

Parochial Canons: Teaching Australian Literature in Western Australia

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Introduction and Context

The marginalisation of Australian literature in high school English courses has made headlines in the national press for almost a decade.¹ These concerns have been echoed by a number of academic studies indicating a similarly narrow student experience of Australian literature in secondary and tertiary English courses (McLean Davies et al., “Critical Considerations”; McLean Davies; Kilner et al.; Mead; Bacalja; Bacalja and Bliss, “A Report on Trends”; Bacalja and Bliss, “Prescribed Texts”). These studies—some state-focused and some national in scope—present a different picture from the one painted in Western Australian classrooms.

In Western Australian high school classrooms, students and teachers are engaging with Australian literature more often and more regularly than these studies imply: the issue we have instead identified is that students and teachers tend to focus on a narrow band of texts. Here, what we call a “parochial canon”—a regionally formed, locally focused selection of texts that is narrow in scope—embeds locally produced, or locally relevant, works in the secondary classroom. We note that this process ensures that Australian literature is well-represented in the literary experience of secondary students, but in a limited way. Our case study investigation of classrooms in Western Australia reveals that Australian literature is being taught in secondary English within the state more widely and more regularly than has been heretofore understood. We identify that it is the narrow variety of texts that defines the experience of students and teachers in formal secondary educational settings in Western Australia, and we attempt to understand the function and formation of this parochial canon and its regional preferences.

Our case study is based on all 2018 Year 12 ATAR English and Literature teaching programs and assessment outlines from Western Australia, which were provided to us by the School Curriculum and Standards Authority (SCSA). The Authority had required the submission of these materials by schools to complete an administrative audit, to enable the Authority to ensure that all aspects of the state curriculum were addressed and adhered to in classrooms. We applied for access to the materials to establish a statewide dataset of curriculum interpretation and text selection; all identifying features of schools were redacted. While this information was often limited in detail, and sometimes incomplete, we were able to analyse each program to investigate how texts are matched to descriptions of curriculum content. We were also able to track how teachers intended to assess students’ learning, including in some cases the questions posed in assessment tasks or—more frequently, the curriculum content descriptions they intended to assess. This essay focuses on the information revealed by this study of the uses of Australian literature in Year 12 ATAR-level English courses in Western Australia.²

Following Bill Green’s methodology of pairing curriculum inquiry with English education, the findings of this study demonstrate that in this context a limited set of texts, which

have not been specifically prescribed, has arisen as a form of parochial canon. This parochial canon consists of texts that are, for various reasons, popular within schools, and we contend that in Western Australia at least, it is the existence of this canon that has come to shape the student experience of Australian literature. As the canon is a construct, “fashioned” as Terry Eagleton has written of canon formation, “by particular people for particular reasons at a particular time” (11), we also seek to elucidate these dynamics. We concur with Bill Green’s premise, quoting John Guillory, that “‘canonicity is not a property of the work but of its transmission, its relation to other works in a collocation of works’—the syllabus is its institutional locus, the school” (223). In affirming the relevance and urgency of probing the nature of cultural value in the high school classroom (Green 222), this essay focuses on what is valued in this parochial canon, by whom, and considers whether these dynamics in Western Australia can be more broadly generalised to other educational contexts.

Western Australia’s Parochial Canonicity

The audit materials informing our study reveal frequent and significant selections of prominent Western Australian authors including, but not limited to, Tim Winton, Craig Silvey, and Jack Davis, whose works we discuss here to consider justifications for their inclusion in classroom teaching. Tim Winton’s *Cloudstreet* was the most popular Australian novel in Western Australia’s ATAR Literature course in 2018, with other schools studying his collection of short stories *The Turning*, making Winton one of the most studied writers. Winton’s popularity is followed by the prominence of Jack Davis’s play *No Sugar*, a text that tended to dominate both the ATAR Literature and English courses. Craig Silvey’s *Jasper Jones* was the most taught novel in ATAR English.³

