigenous texts within subject English have been raised in the past. These studies consider a range of positions, including questions about who should teach Indigenous perspectives, how they should be taught, and which perspectives should be included at all. Collins (2005) identifies the challenges of being a ‘white’ woman teaching Indigenous students about Indigenous issues, concluding that a critical literacy pedagogical approach to discuss issues of culture and racism created space for students’ voice to be heard. Leane’s (2010) research into representations of Aboriginal subjectivity in

Australian literature found that non-Aboriginal students, confronted with Aboriginal narratives that include unfamiliar or non-benign representations of Aboriginal subjects and experience, often resulted in resistance, refusal and sometimes distress (p. 231).

The *Teaching Australian Literature Survey* (Mead, Kilner, & Healy, 2010), a study of the institutional structure, practices and resourcing of Australian Literature teaching, found that questions about the place, value and consistency of Indigenous texts in the curriculum needed far greater analysis, with a majority of secondary teacher survey respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the prompt: 'The idea of a 'canon' of Australian literature is narrow and exclusive. The notion that an exclusive Anglo Euro-centric canon crowds out space in the English curriculum for other perspectives raises questions about the value of non-canonical stories'. Shipp (2012) reflects on the issue of including Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum, arguing that the prominence of successful Aboriginal authors in the Australian consciousness is not reflected in the Australian schooling system. She argues that the education system does not accommodate non-Anglo Australian cultures at any real level (p. 21), a claim that is a contestable claim, especially across the junior secondary English curricula which is not required to adhere to prescriptive text lists.

In spite of Kevin Gilbert's claims, as far back as 1988, that

Over the last two decades the Aboriginal voice has received quite a remarkable amount of attention and scrutiny in the European Australian world of literature' and, moreover, that 'a whole new education "industry" has risen in the academic area [of] "Aboriginal Literature" (1988, pp. xv-xvi),

there has been little empirical research to determine the extent to which Aboriginal voices have been included for literary study in Australian classrooms. Through a focus on the senior English curriculum in Victoria, this paper addresses this gap in the literature, focusing on issues associated with representations of Indigenous culture and history through texts, and the problems and possibilities associated with the policies that impact on literary study.

The Study

This paper offers a study of trends in one Australian state's senior secondary English text lists to analyse gaps between stated policy aims and patterns and trends in text selection, with a focus on the representation and narration of Indigeneity and Australian history. We conducted a content analysis of the 360 texts which appeared on the Victorian senior English curriculum text lists between 2010 and 2019. All texts were collated into a single data file. To conduct a content analysis, a coding frame was produced, guided by the study's primary research question: what are the trends in VCE English text selection between 2010 and 2019? The coding frame asked researchers to code whether the author or director was Indigenous, the year of publication, the geographic and historical setting of each text, the text-type of each text, the presences of themes about Indigeneity and the colonisation of Australia, and the presence and role of Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters within the text. Project team members were then tasked with coding each text according to the coding frame. Every text was double-coded to ensure reliability.

Categories were divided in this way to understand the complexity of texts. Our hypothesis was that there would be an over-representation of themes of Indigeneity and non-Indigenous authors exploring such themes, conforming to Langton and Leane's view of 'white consciousness'; alongside an under-representation of Indigenous authors with an under-representation of complex Indigenous characters. The coding frame is briefly outlined and explained here.

Our coding framework simplified and renovated post-colonial theory and Australian Indigenous studies to generate trends in text lists and to analyse these trends in relation to stated policy aims. The work of Langton (1993), Leane (2010), Moreton-Robinson (2004) and Nakata (1995) on the representation of Indigeneity and non-Indigenous identity in media, discourse, education and literature was the point of departure through which we generated our coding frame. These scholars, with wide-ranging arguments, theorise how racial difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous is predominately constructed and mediated by non-Indigenous persons in positions of social power. Racial difference is reproduced through narratives and representations that reinforce stereotypical knowledge about Indigeneity as "always lacking" (Moreton-Robinson, 2004, p. 87) which builds toward what Langton calls the "naive" view in a 'better', 'true' or 'right' representation of Aboriginality, reconfirming the belief in a generalised, undifferentiated view of Aboriginality ("an ancient, universal feature of racism" (1993, p. 27)). These scholars confirm the need for critical theorisation of representations and narratives about colonisation, settler-identity and Aboriginality to challenge the simplicity and power of the colonial world-view.

