

White déjà vu: Troubling the Certainty of the English Canon in Literary Education

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This paper is prompted by my experience as a researcher of English literary education in three different geographies over the past three years: Canada, the United Kingdom and now Australia. In response to the call to consider Futures for English for this special issue, I begin by thinking about the English literary inheritances I've experienced across these three geographies and what I've come to describe as a feeling of affective *white déjà vu*. Affect theory, as I will discuss below, concerns atmospheres, surfaces, bodies, emotions, moods, vicinities and capacities. Sometimes affect clings to a body; other times it slides past it, landing elsewhere. Drawing on affect theory, critical race scholarship and discussions of whiteness, I argue that despite continued local attempts at diversification of English literary education, whiteness continues to circulate through and cling to many of the core texts, narratives and messages that make up English literary education (Bacalja & Bliss, 2019; McGraw & van Leent, 2018; McLean Davies, Truman & Buzacott, 2020). This whiteness is general and specific, global and local, obvious and hidden. Rather than attempting to discuss the literary canon as a whole, I focus on a specific literary text as an example of how whiteness circulates *as* neutral or normal in literary education, even in a text that's often framed as helping (white) students learn *about* racism.

The event that precipitated this paper occurred directly after my arrival in Australia as a postdoctoral research fellow in 2019. Originally from Canada, I had spent the previous year in England also researching secondary English literary education and was excited to arrive in the state of Victoria, Australia, ready to learn about the Australian National Curriculum and be introduced to some new Australian literary texts. Unsurprisingly, the texts I encountered on recommended reading lists and interview transcripts of teachers echoed a similar canon I was used to seeing in both Canada and the UK. However, I was surprised to learn that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is still widely taught in Australia. While the book is regarded as a 'classic', it resonated as odd that in 2019 it would feature in schools here in Australia when surely there are Aboriginal texts or texts by Australian writers of colour that address racism (because surely that was its purpose, not merely 'literary merit')? I asked a colleague who researches Australian literary education why she thought the text is commonly taught at Year 10:

Colleague: Ironically, it remains a popular text because of its perceived 'universalism ...'

Me: But it is written from a white perspective during Jim Crow Alabama and the Black characters have no agency.

Colleague: It's regarded as an enduring classic.

Me: I have an overwhelming feeling of white déjà vu.

Colleague: That's the canon.

I've since found the text on recommended text lists (Board of Studies NSW, 2012) and

discussed its continued use in metropolitan Victorian schools with secondary English teachers on research projects (McLean Davies, Truman & Buzacott, 2020). Further investigation revealed an email from VATE in 2012 charging educators to suggest other texts that might be appropriate or challenging for Year 10 English, entitled 'Anything but Mockingbird – what texts to study in years 7–10' (VATE, pers. comm., March 2012). Rather than suggesting texts to replace *To Kill a Mockingbird*, however, two of the responses in *Idiom* were from teachers outlining why the text should stay in schools, citing a variety of reasons including literary merit and the text's enduring ability to teach about racial injustice (Albrecht, 2012; Scholten, 2012).

Debates around text selection are ongoing in English literary education. However, my aim with this paper is not to count how many times *To Kill a Mockingbird* is still being used in Australian schools, nor criticise teachers who may be teaching the book using an anti-oppression framework. Rather, I aim with affect theory and critical race theory to consider *To Kill a Mockingbird* as an example of how whiteness circulates and clings to the literary canon and literary education *as if* white experience were universal. Before I do, I'd like to stress that for decades Black scholars have pointed out the whiteness of the English canon's narratives (e.g., Achebe, 2016; Morrison, 1992; Walcott, 1997), and academics in Australia and abroad have troubled the continued use of *To Kill a Mockingbird* because of its tendency to centre white experience, often at the expense of racialised bodies in the classroom (James, 2019; Spires, 1999), so this is not a new argument. Nor is *To Kill a Mockingbird* the only canonical text that might centre whiteness – although encountering its continued use in Australian schools in 2019 did force me to consider how whiteness reproduces itself around the globe through the texts we foreground. Indeed, perhaps, as my colleague says, the feeling of *déjà vu* is what we're supposed to experience when confronting the canon as something static, known, reproduced across continents: what is English literature if not a recognisable group of texts telling universal stories from predominantly white people's perspectives?