The analysis of these rankings is summarised in the tables that follow. They reveal an educational or school canon relating to Australian literature, where teachers recognise particular works as having utility in a specific educational context. This local narrowness of focus does not reduce the effectiveness of the canon, nor is the regional focus intended to be exclusionary or isolationist. Rather, this parochial canon captures texts that combine suitability and utility within a specific reading context. Since its release in 1991, *Cloudstreet*, for instance, “has held an unprecedented position in Australian secondary classrooms” (Jones, “Conditions of Assent” 329). Not only is it frequently studied in Western Australia, but it has regularly appeared and reappeared on text lists in states where there are compulsory lists, such as New South Wales, Victoria, and Tasmania (Jones, “Conditions of Assent” 329). *Cloudstreet* has been included on Western Australia’s Year 12 Literature text lists every year since 1993, and in 2018 it was the most taught Australian novel in Year 12 Literature classrooms.

Winton’s texts are regularly included at all levels of secondary English in Western Australia. Having won the Miles Franklin Award four times, with an oeuvre that spans three decades (McCredden 1), Winton is a Western Australian celebrity; particular novels, largely from the 1980s and 1990s such as *Blueback* and the *Lockie Leonard* series, are the most popular choices for teachers. As a writer who creates vivid rural and outdoor settings and resilient characters, Winton is both “literary” and “popular” (McCredden and O’Reilly 1) providing both scholastic legitimacy and student accessibility. Furthermore, his descriptions of the Western Australian setting are recognisable for many students, and perhaps offer familiarity, comfort, and reassurance.

In addition to these identifiable markers of regionalism and local interests, Winton and his works are also frequently taught because they have the reputation for being genuine and consistent, with predictable political positions that express conservative “Christian, family-centred values” (Dixon 256). These features appeal to the conservative school environment and to a “middlebrow” audience (Carter, “Literary Canons”; Turner and Edmunds), owing to their

accessible themes and language, and the Australian-ness they depict. This fascination draws on the discussion of generic and linguistic matrices explored in Jones (“Conditions of Assent”), which reinforces Guillory’s argument:

[In *Cloudstreet*] there is an interconnection between linguistic and nationalist agendas since the bourgeois voice shifts from being the voice of the international connections, removed from literature through previous canonised classical expression, to being the voice of the national vernacular that can sustain a literary culture. . . . [W]e can translate [this] to the Australian working-class ethos at the centre of the cultural mythology of *Cloudstreet*—a common vernacular recognised in a literary text by a “common reader.” (331)

The work of Guillory, and particularly his discussion of the sociology of literature, explains that in matters of school canonicity, there are some very blunt canon-formation tools in operation. For Guillory, canonicity is regional by its very nature as “there can be no general theory of canon formation that would predict or account for the canonisation of any particular work, without specifying first the unique historical condition of that work’s production and reception” (85). Guillory also contends that “[n]either the social identity of the author nor the work’s proclaimed or tacit ideological messages definitively explain canonical status” (85). Rather, a series of attributes within the compositional, generic, and linguistic features of the work can account for a work’s canonical status in schools.

Moreover, Guillory explains that the project of the school canon functions, in part, to critique the existing wider cultural canon. This is because school reading is very much about acquiring linguistic capital for inexperienced readers; acquiring a text accrues capital for the student where that text has a distinct role or utility within the school system. This utility may not be discernible in texts embedded in the wider cultural canon, but it is what sets *school* canonical texts apart from many others (Guillory 86). A text is canonised within an educational framework because of its compositional accessibility, its generic predictability, and the relationship between textual and social functions, as well as linguistic relativity for students and the zeitgeist. These aspects are all conceivably inherent in the works highlighted by the data that follows, and we can consider them part of the framework of Western Australia’s parochial school canon.

What Is Taught?

ATAR English

Close examination of the materials revealed that 35% of the texts studied in Western Australian Year 12 ATAR English classrooms in 2018 were Australian. This data is represented in Table 1, which breaks down this figure according to specific texts and the number of schools in which those texts are taught. It is important to note that the ATAR English course in Western Australia does not have a prescribed text list. Teachers are free to include any text they consider to be useful in addressing the syllabus content and appropriate for the classroom context. There is no requirement to study Australian texts, although there was such a condition in previous iterations of this course, and this may continue to influence teacher selections. While this data is from 2018, the syllabus and text requirements have not altered in the intervening time, and anecdotal reports from teachers and examination markers confirm that the noted trends in text selection remain consistent.