In the spirit of these thinkers, we developed a simplified model of narrative analysis and coders were asked to categorise the presence of any 'protagonist', as a character with agency who enacted causal change within the narrative, and 'antagonist', as a passive character whose primary purpose was to develop strengths or weaknesses, or other character traits, in the protagonist and/or deepen the significance of the narrative. These categories are connected to notions of Othering and stereotype as argued for by these thinkers. Further, categories of themes, authorship and characters were separated in our coding framework in order to address the diversity of representation within texts and across text lists in relation to policy mandates for inclusion and diversity.

We present the findings of this study through two inter-related lenses: the first lens focuses on the composition of the lists and trends over time in terms of authorship, text type, historical setting, and character typology. The second lens considers trends and patterns in text selection by students themselves, that is, the actual texts they are choosing to write about in the high-stakes final year examination.

Findings and Discussion

What is on the text lists?

The likelihood that a text was created by an Indigenousⁱ author or director was rare. Of the 360 texts which appeared on the text lists, there were only five individual texts which were created by Australian Indigenous people (including the controversial author Mudrooroo, whose status as an Indigenous Australian remains contested (Clark, 2004)). When factoring in those occasions when these texts appeared multiple times across several years, we can

conclude that just four per cent of all texts were the work of Indigenous people, (see Table 1). If we exclude films directed by indigenous directors, we are left with only three written works (two novels and one play), comprising less than two percent of the total text list, including only a single novel by an undisputed Australian indigenous author.

Table 1: Texts from Indigenous author and directors
<i>Home (novel)</i> – Larissa Behrendt (of the Eualeyai/Kamillaroi people)
<i>No Sugar (play)</i> – Jack Davis (of the Noongar people)
<i>Wild Cat Falling (novel)</i> – Mudrooroo (Indigenous heritage challenged)
<i>Mabo (film)</i> – Rachel Perkins (of the Arrernte people)
<i>One Night on the Moon (film)</i> – Rachel Perkins (of the Arrernte people)

However, eighteen per cent of texts from the list explored the theme of Indigeneity and the impact of settler-colonisation in some respect (see Table 2), a discrepancy analysed later in this paper. This list includes texts by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors and the presence of these themes does not suggest that they themes were a major focus in the text's narrative, as discussed below.

Table 2: Texts which explored Indigeneity and settler-colonisation	
<i>Home (novel)</i> - Larissa Behrendt	<i>Joyful Strains (short stories)</i> - Kent MacCarter and Ali Lemer
<i>Tracks (novel)</i> – Robyn Davidson	<i>The Mind of a Thief (other)</i> - Patti Miller
<i>No Sugar (novel)</i> – Jack Davis	<i>Wild Cat Falling (novel)</i> - Mudrooroo
<i>Sometimes Gladness (poetry)</i> – Bruce Dawe	<i>Mabo (film)</i> – Rachel Perkins
<i>Charlie's Country (film)</i> – Rolf de Heer	<i>One Night the Moon (film)</i> – Rachel Perkins
<i>The Lieutenant (novel)</i> – Kate Grenville	<i>Growing Up Asian in Australia (short stories)</i> – Alice Pung
<i>The Secret River (novel)</i> – Kate Grenville	<i>Old/New World: New & Selected Poems (poetry)</i> - Peter Skrzynecki
<i>Selected Poems (poetry)</i> – Gwen Harwood	<i>Cloudstreet (novel)</i> - Tim Winton
<i>Peripheral Light: Selected and New Poems (poetry)</i> - John Kinsella	<i>A Human Pattern: Selected Poems (poetry)</i> - Judith Wright
<i>Jindabyne (film)</i> – Ray Lawrence	<i>Black Diggers (play)</i> – Tom Wright
<i>The Lot: In Words (other)</i> - Michael Leunig	

A range of text-types are represented on the text lists. Figure 1 details the percentage of each text-type which explored Indigeneity and settler-colonisation. Novels, poetry, and 'other', including memoirs and collections of essays, letters, and other non-fiction were the most likely text-types to explore Indigenous themes and issues. It is important to note that texts which addressed Indigenous themes in minimal ways were coded in the affirmative. For example, a collection of poetry which included just a single poem that presented an Indigenous narrative, or considered themes of colonisation, displacement or reconciliation,

was coded in the affirmative; despite the poem in question representing a minor part of the collection. This was an unavoidable aspect of the coding process, whereby collections of poetry could not be separated into their many shorter units.

