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# Unsettling subject English in the twenty-first century

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## Abstract

This paper uses examples from Australia and England to explore subject English with regard to the multiple metaphors inherent in the terms 'settling' and 'unsettling'. In doing so we are concerned with imagining a future for a subject English curriculum which dislodges it from its imperial, colonial roots. In the first instance, we outline the existing approaches to unsettling English in England and Australia and the challenges and limitations of these approaches and strategies. We also discuss some of the structures and agents which are invested in maintaining the status quo: namely, curriculum and assessment; teacher practices and disciplinary norms; teacher knowledge and CPD; and student context and the purposes of English. We conclude with the implications for a systemic and multi-layered approach to unsettling. We see this as an opening up of a comparative conversation about subject English across the Anglophone world, the different contexts of unsettling and what that subject might look like if it is to enact the justice imperatives of education in the twenty-first century.

**KEYWORDS**

curriculum, decolonisation, literature, school English, text selection

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**Key insights**

**What is the main issue that the paper addresses?**

The paper addresses the colonial roots of subject English in schools, and considers how a future which 'unsettles' those roots might be achieved.

**What are the main insights that the paper provides?**

The paper identifies a number of structures and agents that prevent the unsettling of English, including teacher practices and norms, curriculum and assessment, teacher knowledge and CPD, and the purposes of study of English.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper is part of an ongoing conversation between authors located in universities in different hemispheres, about the purpose and work of school English in diverse twenty-first-century contexts, and about English teachers' knowledge and practice in the context of decolonising curriculum imperatives. Invested in the project of unsettling English through various engagements with schools, education departments, publishers and industry in both Australia and England, we asked ourselves, what would English look like, and what would it need to do, if it was able to unsettle its imperial foundations? What texts would be studied? Who would be the teachers of English? Who would be the teacher educators, and what would be the curriculum? What partnerships and new relationships would be evident? What would English be called? How would it be assessed? In considering these questions, we acknowledge that what is underpinning our inquiry is the imperative to bring English into a different future, one that faces into the democratic challenge of imagining and enacting a twenty-first-century English curriculum which is justice-focused and oriented towards a sustainable, relationally informed future for diverse communities.

We use the term 'unsettling' and draw on the multiple metaphors inherent in that term. On the one hand it brings the notion of discomfort (pace Boler, 1999) and disrupts or disturbs the subject and its learners in the classroom. On the other hand, it challenges the colonial, imperial roots of the subject, with the settler colony of Australia providing one of our contexts. Yet, we might also think of things being settled as being established, as in the settled canon of English literature, and we, along with many others, challenge that settledness. To be settled is also to stagnate, to let the muddy waters stand still. We assert the place of literary and language studies as dynamic, as moving us forward through the twenty-first century. While we might think of this as part of decolonising curricula imperatives, we are conscious here, following Tuck and Yang (2021), that decolonisation is not a metaphor, and pertains particularly and specifically to actions towards justice for Indigenous peoples. We are inspired by Ramazani's (2019) call for an enunciation of new possibilities and collectives, new names and identities, new structures of thought and feeling (p. 162) as part of decolonisation. We have focused on curriculum in this paper, although we feel strongly that it is not by shifting curriculum alone that change can be made, largely for reasons of space, which is a limitation on the conclusions we can reach.

One of the pushbacks against discussions of decolonising subject English, particularly in the United Kingdom, is the resentment of perceived enforced White guilt, and a rejection of responsibility for past harms, and therefore a rejection of the need for change. In the

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Australian context, this position was perpetuated by former Conservative Prime Minister John Howard (1996–2007), who coined the term 'black-arm band' view of history, as a means by which to silence those who sought to tell the story of English invasion and acknowledge the continued impacts of colonial conquest in the present day (McKenna, 1997). Unsettling English allows us to think more broadly about the contexts in which we work, including a country which itself has done the colonising, but which is nevertheless in need of these kinds of conversations (Yandell, 2020). Our use of unsettling draws on Boler's (1999) 'pedagogy of discomfort', which 'begins by inviting educators and students to engage in critical inquiry regarding values and cherished beliefs and to examine constructed self-images in relation to how one has learned to perceive others' (pp. 176–177).