Table 1				
ATAR English texts taught most frequently in schools in Western Australia in 2018				
Text	Author/Director Nationality	Type	No. of schools (out of 197)	No. of schools (%)
<i>Jasper Jones</i>	Craig Silvey Aust (WA)	novel	25	13
<i>No Sugar</i>	Jack Davis Aust (WA)	play	24	12
<i>Nineteen Eighty-Four</i>	George Orwell UK	novel	18	9
<i>Gran Torino</i>	Clint Eastwood USA	film	14	7
<i>V for Vendetta</i>	James McTeigue Aust	film	12	6
<i>Children of Men</i>	Alfonso Cuaron Mex	film	12	6
<i>The Secret River</i>	Kate Grenville Aust Andrew Bovell Aust	novel / play	11	5.5
<i>The Handmaid's Tale</i>	Margaret Atwood Can	novel	11	5.5
"The Pedestrian"	Ray Bradbury USA	short story	10	5
"The Drover's Wife"	Henry Lawson Aust	short story	10	5
"Neighbours"	Tim Winton Aust (WA)	short story	10	5

It is also significant that there are many recently published works (not shown in Table 1) that were selected by individual schools and teachers, including novels recently shortlisted for Australian literary awards. The most popular choices, however (shown in Table 1), demonstrate that Australian literature, or more specifically Western Australian literature, is regularly taught by teachers at this level of subject English.

ATAR Literature

In Western Australia in 2018, ATAR Literature was studied by 1467 students enrolled at 88 schools, whereas ATAR English was studied by 11051 students in 197 schools. ATAR Literature has a significantly smaller cohort and is considered a more specialised course for more able and interested students. It also operates with a prescribed text list and stipulates the study of “literary texts,” which are described in the syllabus as “valued for their form and style and are recognised as having enduring or artistic value” (4). The syllabus also explains that “[w]hile the nature of what constitutes ‘literary texts’ is dynamic and evolving, they are seen as having personal, social, cultural and aesthetic value and potential for enriching students’ scope of experience” (4). This is an explanation of textual value that aligns with traditional ideas of canonicity. In 2018, 358 titles were included on the prescribed text list, with no texts specified in the examination paper. That is, all examination questions could be answered with reference to any prescribed text, though some questions do stipulate the text genre (prose, poetry, or drama). Unlike the English course, there is a requirement for Literature students “to study at least one Australian text (i.e., one novel, or play, or a selection of the work of one poet or a selection of Australian short stories) in each pair of units” (SCSA Literature Syllabus 4). As can be seen in Table 2 below, the text list provides a substantial range and proportion of Australian literature titles. Significantly, our study demonstrates that Australian literature, including literature written by First Nations writers, is being included in classroom study at a higher rate than that with which it appears on the text list.⁴

Table 2				
Texts by Australian and First Nations authors as percentages of Literature syllabus list and teacher choices.				
Type	Australian texts as % of syllabus list	First Nations texts as % of syllabus list	Australian texts as % of teacher choices	First Nations texts as % of teacher choices
Overall	36%	3%	43%	7%
Poetry	34%	3%	48%	9%
Novels	35%	2%	39%	1%
Drama	39%	7%	40%	11%

While Table 2 highlights the Australian literature choices made by teachers of Literature in 2018, it does not take into account the frequency of specific choices, as presented in Table 3. For example:

- 15% of schools studied Samuel Wagan Watson’s anthology *Smoke Encrypted Whispers*
- 19% of schools studied *No Sugar* by Jack Davis
- 25% of schools studied a Tim Winton text
- 37% of schools studied Gwen Harwood’s poetry

The Table 2 figures, of course, do not include what is taught in Year 11 Literature courses (where some schools would study Harwood and *No Sugar*, for instance). To some degree therefore, it is possible, and even likely, that the data is under-reporting the frequency of these texts studied in schools.