Affect

Literature is affective: it generates moods, emotive responses, agitated moralities and inspiration. Across academic disciplines, affect is understood in different ways (Truman et al., 2020). What most scholars agree on is the idea that affect is not neutral and that

affective feelings do not affect all bodies in the same way (Palmer, 2017). Affect is frequently theorised as the capacities of bodies to act or be acted upon by other bodies, or as the *forces* at work in an encounter (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). Such forces can build capacity and debilitate capacity as part of relational exchanges circulating through and transversal to individual bodies. Affects can be intimate (Springgay, 2018) and sticky (Ahmed, 2004) and cling to bodies (or texts); affects can also be deflective and slippery, and glide past particular bodies (Truman & Shannon, 2018). The feeling of what I call *white déjà vu* that I experienced through confronting the literary canon in Australia was affective: I felt the mood of 'I've seen this before', while at the same time the familiarity of the canon felt so certain that the affective moment could have glided past me and been forgotten. The feeling I experienced that particular day as a white scholar is likely quite different from what a student of colour sitting in a secondary literary classroom might feel when confronting the ongoing whiteness of the literary canon.

Whiteness

The historical White Australia Policy was an overt example of the attempt to create and maintain a white state through immigration policies. While the policy is no longer in effect, whiteness continues to function as an affective force that suffuses institutions such as schools and universities (Ahmed, 2012). As Bhopal (2018) argues, 'In such white spaces, whiteness and white Western practices are the norm and those which do not comply with these are seen as outsiders and others' (p. 25). Ahmed (2007), when discussing what she frames as the *phenomenology of whiteness*, considers whiteness as an 'ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they "take up" space' (p. 150). Ahmed draws on Black theorist Franz Fanon to articulate how a Black body moving into a space becomes racialised through limitations on what it can access and through not quite belonging. A world historically, materially and literally shaped by colonialism is a 'white' world '... a world "ready" for certain kinds of bodies, as a world that puts certain objects within their reach' (Ahmed, 2007, pp. 153–154). Indigenous scholar Kim Tallbear (2018) discusses how whiteness does not only refer to phenotype or skin tone but also to the Euro-Western 'rational' humanism that circulates as the 'correct' way of performing science, or cultural practices. Literacy

and literary practices taught in secondary English are rooted in and remain tethered to this Euro-Western humanism and enacted through the texts privileged, prescriptivism and assessment strategies (McLean Davies, Doecke, Gill & Hayes, 2017; Mishra Tarc, 2015; Truman, 2019a; Truman et al., 2020). I'm going to stop this paragraph right here, because already it sounds like what I'm saying makes perfect sense (of course English and the texts we study are rooted in humanist ideals!). My point – and the point that other anti-racist scholars make – is that the ideals of humanism rely on practises of othering that are historically tied to trans-Atlantic slavery, ongoing settler colonialism and a rejection of those who did not (or still don't) 'count' as fully human, e.g., Black people, Indigenous people, people of colour, queer, trans, and disabled people, and their stories (Hartman, 1997; Jackson, 2016; Wynter & McKittrick, 2015; Yusoff, 2018).

This white humanism is tethered generally to the English canon's 'great works' (typically British or American) as well as specifically to the geographies of settler states (like Australia and Canada) where, when a literary heritage is acknowledged, it comes in the form of white settler narratives rather than foregrounding Indigenous authors or authors of colour (Leane, 2016; Simpson, 2011).

Sarah Cefai (2018) draws from Lauren Berlant's notion of 'optimism' to describe how the cultural production of whiteness operates as an affective structure in the creation of nationhood in Australia. Cefai describes how affective whiteness is expressed as a surface that can be both absorptive and deflective simultaneously. In being *absorptive*, whiteness forces Indigenous people and other people of colour, and anyone or anything that does not uphold white optimisms, to be absorbed or assimilated, while in being *deflective*, it operates as a surface that 'non-white' people or ideas are occupying (which necessitates the need to preserve and promote the white state and its ideals). In both instances, whiteness is normal, ordinary and the basis of nation – and any person or cultural practice that is read as 'not-white' is used to reinforce whiteness through being 'Other', or through being assimilated into whiteness. Whiteness is always affirmed.