In this paper, we bring together these critical conversations, in the first instance to outline the existing approaches to unsettling English in England and Australia, and the challenges and limitations of these approaches and strategies. We recognise that the practices and imperatives for decolonisation are different in each context, although often the texts and pedagogies that dominate subject English in its current rendering continue to be animated across cultural and geographical sites. We will then share some conceptual and pragmatic approaches to unsettling English that go beyond working at the level of the set text or 'intended curriculum' (Beavis, 1996), and unsettle notions of powerful, or valuable, knowledge as White and enduring, dominant imperial approaches to reading. We also discuss some of the structures and agents which are invested in maintaining the status quo. We will conclude with the implications for a systemic and multi-layered approach to unsettling. We see this as an opening up of a comparative conversation about subject English across the Anglophone world, the different contexts of unsettling and what that subject might look like if it is to enact the justice imperatives of education in the twenty-first century.

## SITUATING THE AUTHORS

When engaging in conversation and scholarship about unsettling English, it is important to acknowledge our own positionality in these discourses. We are White teacher educators who have researched the teaching of English and its texts in different continents and who have advocated for the teaching of diverse literatures that expand and connect with all students' experiences (Elliott, 2020; Elliott & Courtney, 2023; Elliott et al., 2021; McLean Davies et al., 2020). We see ourselves as allies (Tatum, 1994); however, acknowledge that in settling/settlement of English, we work in the spirit of Rothberg's (2019) 'implicated subject': not perpetrators but our 'actions and inactions help produce and reproduce the positions of victims and perpetrators' (p. 1). We recognise, following Pratt (1984), the feminist, anti-racist imperative to commit to a personal/professional unsettling, in order to engage in the complexities and layers of stories that are 'more truthful'. Pratt (1984) asks the question, 'where is our need to change what we were born into?' if we are in a position of material advantage 'just by staying put', but also gives the answer:

> I learn a way of looking at the world that is more accurate, complex, multilayered, multidimensioned, more truthful. To see the world of overlapping circles, like movement on the mill pond after a fish has jumped, instead of the courthouse square with me at the middle, even if I am on the ground. I feel the need to look differently because I've learned that what is presented to me as an accurate view of the world is frequently a lie.
>
> (Pratt, 1984, p. 17)

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We recognise the privilege in our positions, but also that the majority of English teachers in both England and Australia 'look like us'. It is important to acknowledge that Whiteness is a racialised identity, to enable conversations about race that are not just about 'others' (Picower, 2021). It is also key to recognise that well-meaning White educators operating from a position which has come to be described as 'White Saviourism' are operating under deficit conceptions of students that are just as problematically racist as more overt racial hatred, partly because their actions are 'viewed as helpful, knowledgeable and in the best interests of children' (Marx & Pennington, 2003, p. 102). We, like Cushing and Govender (2024), are concerned about 'reformist and additive logics [that] simply place the burden on racialised communities' to fix the problems of a system by modifying the behaviours of the individual. We recognise a need to reimagine what subject English can and should be in the twenty-first century, and that this work can and must be done by those with privilege. It is part of the work we need to do as teacher educators to reimagine the subject and challenge the colonial roots and cultural hegemonic thinking that dominate curriculum design, to highlight Whiteness in our systems and our '#curriculumsowhite' (Picower, 2021); it must not be left to the people of colour involved in English teaching and teacher education. 'Teacher education does not exist in a vacuum: rather it reflects and perpetuates the system of White supremacy and economic inequity [in society]' (Picower & Kohli, 2017, p. 5). Unsettling this cycle requires a degree of concentration and returning to the problem repeatedly, whenever we are disrupted by 'discomfort and defensiveness' (Picower, 2021, p. 7). We start from Govender's (2023, p. 236) place of 'political-pedagogical action', which recognises 'that all teacherly decisions (from classroom practice to curriculum design) are inherently bound to issues of power'.

## ENGLISH, LITERATURE AND COLONISATION—THE ESTABLISHMENT

The school subject of English has its roots in the British Empire, developed as it was in schools across India, Australia, Canada and many others, to inculcate a sense of 'Englishness' (Morgan, 1990). The subject developed as a tool of enculturation to Britishness, with a focus on British literature and authors like Shakespeare, in whichever colony or dominion the child found themselves in, so that they were British first and (for example) Australian afterwards (Green & Cormack, 2008). This was no less the case in England than elsewhere, as the nationalistic tones of the Newbolt (1921, p. 14) report demonstrated: 'for English children no form of knowledge can take precedence of a knowledge of English, no form of literature can take precedence of English literature'. From Lord Macauley's 'Minute on Indian Education' claiming that 'a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia' (Macaulay, 1835, n.p.) to Michael Gove's statement while Secretary of State for Education in England that 'our literature is the best in the world' (Gove, 2010, n.p.), we have seen continued and deliberate promotion of a set of narrowly national 'English Literature' in the name of a unified experience of 'the best that has been thought and said' (Arnold, 1882, p. 219), which demonstrates ignorance of literature beyond British shores and which continues to situate the English curriculum firmly in its colonial heritage (although we also note that Arnold's original formulation ended 'in the world'—something which is frequently overlooked in political discourse today).