It is also significant that many of the texts on the list remain unstudied, with the teaching programs gathered in the audit revealing that only 35% of the texts listed were being studied in schools. This situation was noted in the 2018 Literature ATAR Course Summary Examination Report as a common trend: “As in previous years, a small number of texts were used extensively” (2). Examiners also commented that Gwen Harwood was one of the authors constituting the bulk of texts used, but “while these are important texts, candidates’ approaches to these texts did at times lack currency and they struggled to discuss how, for example, their contemporary identities can shape responses” (SCSA 2). The 35% figure in 2018, however, demonstrates greater engagement or incidents of selection from the text list set in 2016. Referring to the previous version of the syllabus and its prescribed text list, Tim Dolin observed that “[l]ess than 10 per cent of these works have been taught or examined since the list was first authorised . . . and that 10 per cent constitutes a de facto teaching canon that is every bit as narrow and ideologically circumscribed as the canon it displaced so long ago” (344). In the 2018 data the de facto teaching canon, or parochial canon as this article has described it, has expanded to incorporate select and strategic examples of Australian literature, and has aligned the ideological direction of textual engagement to the direction of a *national* curriculum, which forms the ideological basis of the Western Australian courses.⁵

Table 3 indicates the frequencies of the most studied titles as a number and as a percentage of schools.

Table 3			
ATAR Literature texts most frequently taught in schools in Western Australia in 2018			
Text	Author	No. of schools (out of 88)	No. of schools (%)
Poetry	Poet		
<i>Selected Poems</i>	Gwen Harwood	34	39
<i>Collected Poems</i>	Judith Wright	18	20
<i>New Selected Poems</i>	Seamus Heaney	17	19
<i>Collected Poems</i>	T.S. Eliot	16	18
<i>Smoke Encrypted Whispers</i>	Samuel Wagan Watson	14	16
<i>Blake</i>	William Blake	11	13

Text	Author	No. of schools (out of 88)	No. of schools (%)
Prose (novel)	Novelist		
<i>The Handmaid's Tale</i>	Margaret Atwood	25	28
<i>Frankenstein</i>	Mary Shelley	18	20
<i>Heart of Darkness</i>	Joseph Conrad	14	16
<i>Cloudstreet</i>	Tim Winton	14	16
<i>The Secret River</i>	Kate Grenville	11	13
Prose (short stories)	Author		
<i>The Turning</i>	Tim Winton	8	9
Drama	Playwright		
<i>Othello</i>	William Shakespeare	29	33
<i>No Sugar</i>	Jack Davis	17	19
<i>The Tempest</i>	William Shakespeare	10	11
<i>Summer of the Seventeenth Doll</i>	Ray Lawler	8	9
<i>A Streetcar Named Desire</i>	Tennessee Williams	8	9
<i>Hamlet</i>	William Shakespeare	8	9
<i>Translations</i>	Brian Friel	7	8

The findings above appear to be inconsistent with the findings of several studies conducted in other Australian jurisdictions (Bacalja; Bacalja and Bliss “Prescribed Texts”; McLean Davies; McLean Davies, et al. “Critical Considerations”). In these, Australian texts are shown not to be taught, or taught rarely, and where Australian texts *are* included, they rarely include female, refugee, or First Nations authors. This latter observation is consistent with the 2018 ATAR English course in Western Australia where Jack Davis (WA) and Samuel Wagan Watson (Qld)

were the only First Nations authors whose works were popularly studied. Only 9% of texts on the Literature text list were by First Nations writers, and Samuel Wagan Watson is the only First Nations poet with an anthology included for study in 2018. What is also noteworthy, is that where First Nations authors are included on the text list, teachers are selecting these works for classroom analysis. This pattern is contrary to the Victorian data where First Nations writers included in Victorian lists are often overlooked for more traditional canonical works (Bacalja and Bliss, “Prescribed Texts” para. 8).

Students’ Experiences of Australian Literature: Narrow Choices

In looking at these results, we might reflect on why particular Australian works become popular choices for classrooms and whether Australian literature is considered distinct from other literatures in the context of Australian secondary schooling. While classrooms are notoriously closed spaces, it is possible to glean something of students’ experiences of Australian literature from syllabus documents, common external assessment models (most often examination questions) and marking guides. These are important methods of “transmission” (Guillory 55) or “apparatuses of canonicity” (Bérubé 458) that provide insights into how texts are used to teach concepts. Jacqueline Manuel and Don Carter have written extensively about the history of prescribed text lists in senior secondary English in the state of New South Wales, 1945–2005. In their historical study of English in this particular time and place, they posit that the combined authority of text lists, examinations and examiners’ reports effectively “came to function as the de facto syllabus in the final year of secondary schooling” (“Inscribing Culture” 89).