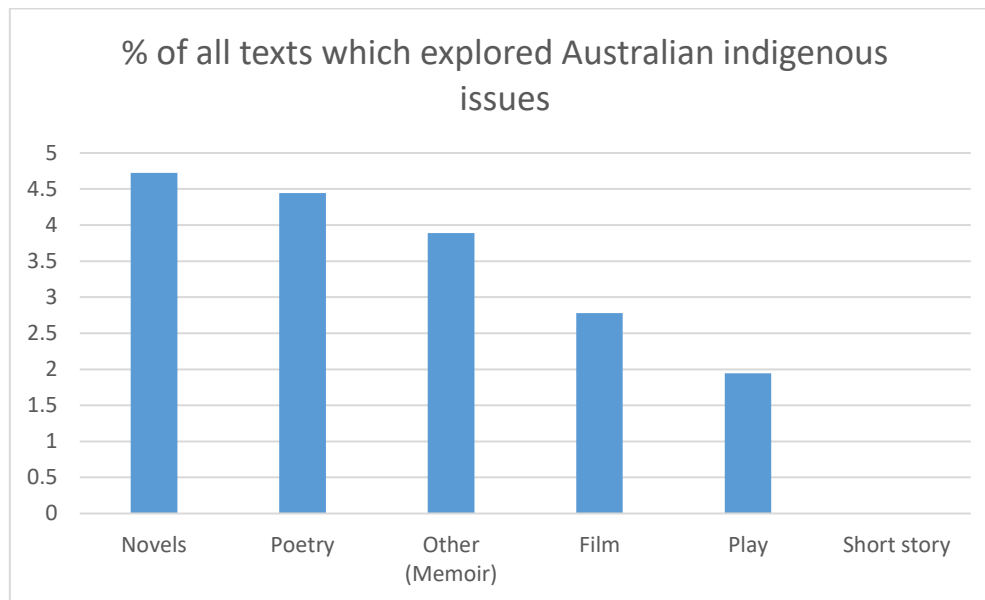


Figure 1: % of all texts which explored Australian Indigenous issues

When various text-types that appear on the lists are further analysed in terms of their relative proportions, it is revealed that some text-types disproportionately address Indigenous themes and Australian history. For example, while novels represent 37 per cent of all texts, only 13 per cent explored Indigenous themes. In contrast, while poetry represented 8 per cent of all texts, over 50 per cent of these had at least some exploration of Indigenous themes (within the poetry sample, there were no Indigenous poets represented on the text lists). Similarly, of the 28 collections of short stories on the lists, not one story was coded as addressing Indigenous issues in a significant way. This data reveals that some text-types are viewed as a more appropriate medium for the discussion of indigenous issues and themes.

Texts were also analysed in terms of the time period in which their stories are set. Figure 2 shows that of those texts that explore Indigenous themes, very few are set in the time relating to the early colonisation of Australia. Only six per cent of texts are set in the time before or during the arrival of the first British fleet. Furthermore, only a small number (fewer than ten per cent) of texts are set in the century following the initial colonisation or invasion. Over three-quarters of all texts which explore Indigenous issues are set in post-WW2 contexts, suggesting a preference to select texts set in contemporary times, in contrast to stories representing early experiences of conflict and settlement.