From its establishment as a subject and a discipline in the nineteenth century, English played a key role in ensuring colonial Australians felt connected to and part of a British heritage. This was achieved through various mechanisms. On the levels of structure and governance, British heritage was inculcated through the appointment of Professors of English from Britain in key roles in newly formed Australian universities (Dale, 2012; Doecke & Mead, 2017;

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McLean Davies & Sawyer, 2023). The movement between universities and school systems, by these professors, tied English in universities to its manifestation in schools, a link that was further enabled by universities setting high school English examinations. Literary-historical accounts of the establishment of English in Australia draw attention to the ways in which the professors appointed into senior leadership roles were valued according to the esteem in which they were held as scholars of canonical British texts. Internationally there are long histories of anti-racist, anti-colonial efforts to unsettle English, and education more generally, particularly evident in the 1960s and 1970s, within teacher education and in classroom teaching. The London Association for the Teaching of English is one particular example of these efforts (see Gibbons, 2017), while the conference 'Aborigines and Education' held at Monash University in the wake of the 1967 Referendum on articles of the Constitution which discriminated against the Indigenous population is another (Rudolph, 2019). Other accounts demonstrate regions where these efforts persisted in the 1980s, while anti-racist impact dissipated in others (e.g., Bonnett & Carrington, 1996). Then, as now, there were strong forces retaining the settled nature of English.

While colonial Australian literature was being produced, as were Indigenous literatures in the nineteenth century, these were not considered worthy of scholarship, and so therefore did not make their way into the curriculum, at the school level, until the 1980s (McLean Davies, 2011). In the first decades of this current century, Australia has implemented its first national curriculum. The federated nature of the Australian government, with the five states and two territories having jurisdiction over education, had previously stymied efforts to implement a national curriculum; arguably the 2007 initiative, which received bipartisan support, was successful because the federal government had previously introduced a national standardised testing regime. It is noteworthy that the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA, 2016) felt it necessary to mandate the teaching of Australian literature across the years of schooling in the English curriculum, suggesting that a policy intervention was required to unsettle the dominant, imperial rendering of English across the Australian states and territories.

## UNSETTLING ENGLISH IN AUSTRALIA

Curriculum theorists remind us that curriculum exists on several levels: the intended curriculum, which exists in documents, text lists and assessments; the espoused curriculum, which is what educators say in relation to their priorities regarding the intended curriculum; the enacted curriculum, which is what teachers do in classrooms; and the experienced curriculum, which attends to students' affective engagement in learning environments. Most scholarship around issues of decolonising, or unsettling, English in Australia has primarily taken place on the level of the intended curriculum. In the context of the aforementioned national curriculum imperatives to include Australian writing, research has directed attention to text lists, both historical (Yiannakis, 2014) and contemporary (Bliss & Bacalja, 2020), as instruments of colonisation, and particularly emphasised the exclusion of women, Indigenous Australians and people of colour (McLean Davies, Cahill et al., 2022).

Significant resources have been developed since the 1990s to support the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander texts in schools, such as Blak Words (part of the AustLit database) and units of work connected with Reading Australia, an extensive digital resource for teachers funded by the Copyright Association of Australia, as well as resources produced by the Australian Association for the Teaching of English. Research has shown, though, that Indigenous writing continues to be under-represented in schools and that even when set on the list, is not routinely taken up by teachers (Bacalja & Bliss, 2019). Those teachers who do advocate (espouse) and then enact unsettling practices often struggle to

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have a text by Indigenous writers or writers of colour introduced and then maintained on the syllabus. Scholarship undertaken by McLean Davies, Truman and Buzacott (McLean Davies et al., 2020) has shown that teachers who introduce texts which challenge colonial narrative experience can face resistance from colleagues who position Indigenous writing as of a lesser literary quality, or those who express a desire to teach Indigenous writing but feel ill-prepared to do so, and who are made uncomfortable by the nature of the text. While motivated (or demotivated) by different drivers, teachers in both scenarios impede the introduction and maintenance of Indigenous writing into the enacted curriculum.