In a Western Australian context, the texts referred to in the summary examination reports are adopted by teachers and become instituted in classrooms as a way for students to score higher marks. The reports also summarise student performance trends in the examination, which also serve “to further shape and standardise reading and writing practices in senior secondary English” as Manuel and Carter observed in examining historical curriculum documents and critical scholarship relating to NSW in the second half of last century (“Inscribing Culture” 8). Manuel and Carter’s work supports our conclusion in this Western Australian study that Australian literature is being asked to serve a particular role of transmission. A study of an Australian novel or Australian poetry, for example, is used to enquire into Australian cultural identity or Australia’s history and how as a nation we might come to terms with a period of national trauma. As such, the requirements for text selection are not simply defined by which texts are included on the sanctioned list, but which will enable the delivery of this “de facto syllabus” (“Inscribing Culture” 89).

A close analysis of examination papers and marking guides, alongside the most targeted syllabus content descriptions in our study of Australian literature in the school programs analysed, revealed that Australian literature is treated differently to other literary works within the context of the Literature course, with emphasis on social rather than textual function. From our study of published course materials, the de facto syllabus as outlined above, and the analysis of school programs, four main approaches to Australian literature have been identified:

1. Australia literature is read through the lens of nation and operates within a national paradigm.
2. Australia as a literary province by nature of its legacy as a national literature that is transforming and connecting with other literatures (Dixon and Rooney x).
3. Australian literature is viewed as a “combative” minority, fighting for status alongside global literatures (Casanova 186).

4. Australia is viewed as a conflicted and traumatised nation, as a result of colonial invasion and dispossession, and this has brought about a haunting (Jones, "Liberating Australian Literature" 236).

Year 12 externally assessed past examination papers reveal the utility of this final prescriptive reading approach because from 2016 to 2022 they all pose a question of similar national framing. Below are three examples:

Discuss the value of representing controversial aspects of a nation's past in at least one literary text. (SCSA 2016 Literature Examination 18)

Discuss how a literary text challenges dominant assumptions about what it means to be an Australian through its portrayal of Australian lifestyle, culture and/or identity. (SCSA 2017 Literature Examination 14)

Discuss how at least one Australian literary text has drawn from mythical concepts and/or archetypes to shed light on the values underpinning Australian life. (SCSA 2019 Literature Examination 24)

In the context of high-stakes external examination it is understandable that teachers will direct student reading in line with examination requirements, but the result is a narrowing of student experience of Australian literature as teachers become strategic in selecting texts that have been credited with examination success.

An illustration of this form of transmission is Jack Davis's play *No Sugar*. The play remains a popular inclusion for teaching English and Literature course concepts, including context, genre, language, and postcolonial reading theory. It simultaneously explores the exploitation of the Nyoongah people and Country by white authorities and asserts their culture and the resilience of its people despite the brutal attempts to subjugate and erase them. First performed in 1985, the play is popularly studied for the significance of its colonial context of two hundred years since invasion, and its function as a revisionist text, protesting impending Bicentennial celebrations. It is also innovative and powerful for its ambitious theatrical innovations incorporating Nyoongah and hybrid language and disrupting the experience of the audience. This text has utility and has remained a classroom staple in many schools for study by senior secondary classes and is firmly established in the parochial canon.

The play was first performed to an audience that was becoming increasingly aware of the issues and perspectives central to postcolonialism. The text makes such concepts accessible to less-experienced classroom readers with limited intertextual and historical knowledge by using recognisable allegorical structures, and it embeds perambulatory performance modes, as well as Nyoongah and hybrid language as clear factors of disruption, thus facilitating the textual and social functions of the text. Davis's inclusion of the historical narrative of Western Australia's 1905 Aborigines Act, the Moore River Settlement, removal and division of First Nations communities and the theatrical depiction of historical figures of Australia's traumatic policies of the Stolen Generation and ongoing dispossession, affords useful teaching opportunities and engagement with emotional stories providing an empathetic understanding of intergenerational trauma and resilience. Due to its usefulness in the classroom, and its function as a revisionist text, students understand the text as a restoration of voice within a strand of Australian history. The popularity of this text for study means that Davis's play operates as a reforming influence for cultural memory for a schooling generation (Lachmann 170).