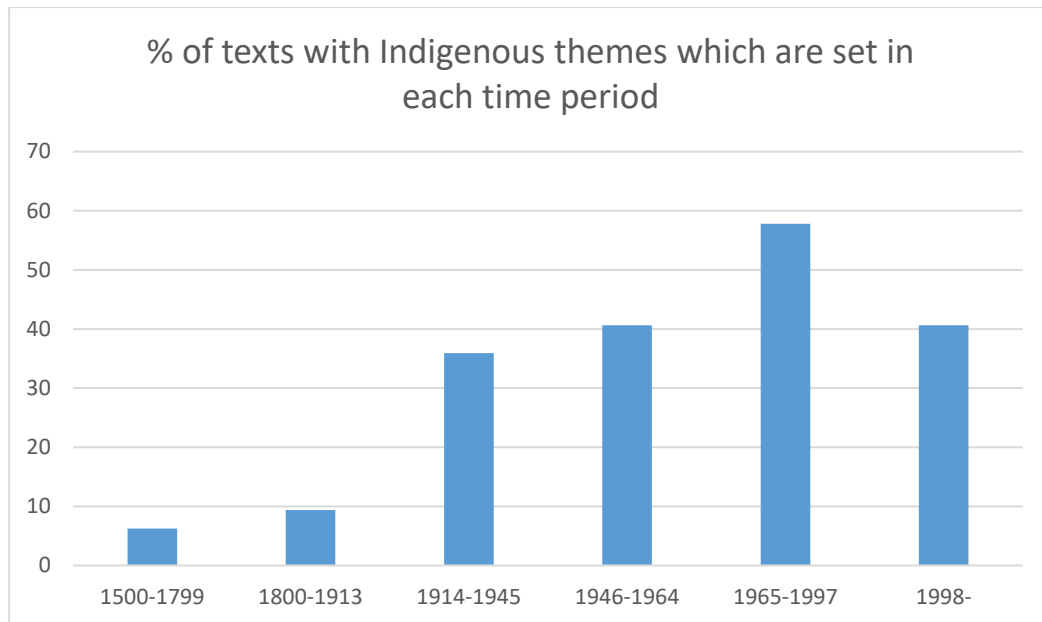


Figure 2: % of texts with Indigenous themes which are set in each time period

The study found that just six per cent of all texts contained an Indigenous protagonist. If we remove collections of short stories and poetry that did not contain a sustained central Indigenous protagonist, the figure drops to just 3.6 percent, meaning that only one in 30 texts on the list contain an Indigenous protagonist. In terms of texts with Indigenous antagonists, five percent of all texts met this description (see Table 3).

Table 3: Texts with an Indigenous antagonist
<i>Wild Cat Falling</i> - Mudrooroo
<i>One Night the Moon</i> - Rachel Perkins
<i>The Secret River</i> – Kate Grenville
<i>Jindabyne</i> – Ray Lawrence
<i>The Lieutenant</i> - Kate Grenville
<i>The Mind of a Thief</i> – Patti Miller
<i>Extinction</i> – Hannie Rayson

The geographic setting of texts was investigated to determine the extent to which texts set in Australia included Indigenous protagonists, antagonists or an exploration of Indigenous issues. One-third of all texts were set in Australia. Of these, twenty-three percent contained an Indigenous protagonist, and eighteen percent an Indigenous antagonist. Figure 3 shows the percentage of texts set in Australia which did not explore Indigenous issues. The graph reveals a significant year-to-year disparity. In some years, as few as 20 percent of texts set in Australia did not explore issues of indigeneity. In other years, this figure increased to almost 60 percent.



Figure 3: % of texts set in Australia which do not explore Indigenous issues

Issues of inclusion are not limited to quantity of texts, but also to composition of narrative, character and theme. Our approach to the analysis of texts and the text lists can be underlined by the argument made by Nakata in the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Educational Policy (1995)*, that the introduction of culturally sensitive texts does not necessarily deter negative stereotyping; “the appreciation of ‘difference’ does not guarantee ‘inclusion’; and, the acceptance of one’s ‘blackness’ constitutes more than unity” (p. 47). The results are considered in detail, with a focus on specific texts *Jindabyne*, *No Sugar*, and *Home*.

On the whole, we found many texts explored themes of colonisation and reconciliation but that they did not contain Indigenous characters with agency, defined in our coding frame as a ‘protagonist’ who drove or enacted causal change within the narrative. For example, in Ray Lawrence’s film *Jindabyne*, a text based on an American short story by Raymond Carver and altered to suit an Australian context, the dead character is one example of how we understood a central Indigenous figure to nonetheless play an oppositional, passive and thus ‘antagonistic’ role within the narrative. In *Jindabyne*, four fishermen stumble on the body of a murdered Aboriginal woman in a rural setting. They are not responsible for her death, but they do not immediately report the body and continue fishing. The narrative progression gears toward reconciliation between non-Indigenous and Indigenous residents of Jindabyne over the fisherman’s guilt and failure to report the body, with the film ending on a positive note. Here, the motif of death in the Australian landscape was understood in relation to its obvious colonial symbolism and the body was coded as an ‘antagonist’ as, in a sense, the reconciliation mutes the complexity of the murder, which takes a secondary status within the narrative world alongside (living) Indigenous characters who are also minor within the narrative. We thus positioned the dead Indigenous woman as oppositional to the protagonist’s guilt, which was at the centre of the narrative.