Further, imperatives to unsettle the curriculum are impeded by what teachers perceive as competing and connected agendas around both student engagement and wellbeing (Cook, 2017; Medina, 2014; Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA), 2018). Teachers argue that they are compelled to teach texts that engage (often male) students in order for literacy capacities to be built through English—the mandatory school subject charged with developing students' technical and functional capabilities in terms of reading and writing. Research indicates that teachers perceive canonical or classic texts (including those texts that have become part of the school English canon, such as Sachar's *Holes*) as central to achieving student engagement. Rather than unsettling the curriculum, concerns about engagement try to settle both the curriculum and students, through presenting students with texts that they will accommodate and accept. It is worth noting that while students across Australia are diverse, engagement continues to look White, and North American. For example, the teen novel *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton remains popular for year 10s around the country (McLean Davies, Doecke et al., 2022). Interestingly, the setting of these texts shows that American cultures are considered engaging for all students. Broader issues of justice and representation, and even the nature of what English could and should be in a diverse country, are sacrificed for the texts by White writers that 'work' in classrooms (McLean Davies et al., 2020).

## UNSETTLING ENGLISH IN ENGLAND

To some eyes, English in England is more than ever the study of the canon, with an increased focus on nineteenth-century texts in language and literature examination at age 16 since 2015 that has led to backwash in the lower school curriculum (see texts exemplified in Kneen et al., 2022). The claim that 'British literature is the best in the world' (Gove, 2010, n.p.) largely revolved around authors who were flourishing around the same time as the British Empire (Elliott, 2014). As a result, the 'decolonising' of such a curriculum relies largely on the revelation of empire and colonialism in the texts and their contexts. The truly global reach of the iconic Christmas pudding in *A Christmas Carol* (a very popular text both for examination and for younger students) relies on the fruits and spices of the Empire; the fortune which Magwitch endows on Pip in *Great Expectations* relies on his profit made from being transported as a criminal to Australia. Such moves utilise the emphasis on 'knowledge-rich' teaching which is current in England.

It is disingenuous to say that moves to diversify texts in England are not about replacing texts with the highly restrictive specifications for study post-14 and the limited number of texts required by those specifications. However, advocates of diversification and decolonisation argue also for greater awareness of the context of empire and migration surrounding all 'British' texts studied, and for a challenge to the White gaze which dominates the English classroom in England. The application of culturally relevant teaching to canonical texts is perhaps particularly promoted by certain teacher training courses; for example at UCL-IOE, many of whose alumni publish the outcomes of their learning in *Changing English* (e.g., Shah, 2013). These amplify the calls made in a number of autobiographically informed

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accounts of education by British global ethnic majority (GEM) people over the last few years for better representation and 'recognition' (Taylor, 1994), and for the focus on black and minority ethnic history and literature to move away from narratives of trauma and violence (Akala, 2019; Hirsch, 2018; Kwakye & Ogunbiyi, 2019; Younge, 2019). The Lit in Colour campaign jointly convened by Penguin Books and The Runnymede Trust (the United Kingdom's leading race equality think tank) was founded in 2020 to push for greater diversity of books in schools at all levels. The Lit in Colour research report demonstrated the lack of representation of global majority ethnic authors in the curriculum, as well as highlighting some of the barriers to change, which include the lack of knowledge, resources and time for teachers, as well as the cost of buying new books (Elliott et al., 2021). A critical momentum for change seems to have been achieved in that all four major exam boards in England have now introduced more diverse texts at GCSE and A levels (including more texts by women); the major subject associations (the National Association for the Teaching of English, the English Association and the UK Literacy Association) all have campaigns, committees or prizes devoted to diversity and inclusion.

Moves towards unsettling have been met by some level of policing from the media and the right wing. For example, in June 2022, the awarding body OCR announced the refreshing of their poetry selection for study at 16, which included the removal of a poem by Philip Larkin and one by Wilfred Owen, replaced by new (diverse) poets. Fierce pushback about the so-called cancellation of these poets dominated the media reaction, including the then Secretary of State for Education Nadhim Zahawi (a role in which the British government saw four different people in 2022), who decried the changes as 'cultural vandalism' and said 'Their work must be passed onto future generations—as it was to me. I will be speaking to the exam board to make this clear' (Zahawi, 2022).