Literary Sociability: A Close-Knit Community

The parochialism evident in the text choices for the Western Australian Literature course is undeniably a product of confluences produced, in part, by the state's geographical isolation, a point we raise here in relation to the social elements of reading and literary sociability (McLean Davies et al., *Literary Knowing* 132). Geographical isolation can be understood to exacerbate the establishment and maintenance of canonicity in specific regions, as the local landscape, identity and character are produced and reproduced through text, representation, reader and reading practices. Western Australia is approximately three and a half thousand kilometres from the east coast of the Australian mainland, where bigger cities and literary festivals attract more, and more diverse, writers and literary subjects, while the literary resources most accessible to Western Australian schools are local ones. This circumstance sees literary ideas circulated within schools by local writers who participate in school tours and Literature days, and it contributes to the way in which book clubs, reading circles, author panels and literature festivals serve as "quasi-educational bodies" (Guillory 96). As there is a narrow selection of local writers who are suitable and available to secondary English and literature studies, this has the effect of fostering local insularity, where the repeated availability of the same group of speakers and writers, repeating the same professional development and workshop offerings, preserves the status, and therefore the study, of these writers.

The appeal of Craig Silvey's work points to his skill as a writer for a secondary audience, but also his presence as a local writing figure. Silvey often presents at local teacher and writing conferences, participates in school tours, and he is an active contributor on various social media platforms. This accessibility contributes to his celebrity status and popularity, and Silvey himself has told stories about Year 12 students emailing him to ask about his use of literary devices (Silvey, "Coming of Age"). Silvey's first novel, *Rhubarb* (2004), has not been widely studied, however, so it is fair to acknowledge that the widespread popularity of *Jasper Jones* (2009) can be attributed as much to the appeal of the Australian gothic-historical-coming of age elements of the novel itself, rather than solely Silvey as a figure.

The popularity of *Jasper Jones* also points to its linguistic relativity. *Jasper Jones* is set in the small, fictional town of Corrigan in Western Australia in the late 1960s and is recognisable to school readers. It addresses familiar curriculum topics like post-war migration and issues in the zeitgeist such as family breakdown and domestic violence in a coming-of-age narrative. At the forefront of the story is the First Nations character, Jasper Jones, and this presents an opportunity to teach representations of race and culture, particularly in the context of 1960s rural Australia. While the eponymous character is centralised in the narrative by the novel's title, Jasper remains an outsider in the town and is forced to leave Corrigan because of "ongoing dispossession and racial oppression" (van Neerven 11). Despite Jasper Jones's centrality to the title and plot, the novel is narrated by 13-year-old Charlie Bucktin, a white teenage boy who learns about the disappearance, and subsequent murder, of local girl Laura Wishart. The story is also useful for teaching elements of the coming-of-age and gothic genres, as well as adaptation and transformation, since it has been made into a play (Mulvany) and a film (Perkins) which have also found their way into the classroom as alternatives or supplements to the novel. Silvey's work has also been supported for classroom study by many locally produced teaching and student guides, and subsequent publications from Silvey have found direct entry into English classrooms at various academic levels.

The parochial canon perpetuates itself because writers can directly impact upon the likelihood of their texts being included in classroom study. This state of affairs also serves to create a "provincialising" of knowledge (Dixon & Rooney 11) whereby literary perspectives are narrowed by nature of their location within a specific "literary province" (Dixon and Rooney x), which is narrowed further by the secondary classroom context. In Western Australia

the Australian literature that receives most attention is created by a small number of authors. McLean Davies et al. identify “an ongoing tension” in Australia “between the expansive role of literature and the texts that are selected for study in secondary English” (“Enduring ‘Cultural Cringe’”). In our view, however, this outcome does not seem to be caused by an “enduring ‘cultural cringe’ about teaching Australian literature” (McLean Davies et al., para. 3), but by local accessibility that narrows the range of texts chosen for study in secondary English. That is, the local, idiosyncratic practices and traditions in education and around sociability (Doecke; Mello et al.; Mead et al.), can compromise the expansive function of literature and contribute to a parochial canon.