Thinking with Cefai and looking at the construction, circulation and upholding of the literary canon in the form of the secondary English curriculum, I see a similar affective ordinary whiteness clinging to the kinds of texts we value and measure others against,

the authors we celebrate, the narratives we continually return to in teaching English and how those narratives are framed. The affective structure of whiteness works on multiple levels through language use, through narratives that tug on emotions and centre white characters and ideals and allow *white* readers to feel particular ways. Many of the narratives we continue to teach are written by and for white people and *taught* in ways that continue to centre white experience (Borsheim-Black, 2015; Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013; Spires, 1999; Stallworth, Gibbons & Fauber, 2006) and in the service of whiteness.

What do I mean when I say the books are written *for* white people in the service of whiteness: isn't literature for everyone (isn't it 'universal')? To explain, I'll return to the book that precipitated this paper, a book that's featured on recommended text lists and taught in Australia, Canada, the UK, and USA: *To Kill a Mockingbird*. After fifty years it continues to be framed as a novel that can help teach students *about* racism (Macaluso, 2017) as well as being an example of literary writing. Because of how familiar the book is to many readers it's a good example of how affective whiteness circulates and centres itself in canonical literature and interpretations of canonical texts, and perhaps why my feeling of *déjà vu* was so strong at seeing that it is still often recommended and praised as a text here in Australia.

To Kill a Mockingbird has been read in schools for generations. I read it in high school English in Canada in the 1990s, and it's still used in schools globally in 2019, although increasingly less so (Sampathkumar, 2018). *To Kill a Mockingbird's* protagonist is a white lawyer called Atticus Finch. Finch has taken on the task of defending a Black man called Tom Robinson who is wrongfully accused of raping a white woman. Although Robinson is wrongly accused, he is found guilty. He tries to escape prison and is killed.

Affective whiteness permeates this story on several registers. Firstly, there's the banal whiteness that clings to everything in the story, always re-centring itself through prioritising white characters and perspectives. Pointedly, there's also the white moralism of the story that depends on Black suffering. What do I mean when I say the story re-centres whiteness? Significantly, the story isn't *about* Tom Robinson. The story is about Atticus Finch, as told through the narrative of his white child. Atticus' character is presented as a moral guiding compass for his white kids (and for the benefit of the white reader). Tom Robinson is nobody. He's

a prop, or an incidental character at best. Robinson could have been *any* Black man – and I mean *any* in at least two senses. Robinson could have been *any* Black man because we don't learn much about him at all as a character, and he could have been *any* Black man because *any* Black body will do as a prop for progressing the white narrative. I know the story in part is supposed to teach readers that racism is bad. But what the subtext, and the absence of character development for Robinson in the plain text, also teaches is that Black people are available as *props* for whiteness to re-affirm itself – in this case a particularly sticky moral whiteness that relies on Black death.

These paragraphs will perhaps raise furor among readers who may feel bad about how horribly Robinson is treated and are confident they would not be like/are not like the racists in the book. Or make the case that white readers need to learn about racism through stories like Tom Robinson's. However, Patel (2016) has argued that '... the creation and consumption of Black suffering is as old as the project of racism, and coloniality has relied heavily on visible suffering and its consumption to deepen the strata between man and human' (p. 82). As such, in our contemporary milieu, as educators, we must consider whether Black and Indigenous students and students of colour need to read *To Kill a Mockingbird* to learn that racism is deadly? Do *they* need a novel that re-centres whiteness through Black death (again/still!)?

While I do not want to conflate Black North American youth's experience with Indigenous Australian youth's experience, it is important to point out that in an Australian context, there are a number of texts authored by white people *about* Indigenous people's experiences that are also taught in schools, such as *Deadly, Unna?*, *The Secret River* and *Jasper Jones*. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, like these texts, is a book written by a white person, quite likely *for* white people; as such, its use in English classes might attempt to critique racism but does so by re-inscribing a narrative where a moral whiteness reigns and Black people pay the cost. If I historicise it that's the case. And if I present-day contextualise it, it's still the case.