Far-right extremists across the Anglophone world have appropriated the language of indigeneity in reference to Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian heritage (Allfrey, 2021); in the case of Britain, this forms itself in a cultural imaginary of White heritage. The pushback against decolonising takes the form of denying the effect of empire and colonialism on the 'motherland' and is supported by claims that 'denying' young people the canon is denying them the chance of developing cultural capital and thus reducing their life chances. This may well be tempered by reactionary anger at being held 'responsible' for acts committed by their ancestors, or at the dissolution (the unsettling) of national mythology about Britain and its role in the world. Government ministers have spoken out against the teaching of 'white privilege' in English schools and suggested that this breaks the law on political impartiality (Murray, 2020).

Current discourse around curriculum and schooling in England is largely centred around questions of social justice and particularly 'closing the gap'. Racial disparities are regularly disparaged by reference to the underachievements of 'white working-class boys', characterised as 'the forgotten' by a parliamentary report (Halfon, 2021). Meanwhile, The Runnymede Trust has argued that the trope of the 'left behind white working class' has been weaponised to create division, where in truth 'There are working-class people from every ethnic background. British-born and migrants, people of all genders, and people living in every part of the country. We can, and should, build solidarity across such differences' (Snoussi & Mompelat, 2019). Work on linguistic ideologies surrounding Standard English, Ofsted and schools has demonstrated that these impact on students both from a GEM background and also White working-class students (Cushing, 2021, 2022, 2023; Cushing & Govender, 2024; Cushing & Snell, 2023). Unsettling English seeks to make school better (as an experience, both educationally and affectively) for people of colour, but also for all those who are not represented by or included within the current White middle-class cultural hegemony. While the dominant discourse in England argues for the emancipatory effect of teaching canon, and the importance of 'cultural capital' (as construed in the UK government discourse rather

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than in Bourdieu), the risk is that in 'valuing one particular set of cultural objects, we advantage the same group of people over time, instead of recognising the value of… other groups' (Elliott, 2020, p. 106).

## DISCUSSION—WHAT IS KEEPING ENGLISH SETTLED?

Through our consideration of the two contexts of Australia and England, it has become clear that there are a number of structures and systems in both countries that contribute to keeping English settled.

### Curriculum and assessment

Large-scale education systems depend on large-scale standardised assessment to monitor and govern them centrally, and as the educational arm of colonisation expanded in the British Empire, so too did the reach of assessment (Fleming & Raptis, 2005, in reference to British Columbia). While the most famous story about the origin of examinations is perhaps the Imperial examination in Imperial China, there was no less use of standardised assessment to settle curriculum and culture in unifying ways across the British Empire and other colonial powers. These historical influences persist. Furthermore, the intrinsic relation between IQ tests and scientific racism in the United States, as well as elsewhere, used to justify inequity (Winston, 2018), persists in the attainment gap in standardised testing today (or the 'education debt', as Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) more appropriately frames it).

In both Australia and England, high-stakes (both for individual students and for teachers and schools) assessment exerts pressure towards the settling of English in terms of both canon and curriculum. Individual students need to pass. In Australia, tertiary education entry rank is determined by the student's three best assessment results excluding English, plus their English result. In England, school performance measures give double weighting to the better of either English or English Literature GCSE, providing a student has studied both. In England, curriculum requirements are largely assured through the testing regime.

Similarly, in Australia, the project of unsettling the English curriculum is made more challenging by a neoliberal climate, where it is only what is assessed that 'matters', and compliance with curriculum reform will only be assured if it is audited (McLean Davies & Buzacott, 2022). While an Australian text is compulsory, this is not checked or specifically examined. Moreover, the Australian text could be Indigenous, but it might be a text by an Australian colonial author. Moreover, an examination of final-year questions from across states and territories shows that in most jurisdictions, there is no specific requirement to respond to an Australian text, let alone a text by an Indigenous author, or author of colour. Indeed, the context of Australian writing, or a focus on Australian cultures or histories, is not part of examination questions discourses, which persistently group texts according to generic character and themes responses. Further disincentive to prepare students to undertake examinations with and using Australian texts is apparent through examination reports available in various states and jurisdictions, which show that students who write most successfully in English will be writing on canonical British or North American texts (McLean Davies, 2011; Teese, 2013). This approach contrasts with secondary examinations in Scotland Standard and Higher levels (age 16 and 17), where the only set text is a Scottish text, and this is checked via the assessment.