Professional associations and writing communities play similar roles in promoting a specific group of writers, placing them at the centre of both cultural and educational exchanges and settings. Similar forms of literary sociability transpire where local associations act in their capacity as providers of professional learning. In their elucidation of “literary sociability,” Mello et al. explain that the concept “affirms the way a knowledge about texts emerges through social exchanges with one another” (185). They argue “the primacy of language as a social phenomenon . . . [and characterise] the exchanges around literary texts in each classroom as forms of ‘literary sociability’” (Mello et al. 175). Such interactions around texts can encourage a way of knowing and understanding texts that reinforces a hierarchy of value and the privileging of certain knowledges within and across literatures, including those in specific teaching and learning spaces, to contribute to the formation of a local canon (Carter 18). We are defining this local canon as essentially *parochial*, a product of the enacted authority of various local systems, institutions, and practices around senior secondary curricula.

Parochial, Not Simply Local

At this point in the discussion, we need to acknowledge that a remarkable 34 out of 88 schools teach Gwen Harwood in Year 12 ATAR Literature. This figure does not consider those schools who may teach Harwood in Year 11 Literature, as Units 1 and 2 were not included in the audit, and it is feasible that many would have done so, as mentioned previously. While not Western Australian, Harwood’s popularity points to the way her works suit the local conditions of the Western Australian subject English milieu. Accessible themes and language, the fact that many teachers would be familiar with Harwood from their own studies, and her poetic representations of gender, make her work not only linguistically valuable to the Literature course with its reliance on poststructuralist theory, but also show that it demonstrates a *usefulness* recognised by Guillory, as outlined earlier in this article. Studying Harwood is popular in schools nationwide. Indeed between 1991 and 2005 Harwood’s poetry was the most cited work on Literature courses nationally (Yiannakis 32). Among the top six poets taught in the ATAR Literature course, none are from Western Australia, which points to a glaring omission, particularly given the calibre of local writers, such as John Kinsella, Lucy Dougan, Tracy Ryan, Elizabeth Jolley, as well as authors Katharine Susannah Prichard, Dorothy Hewett, Faye Zwicky, and Gail Jones. Female writers appear on the text lists at different historical moments. Hewett, Jolley, Prichard, Jones, and Dougan are on text lists presently, but are not taught consistently, or are only taught in a small number of schools. John Kinsella is taught in a growing number of schools, but the poetry selections made by teachers, and the dominance of Harwood in classrooms, indicate that her work is promoted and perpetuated within this local subject community.

Despite *No Sugar*’s popularity, Western Australian First Nations writers are not well represented in either course, consistent with the findings of McLean Davies; Bacalja; Bacalja and Bliss (Report on Trends; “Prescribed Texts”); and McLean Davies, Martin and Buzacott (“Critical Considerations”). Three of Kim Scott’s novels are on the Literature text list and *That*

Deadman Dance is taught in a small number of schools. While endorsed by Reading Australia as a text suitable for Unit 4 Literature (Jones, “*That Deadman Dance*”), Scott’s novel is a more popular inclusion in tertiary classrooms, as are Scott’s other novels on the prescribed list: *Benang: From the Heart* and *True Country* (Jones, “Liberating Australian Literature” 234). The point we make here is that expanding text lists or prioritising the diversification of text lists does not necessarily ensure that a wider variety of texts will be studied in schools. The factors that influence text choices strongly feature those conditions exacerbated by parochial canonicity: a teacher’s familiarity with the text, the range and quality of teaching resources available around that text (including *Good Answers Guides* produced each year incorporating sample student responses and learning activities) and whether a text has previously enabled students to score well in examination responses and therefore has been proved reliable or useful. This can be understood when we consider the large number of prize-winning texts that find a short moment in English classrooms but fail to find admittance into the parochial canon. Tim Dolin explains that, in part, the tendency of teachers to choose the same works year after year is because these texts “are familiar to overworked, under-resourced English departments, and because they are proven with students. But they are also particularly well suited to the syllabus as it has evolved and adapted over the past 20 years in Western Australia” (344). Introducing a new text requires considerable investment from teachers, and this investment (and therefore any perceived risk) may not be worth it, especially given time constraints in schools. These requirements demonstrate that school canon formation, like all canon formation, is not simply a judgement about literary quality or publication success but involves specific understanding of the local educational context.