Tellingly, in July 2019 Professor Carl James at York University, Canada sent a report to Peel Board of Education (the place I went to school in Ontario, Canada and read *To Kill a Mockingbird* in Grade 10) regarding an ethnographic study he completed with Black male secondary school students. The study focused on Black student attainment across subject areas and the need

for culturally responsive pedagogies. Significantly, the students reported feeling uncomfortable reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*: they didn't like how the Black characters are treated in the book, and they didn't like the continual use of the racial epithet (n-word) in the book (James, 2019). Cultural analysis of whiteness aside, this knowledge forces me as an educator to consider why we would continue to teach a narrative that Black students who are consistently marginalised in mainstream schooling have explicitly stated is hurtful to them. School boards in North America are removing the text for precisely these reasons, or asserting that it can only be taught through an anti-oppression framework which may require specific training on the part of educators (Llana, 2019).

This leads me back to my colleague's comment at the beginning of this paper: that we persist in teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* and other 'classic' texts due to its 'perceived universalism.' The book is set in a very different time and place from contemporary Australia (or Canada, or the UK): the American South, during Jim Crow and before the civil rights movement. Focusing on narratives about racism from a different time and place does not necessarily translate into critical reflection on the existence of racism in a specific time/space. There's no 'universal' narrative of racism; it is constantly re-produced locally as well as being part of larger racialising technologies or assemblages of oppression and supremacy (Euro-Western humanism).

Another recent example of *To Kill a Mockingbird* being used to re-centre whiteness culturally is an article by an Australian English teacher (O'Farrell, 2020) that compares the racial prejudice Tom Robinson experiences in *To Kill a Mockingbird* to white Catholic Cardinal George Pell's experience of being accused and convicted, and then acquitted, of the sexual abuse of children. Allegorically equating a powerful white man who is a senior official of one of the most powerful religious institutions on earth to a poor Black man condemned and killed for a crime he didn't commit both erases and instrumentalises the institutionalised racism Black people experience. However, such allegorical equivalencies of experience are common teaching techniques in English – after all, English is often touted as a subject where we read fiction and put ourselves into other people's shoes, or use fiction as a way of understanding larger social or historical issues. Scholars have argued that using pedagogical tropes such as asking students to draw parallels between their own experience of being falsely accused of something

and Tom Robinson's experience can 'trivialize the realities of systemic oppression [and]... may actually reinforce normative notions about Whiteness rather than interrupt them' (Borsheim-Black, 2015, p. 409).

While I believe that allegorical and speculative readings can be effective tools in English education for promoting empathy or affirming different futures, such endeavours must not be at the expense of actual human children in a classroom – particularly students who are already marginalised by mainstream schooling – and must not instrumentalise systemic racist oppression in the service of whiteness. White teachers, school boards, and nostalgic parents telling Black kids that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is an important text to teach about racism, or an important universal narrative that white people can use to draw parallels about being falsely accused, are quintessential examples of whiteness centring itself.

Disrupting white déjà vu

I've been focusing on *To Kill a Mockingbird* as an obvious example of how whiteness circulates through the English canon and literary education, and how it is mobilised in schools and beyond. As I said at the beginning of the paper, critiques of the whiteness of the English canon are not new, particularly critiques by writers of colour (Baldwin, 1961; Hartman, 1997). In 1975, Chinua Achebe delivered a lecture in Massachusetts that critiqued Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (another text that's still frequently taught in high schools), pointing out the 'preposterous and perverse arrogance' of the text for reducing the continent of Africa to a mere backdrop for Kurtz's (the white European protagonist's) descent into madness (Achebe, 2016, p. 21). While it is possible to do a 'post-colonial' reading of *Heart of Darkness* and demonstrate that the text highlights the flaws of imperialism, Achebe's critique of the text's racism renders any re-cooperative attempt at a 'post-colonial' reading moot. Achebe (2016) draws attention to the text's 'dehumanization' of Africa and African people, and asks whether a novel that 'depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No, it cannot' (p. 21).