Examination procedures at 16 and 18 in England are commercialised through the existence of four awarding bodies, which all offer a full range of qualifications. Schools can choose which awarding body they use; specifications offer different choices of texts and some variation in assessment, within the parameters set by the government. Awarding

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bodies tend, therefore, to make decisions with one eye to commercial forces. This tends towards inertia: no single awarding body would remove *An Inspector Calls* while 70% of all 16-year-olds are studying it, because they would be highly likely to lose market share to another specification. Market forces push towards the classic, and the canonical, and particularly towards those texts where large bodies of supporting resources are easily accessible online. This is related to teacher knowledge, which we consider below.

In England, a further line of control is applied to curriculum, beyond the assessment specifications, in that most secondary schools are part of multi-academy trusts, which often have centralised curriculum design that may designate the texts which are studied (Elliott et al., 2021), provide schemes of work, or even decree the content of individual lessons (and/or PowerPoints and worksheets). This plays into a culture of standardisation in which the dominant aim is to be able to accurately measure inputs and outputs, where the focus is on perceived 'equality' rather than equity, achieved though asserting normative practices which have been historically established (such as students at year 10 studying *Macbeth* in both England and Australia).

## Teacher practices and disciplinary norms

One force of social inertia in English is the canon of texts that we study. Popular conceptions of canonicity assume that the texts we study have earned their place through quality, rather than understanding the social construction of canons through institutional practices (Guillory, 1993). Other characteristics are clearly at work in the choice of texts: the four most studied texts in England (*Macbeth*, *A Christmas Carol*, *An Inspector Calls*, *Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde* and formerly *Of Mice and Men*) are all short, filled with clear symbolism and have a satisfactory twist ending (Elliott, 2022). Conversely, texts by Australian authors, or by authors of colour in the United Kingdom, are assumed not to have that level of quality, until proven otherwise, as for example by winning literary prizes, after which they may enter the roster of texts studied in schools (e.g., see Bernadine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*, which is now on the OCR A-level specification in England).

Research in Australia (McLean Davies, Doecke et al., 2022) shows a strikingly similar commitment to the same British and North American texts to those studied in England (see Kneen et al., 2022), across the secondary years of schooling. Texts such as *Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, *Holes* and *To Kill A Mockingbird* maintain currency on Australian lists, locating conversations about genocide, injustice and class elsewhere, in another time and geographical context (McLean Davies, 2011; Truman, 2019). In part this can be seen as the result of a pragmatic sharing of resources, and an acknowledgement of 'what works' in the English curriculum. It can also be understood as a form of safe practice—it is potentially less problematic to set and study texts that have been culturally accepted as part of being a 'well-read' student (McLean Davies & Sawyer, 2020) than challenge teachers and students with what might be perceived as 'difficult' (Zembylas, 2015) cultural knowledge. The impact of this is to 'settle' certain texts and narratives, often locating the focus of dialogue in English outside Australia, and in previous historical periods. Meanwhile, in England, the focus of the dialogue is usually firmly within England, but also in previous historical periods, with a particular emphasis on the Shakespearean, the Victorian and the literature of the World Wars and the immediate aftermath.

Aside from curriculum in literature, which we have focused on here, teacher norms around so-called 'Standard English'—which might be more accurately framed as 'White Mainstream English' (Baker-Bell, 2020) or, indeed, in England and the British-influenced milieu of Australia as 'White Middle-Class Mainstream English'—also maintain the settled nature of subject English, including in terms of setting a higher value on some (canonical) texts over others. Prescriptive versus descriptive debates in grammar teaching have persisted

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for some years, and it is here in particular that we see the 'helpful, knowledgeable' 'racism' (Marx & Pennington, 2003, p. 102) we referenced above. Rather than setting students up for success, 'normative language practices in schools… expose deep-rooted systems of power where minoritised speakers have been framed as sub-standard, deficient and lacking' (Cushing, 2023, 2022, p. 166).