National Picture and Conclusion

This paper seeks to contribute to national discussions about text selection in senior secondary English courses and concerns around a lack of diversity in text lists in particular jurisdictions. What has been apparent throughout our research is that even with extensive text lists and, in some cases, with virtually unlimited text choice, teachers select works with a distinct role or utility within the school system. We acknowledge that the texts we identify as belonging to a Western Australian parochial canon—such as Jack Davis’ *No Sugar*, Craig Silvey’s *Jasper Jones*, and Tim Winton’s *Cloudstreet*—have also been popular classroom texts in various locations nationally at different moments in text list construction. This Western Australian example does recognise the utility of regional literatures, as well as the educational power of narratives that enable linguistic self-recognition and student grounding within locations. The works offer broad accessibility and usefulness to syllabus content related to nation and identity, and to the Australian Curriculum: English, which has been mapped by the Reading Australia teaching resources for each of these examples. We assert that parochial appeal and literary sociability around the text influence the choices of English teachers in Western Australia.

In many Australian educational contexts, teachers, writers, and scholars are working to increase the inclusion of works by First Nations writers in secondary English classrooms, as well as addressing the narrow representation of women writers and other under-represented identities on text lists. Reading Australia has been an important and supportive initiative in this process, as are the resources from literary prize structures, such as the Stella Prize, and other projects working to draw attention to the classroom possibilities of new Australian literature releases. Some jurisdictions now also require text lists to have ratios of representation. The findings presented here provide useful considerations of the fact that inclusion on text lists, or the production of resources, does not assure classroom study of texts. Admission to the parochial school canon requires a confluence of specific textual attributes, with textual, and

social functions that are relative to the concerns of the local curriculum, as well as relevance for students and the zeitgeist.

Finally, we note that there are inherent problems with such a canon, including insular understandings of national literary histories and national concerns, and that this Western Australian parochial canon has become relatively stable, with minimal revision or curbing of “intellectual conservatism in the present” (Bérubé 463). The stability of this canon, particularly the stability of its narrowness, also highlights the need to review not only text lists when seeking to expand secondary school students’ experiences of Australian literature, but also the curriculum structures and ideological underpinning of syllabus documents, when considering the range of literatures that students encounter. This highlights the importance of participation in the secondary-tertiary nexus through the critical engagement of writers, academics and teachers in robust conversations relating to subject English in Australia and the teaching of Australian literature.

NOTES

¹ See, for instance Dunn’s 2012 “The Nation That Lost Its Own Stories,” Brady’s 2011 article “Uni Brought to Book for Snub to Local Literature” and Webby’s 2007 article “Teaching of Australian Literature Needs to Be Encouraged.”

² For this study, texts were classified as “Australian” and “Western Australian” where they were created by authors or directors who were born in Australia or Western Australia, or who had come to be residents of Australia or Western Australia.

³ ATAR Literature and ATAR English differ in the range of texts studied. In Literature, the texts prescribed are significant cultural works and are often viewed as canonical in a non-parochial sense. English focuses on a broad range of text types including literary and non-literary texts, fiction and non-fiction, and there is a strong focus on media texts. There is no prescribed list of texts for English, essentially giving teachers unlimited choice.

⁴ The number of First Nations texts included on the prescribed list demands comment; while teachers are selecting works that are available, First Nations writers and their works are under-represented on the list. Since 2018 the prescribed poetry section has been revised, and Oodgeroo Noonuccal’s poetry has been added, while the anthology *Inside Black Australia* (edited by Kevin Gilbert) has been removed.

⁵ The current Western Australian ATAR English and Literature courses (introduced in 2016) were adapted from the Australian Curriculum syllabus documents. While there were some local preferences included and alterations were made to assessment modes, most of the course content was retained from the Australian Curriculum documents.

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