Achebe's refusal to call *Heart of Darkness* a 'great' work of art strikes at the heart of debates around the English canon, and the persistence of whiteness as an affective force in literary education. It's so pervasive that I think in many ways white people cannot even see it: we don't question the certainty of whiteness because we don't

know it's there. I'm saying this as a white middle-class academic who has been schooled in the canon. English literary education has created a white echo chamber, where white voices are prioritised, white feelings more important than any others, and everything is calibrated and measured against European humanism. Hence this overwhelming feeling of déjà vu on confronting the secondary English curriculum in Canada, the UK and Australia; but particularly through seeing *To Kill a Mockingbird* still touted as a recommended 'classic' text to teach in secondary schools. And yet, I'm not saying we shouldn't teach it. I'm saying we need to think about who and what we serve in teaching it, and most importantly *how* it is taught.

Although I have used *To Kill a Mockingbird* as an example in this paper, I don't think that the text itself is the problem. For the purposes of this paper, the book has been a catalyst for considering how a beloved text that did a particular job in the past might not be the kind of text/narrative we need for the future of English. Or at least how we must re-evaluate the risks and impacts that are concomitant with retaining and teaching 'social justice texts' that centre whiteness not only in the narrative, but also through pedagogical practices of drawing false equivalencies of experience.

We know from research that many English teachers have expressed how they would like to bring culturally responsive pedagogies into their classrooms and engage with texts that are reflective of cultural diversity, but often cite lack of time and resources as barriers for implementing change (McLean Davies, Truman & Buzacott, 2020). These are material realities that must be acknowledged; however, in order for the future of English to rupture the certainty of the canon and the primacy of white experience, we have to stop centring it. One way to approach this is to change up text lists, and invest in teachers and allow them time to read and develop new materials for teaching. We also have to allow teachers (who remain predominantly white) time to develop more understanding of systemic structures of racism and settler colonialism. Additionally, teacher education and school hiring practices should invest in and acknowledge Indigenous teachers and teachers of colour and cultivate their experiences and expertise as literary educators (Hogarth, 2020; Skeeter, 2001). We also need to take a situated look at the students in English classes and their interests, as well as assessment regimes and bureaucratic structures that continually constrain the work that teachers do. English teachers know that stories have material effects on readers

(Truman, 2019b), and that the methods we bring to analysing texts and the comparative texts we put them in conversation with can have radical effects on textual reception and understanding. A renewed critical literacy perspective for the future of English might require not just different stories that foreground diverse characters' perspectives, but methods of analysis and reflection that do not reproduce dominant worldviews, regardless of the texts being analysed; otherwise we will continue to reproduce this white *déjà vu* in literary education.

Notes

- 1 *Déjà vu* in French means to have already seen something. It is often used in English to express a feeling of having lived through something before.
- 2 In Australia, *To Kill A Mockingbird* remains a text recommended by curriculum authorities (Board of Studies NSW) and the Premier's Reading Challenge Victoria (<https://vprc.eduweb.vic.gov.au/home>), and argued for by teachers in *Idiom* (Albrecht, 2012; Scholten, 2012), and it has been consistently mentioned to me in discussions with my tertiary colleagues, secondary teachers, and students.
- 3 Black scholars of affect have drawn attention to how when there is a 'subject' in affect theory, they are a transparent subject 'endowed with the capacity to affect and be affected' (Palmer, 2017, p. 37). Palmer (2017), following de Silva, argues that while the transparent subject, or Man, is endowed with a capacity to affect and be affected, a Black body 'stands as endlessly affectable but unable to "affect" or have agentive power within an affective economy' (p. 37).
- 4 A current discussion about media and the viral sharing of the video showing the murder of Black jogger Ahmaud Arbery in broad daylight relates to this ongoing practice of 'consuming' Black suffering and its affects on racialised people. See <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/may/07/ahmaud-arbery-video-shooting-sharing-viral>
- 5 In many ways this paper is written to enable white people to think about how whiteness circulates in the curriculum and at what cost. Black scholars have been calling out the whiteness of the canon and curriculum for decades.
- 6 I know that this book has the potential to be taught through an anti-racist lens, and I'm not suggesting it be banned – I am suggesting that we consider why we still think it's a 'go-to' text for talking about racism or literary merit when there are a lot of other current, local books that address racism written by racialised authors.
- 7 The ongoing murders of unarmed Black youth on American streets – most recently the killing of Black jogger Ahmaud Arbery mentioned above – demonstrate how the racial logics of white supremacy continue to operate in America and globally.

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