As noted, many Australian texts represented themes of indigeneity and colonisation but were without a significant Indigenous character or had characters that were marginal to the narrative. These included, for example, Robyn Davidson’s *Tracks*; Jessica Anderson’s, *Tirra Tirra By the River*; Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River*; Michael McGirr’s, *Bypass, the Story of a*

Road; and Christine Piper's *After Darkness*. The presence of Indigenous stereotypes within texts was especially problematic where Indigenous figures were utilised in the narrative to spearhead a sense of return, recognition and reconciliation between settler and Indigenous figures, but where those Indigenous figures took on a minor to purely symbolic role within the narrative: for example, in Sarah Watt's film *Look Both Ways*. Unfortunately, poetry was particularly notable in its exclusion of Indigenous authors and themes.

The narratives by Indigenous authors and filmmakers were the most complex re-imaginings of colonisation and history. Complex characterisation can be found in the novel *Home*, by Indigenous author and legal scholar Larissa Behrendt, which is an account of the Stolen Generation told through the eyes of a young woman living in modern Sydney and returning home to her ancestral lands. Importantly, Behrendt charts complexities and contradictions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous experiences through the figures of a white mother and Indigenous father:

In *Home*, the character of Carole, who is able to give the Aboriginal children a sense of pride about their Aboriginality, is based on my mother's experience. My mum's role is a powerful story of reconciliation, how Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people live together in Australia as families" ("Finding home amid the stolen memories," 2004, May, 8).

The narrative is restorative, however the complexities of violence, both physical and sexual, and dispossession remain foregrounded and the text does not contain any passive or 'antagonistic' figure. This is not to say the presence of an antagonist would lead to stereotyping or was not productive in its own right. For example, the play *No Sugar* by Jack Davis set in rural Western Australia in the 1920s and 1930s represents the alienation, isolation and displacement experienced by an Aboriginal family. Opposed to this family is the historical figure of the notorious 'protector' A.O. Neville, whose role as antagonist ensured themes of alienation, isolation and displacement could be represented and explored. We also found Rachel Perkin's recent film *Mabo* an uplifting cinematic depiction of the land-rights struggle, to foster renewed perspectives on Australian history against settler consciousness. This film has only been on the text selection list since 2016.

What texts are students writing about?

While the data above capture various statistical trends regarding the composition of texts on the senior English curriculum in Victoria, it does not reveal the extent to which these texts were actually studied by students. In fact, little data are available to study questions associated with which texts are privileged through teacher-selection for study in the classroom. One way to address this question is to look at publicly available data associated with the end of year final examination which all students studying English must complete. The Victorian state curriculum authority (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2019) releases data each year which detail which texts students wrote about during the examination.

Here, we have chosen to focus on data related to Part A of the English Examination, a text-response essay, and from the years 2015-2017. Table 4 shows the five texts which appeared in Part A of the examination and which explored Indigenous themes. The percentages reveal

the proportion of students who studied and wrote about that text in each year, recognizing that decision of text selection in these contexts are usually made by the classroom teacher. For example, in 2015, five percent of students in the state cohort wrote about the play *No Sugar*. The data reveal that *No Sugar* was the most popular text containing Indigenous themes which students wrote about on the senior examination, closely followed by the film *Mabo*. The other three texts which explored Indigenous themes were selected by three per cent or fewer of students. For the purposes of comparison, the most popular text in this section of the examination over the same period was the Greek play *Medea*, which in 2017 was used by 23 per cent of students to complete this part of the exam. In that same year, the five texts in Table 4 represented sixteen per cent of students.

Table 4: % of students who wrote on each text 2015-2017				
Text	2015	2016	2017	Average
<i>No Sugar</i> *	5%	5%	6%	5.3%
<i>Mabo</i> *	6%	5%	4%	5%
<i>The Lieutenant</i>	NA	NA	3%	3%
<i>Selected Poems</i> (Harwood)	3%	3%	1%	2.3%
<i>Cloudstreet</i>	3%	2%	2%	2.3%

*Refers to text with an Indigenous author or director

It is also revealing to briefly address the popularity of the only novel by an Indigenous author to appear on text lists between 2010 and 2019. Larissa Behrendt's *Home* appeared just once in the data sample, although the text did appear on earlier lists. In that year, 2010, the five most popular texts which students wrote about represented 70 percent of all responses. These five texts were: *Look Both Ways* (24 percent); *Cosi* (12 percent); *Nineteen Eighty Four* (12 percent); *A Man for All Seasons* (10 percent); and *Maestro* (9 percent). In contrast, *Home* was listed as being one of the five least most popular texts of 2010.