## Teacher knowledge and CPD

Teacher knowledge is by nature deeply unsettled: it is located at the juncture of disciplinary knowledge and pedagogical knowledge, both of which are constantly evolving. To the English teacher, there is a third moving target, with the constant generation of new literary texts, including those aimed at young people themselves. This sits in tension with our desire for expertise and a settled body of knowledge in which each of us feels confident, a desire which is felt for many reasons, not the least of which is attaining the highest grades possible for students. Beginning teachers may prioritise their own development of pedagogy and choose (where they have a choice) to teach texts with which they have long familiarity, often meaning what they studied themselves at school. Teachers want to do the best for the students they serve, and that often means sticking with the tried and tested approaches to assessment preparation (including the specific text choices) rather than risking results by trying something new. For some, also, the practice of English teaching is part of the inculcation of students into a literary community, introducing them to shared reading that forms part of the cultural literacy of a nation (pace Hirsch, 2018). A text is only worth teaching, therefore, when it has become a settled part of the cultural discourse. Hirsch himself, when arguing for a core knowledge of national 'cultural literacy', drew on the example of Hugh Blair, who taught English belles-lettres in Scotland in the eighteenth century, considering England to be the 'cultural mother lode' (Court, 1995, p. 37), tracing back fundamentally colonial principles from the off.

Teachers often do want to introduce new texts and diversify the range of authors to whom they are introducing classes. The most common way that this is done is through the introduction of individual poems into the curriculum both in England (Elliott et al., 2021) and for the presence of First Nations authors in Australian classrooms, where each poem can be made low-risk and can be 'known' to an acceptable degree (for both teacher and student). The time investment for discovering and coming to a settled level of knowledge for a poem is much smaller, but that also reflects the time spent on it within the classroom and its subsequent value for students. Unsettling with poetry is contained unsettling; perhaps confined to a single lesson. This leaves the dominant discourses mobilised through canonical texts, present in set novels and plays—which are studied for longer periods—intact. This practice of animating diverse voices through poetry also delimits the extent of new knowledge teachers may need, enabling them to introduce diverse texts in ways that ultimately maintain the status quo and the settlement of English.

When attempting to diversify the curriculum, and unsettle English, existing approaches to teacher professional learning tend to focus on a single text, often engaging an author to speak directly about the texts, and their purposes for writing it. Some resources might be provided to support the teacher to introduce this text into their own classroom. What is not made apparent in this approach is that teacher knowledge itself is not built on the level of the individual text, but rather English teachers develop a vast intertextual network (that has been built through their own education and in practice, which they draw on to read each new text; Truman, 2019). This is the human and embodied 'text book' of the English classroom. Therefore, when texts that are distinct from the intertextual network a teacher has developed are introduced, ones that might unsettle English as a subject, we see that the establishment

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of these new texts requires more than the provision of resources to gain traction in classrooms (Teese, 2013; Truman, 2019). What is implicit and assumed in dominant approaches to CPD (continued professional development) is that, fundamentally, teachers have the intertextual knowledge required to make sense of these new texts, so that they will be able to accommodate them in their practice. Professional learning rarely has time for enabling practising English teachers to explore the scope and limits of their intertextual network, and to build new understandings of, for example in Australia, Indigenous relationality (Phillips & Archer-Lean, 2019) that shift and change reading practices, unsettling colonised or imperial English beyond the individual text. Building, or expanding, these networks takes time and resources, and needs to understand professional learning and knowledge building over time, beyond a half-day or after-school in-service session.

This professional learning is an essential part of unsettling English. Phillips and Archer-Lean (2019) argue that without careful work to challenge existing preconceptions, introducing First Nations texts into the classrooms risks a contemporary neo-colonising effect and that teachers and students need to reflect on their own position in order to 'perceive Indigenous writing as produced from a politically and culturally strong context and a complex and diverse worldview, that was affected but not defined by colonial acts of violence' (p. 34). Where textbooks may play a part in mediating artefacts in, for example, the subject of History, in English Literature that mediation is reliant on the teacher's knowledge and practice. As Cushing and Govender (2024) note, drawing on Freire (1970), these are ideas which require 'continuous reflection-action' (p. 353).

## Student context and the purposes of English

Yet another stabilising, settling force on subject English is the perception of student needs and desires, in the name variously of 'engagement' or social mobility via life chances. Depending on the context, schools in both Australia and England serving largely White, largely wealthy middle-class students may prioritise the use of elite canonical texts or 'classic' school texts, to satisfy perceived student (and parent) desires. More modern or diverse texts are rejected as being irrelevant, or impossible for White students to relate to. Conversely, in schools which serve diverse populations of students, particularly those with low socio-economic status, the pressure is perceived to be to provide 'powerful knowledge' in the form of canonical texts, that serve to enhance cultural literacy. Dominant establishment discourse in England for some years has been that cultural literacy (usually misnamed cultural capital) is the key not only to examination success but also to life success and social mobility (see Elliott, 2020). When assessment has threatened the removal of privilege from the White middle-class pre-existing knowledge of 'high' culture, as when Larkin was removed from OCR's GCSE specification, or when *Tissue* by Imtiaz Dharker was the main set poem for an AQA GCSE examination, outcry from teachers, students and the media has been rapid. Settled curriculum and canon help to reinforce structural advantages. All of these sit within a broader social context of differentiated experiences of youth depending on racial identity, including higher chances of being suspended from educational settings for Black students in England and Indigenous students in Australia, and the consequent increased likelihood of involvement in the criminal justice system (e.g., Graham et al., 2023; HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2021), as well as embedded injustice in everyday experience. Anti-racist pedagogies, culturally responsive pedagogies and abolitionist pedagogies all have their role to play, both in changing the experience of youth and leveraging a change in understanding in beginning teachers. Space restricts us from a detailed examination here but the work of Lamar L. Johnson (2021) and Gholdy Muhammad (2021), both from the United States, offers scope for the development of such work in England and Australia.

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## IMPLICATIONS FOR UNSETTLING SUBJECT ENGLISH

Thus, the path of least resistance is clearly to maintain the settled curriculum. It is easier intellectually, in terms of workload, and in terms of risk, whether that be in terms of assessment outcomes or pushback from the establishment. Beyond this we are in a time of standardisation of education. We find ourselves asking, what can be done for a profound impact?

It is not possible to unsettle English simply by offering greater choice in the curriculum: an increased set of choices in both countries has not translated into materially different curricula in practice. In both countries an intensely historical bent in terms of text selection means that we need new critical frameworks to engage with those texts, to avoid the whitewashing of history (in both senses) and to unsettle long-settled interpretations and readings. Considering the context of race and empire when teaching Victorian novels set in Britain is an essential first step. In addition to this, schools, teachers and initial teacher education programmes also need to engage with the new textual possibilities. In a world where society is inherently multicultural (Parekh, 2002), we concur with Priyamvada Gopal that:

> … a largely white or largely male curriculum is not politically incorrect, as is often believed, but intellectually unsound. Monocultures do not produce good thinking and are in themselves a lethal form of unmarked narrow identity politics. An intellectually expansive curriculum that, taken as a whole, puts different ideas, texts and traditions in conversation is pedagogically sound. 'Diversity' in and of itself, however, is not the same as 'decolonisation' and can serve to militate against it if all it generates is a glib pluralism that allows the centre, and its attendant orthodoxies, to remain unchallenged and unchanged.
>
> (Gopal, 2021, p. 877)

It is this glib pluralism that needs time and energy to be invested in the professional development of English teachers not in terms of their pedagogical knowledge but in terms of their subject knowledge. Unsettling becomes, therefore, an important part of initial teacher pedagogy, in unsettling received and sedimented ideas about students, about schools, about pedagogy, about the subject and about knowledge. Unsettling spontaneous concepts in favour of scientific ones, if you like, in Vygotskyan terms. This will not necessarily be a comfortable process. Zembylas (2015) argues that a pedagogy of discomfort is 'ethical violence'; that is, the challenge levelled to teachers and students, that will do symbolic violence to their worldviews, is an ethical imperative. We would argue that this ethical violence is also a restorative, reparative one, which adjusts the balance of who is being expected to do the emotional labour in our classrooms. Ultimately, without unsettling, the subject of English will continue on the trajectory of its origins, settling students into the colonial milieu and viewpoint of the world. This is not only a problem within a settler colony where students are descended from both sides of the colonial divide, and have to live in relation with one another, but also in a country which is still wrestling with its colonising history, and largely living in denial of the relevance of decolonisation.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o suggested, with regard to *Decolonising the Mind* in Africa, that it involved 'the search for a liberating perspective within which to see ourselves clearly in relationship to ourselves and to other selves in the universe' (1986, p. 87). He was writing specifically in relation to unsettling English in Africa, but the sentiment harks back to the imperative from Pratt to see the world in a 'more truthful' way (1984, p. 17). Unsettling English requires us to unsettle the White gaze which we have turned upon texts; unsettle value judgements that do not acknowledge their sociological origins and the entwined practice of 'learning whiteness' that is implicit in this work (Sriprakash et al., 2023); unsettle ourselves

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and our ways of relating to the texts we teach and read. But it can also be a time of liberation, a process to enjoy and to expand. The potential of a blank slate literary curriculum, divorced from its colonial origins to enculturate, is endless.

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