Part B of the Examination required students to use a central text to explore one of four context areas: encountering conflict; exploring issues of identity and belonging; the imaginative landscape; and whose reality? Unlike the detailed data above, the Victorian state curriculum authority only reveals data for Part B which details the most popular texts explored by students. The data for each context area between 2014 and 2016ⁱⁱ are presented in Table 5. The table shows the percentage of students who wrote about each context area in each year, and the most popular texts students used as the central focus for that context.

Table 5: Most popular contexts and texts in 2014		
Context	%	Most popular text
Encountering conflict	46	<i>Paradise Road</i>
Exploring issues of identity and belonging	25	<i>Skin</i>
Whose reality?	22	<i>Death of a Salesman</i>
The imaginative landscape	7	<i>One Night the Moon</i>

Table 6: Most popular contexts and texts in 2015		
Context	%	Most popular text
Encountering conflict	44	<i>A Separation</i>

Exploring issues of identity and belonging	24	<i>Skin</i>
Whose reality?	25	<i>The Lot: In Words</i>
The imaginative landscape	7	<i>Peripheral Light – Selected and New Poems</i>

Table 7: Most popular contexts and texts in 2016		
Context	%	Most popular text
Encountering conflict	44	<i>A Separation</i>
Exploring issues of identity and belonging	25	<i>Summer of the Seventeenth Doll</i>
Whose reality?	24	<i>Death of a Salesman</i>
The imaginative landscape	7	<i>Into the Wild</i>

These data reveal a dearth of texts with significant Indigenous characters, and a lack of texts which explore Indigenous themes. Only one text created by an Indigenous author or director appears on these ‘most popular’ lists, Rachel Perkins’ film *One Night the Moon*, and in this instance the text relates to the least popular context; only seven percent of students wrote about the ‘The imaginative landscape’ context area in 2014. Despite each context area sharing connections to issues relating to Indigenous people and their place in a colonial/post-colonial Australia, these data reveal that teachers are overwhelmingly choosing to use texts which explore issues of conflict, identity and reality that are written and directed by non-Indigenous authors and are located in non-Australian contexts.

The work of Indigenous writer Anita Heiss, whose books were unfortunately not represented on the text selection lists, comments on how policy, discourse and fictional narrative alike can polarise the difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Heiss uses irony and humour to write of her complex, multi-faceted identity in her memoir ‘Am I Black Enough for you?’ (2012): “I am an urban, beachside Blackfella, a concrete Koori with Westfield Dreaming, and I apologise to no one” (p. 1). Literature, film and art in this respect, as Heiss and Indigenous scholars like Behrendt confirm, is also particularly powerful in that it has the potential to break stereotypes and produce new forms of representation.

Conclusion

We began with an interest in the kinds of texts which were being selected for inclusion in the senior English curriculum of one state. What we found was that not only was the authorship of texts lacking in Indigenous representation, but that texts which included Indigenous characters, or explored Indigenous themes, were a minor component of these lists. When combined with data which showed that texts with these characteristics were highly unpopular, we can conclude that despite stated policy objectives aimed at recognising diversity, Indigenous stories exist on the fringe of the literary experience most Victorian students receive.

In her criticism of how Aboriginal people have been misrepresented in Australian culture, Leane argues that literary representations are never just benign representations (2016, p. 42). She makes the case for Aboriginal stories, what she terms ‘black writing’ (p. 43), to interrupt the unquestioned empowerment of the non-Indigenous to represent Indigenous identity and

history in Australia. What our study tells us is that if young people are to engage with narratives that do what Leane and others advocate for, then we must reconsider how policy and practice have coalesced thus far to silence such writing and limit engagement with the stories of the First Peoples of Australia.

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ⁱ References to Indigenous and indigeneity refer to people of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background.

ⁱⁱ We will focus on the years 2014-2016 as the 2017 curriculum involved a new task for Part B of the examination.