

# The Ladders

Joseph Steinberg and Sarah-Jane Burton

More than ever, the uncertainty of aesthetic pleasure in literature calls for a sophisticated theory of cultural transmission in all of its sites, but above all in the classroom, where all the ladders of the discipline find their start.

John Guillory, *Professing Criticism*, 379.

**T**HOSE OF US WHO TEACH LITERATURE AT UNIVERSITIES IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA MAY soon find ourselves before a new cohort of first-year undergraduates, the majority of whom have not read a poem or play since the age of fifteen.<sup>1</sup> Or rather, it's now possible to imagine a scenario in which an increasing share of Australian high school graduates have not in their last two years of study been *assigned* any poetry or drama—there is of course nothing to prevent them from having *read* such texts in their spare time, other than the usual distractions of homework, co-curriculars, adolescent ennui and social media. If this scenario eventuates, one of the straws that broke the camel's back will have been an ostensibly minor change to the structure of the Western Australian Certificate of Education [WACE] English examinations: this change stipulates that, from 2023, the two written, visual, or multimodal stimulus texts provided in the unseen

---

<sup>1</sup> We would like to extend our thanks to Monique Rooney, Christian Gelder and Tony Hughes-D'Aeth for their helpful comments on various drafts of this essay.

section of the examination cannot be works of poetry or drama (15). Works of poetry and drama can, of course, still be assigned as set texts at a teacher's discretion, and knowledge of these texts may be deployed by students in the second section of the examination. But this change not only removes a significant incentive to do so—previously, assigning poetic and dramatic texts would have prepared students to encounter them in the unseen section—it in fact disincentivises doing so, as assigning written or visual texts in any *other* genre would serve the dual purpose of familiarising students with the kind of material they may encounter in the unseen section. By the same logic, this change may have knock-on effects for the subject Drama, where students routinely put their interpretive skills to use as actors. Poetry, on the other hand, remains a mode of writing only rarely encountered in any other subject. The rationale for this change seems to have been that it might help differentiate examinations in English from those in the alternative course, Literature, for this split is a key component of WA's curricular structure, as it is in other states. The hope seems to have been that changes to the examination might induce a few students in English to jump ship to the Literature course (in recent years there have been approximately six times as many students enrolled in the former as there were in the latter). More likely, given that undergraduates who took English in WA secondary schools vastly outnumber those who took Literature even in our discipline's undergraduate classrooms, is that a growing fraction of our matriculants will lack more than a rudimentary familiarity with these genres of writing.

'[A] curriculum', as John Guillory asserts in his survey of the state of the discipline, *Professing Criticism* (2022), 'in which there is no coercion is not a curriculum at all':

The curriculum is a site of contention because it exerts force, bureaucratically recognized in the notion of 'requirements'. This force in turn measures our responsibility for the transmission of a valued knowledge. If we don't exert force in the curriculum, we are disclaiming that responsibility. (231)

When curricular force is exerted specifically to *exclude* literary genres from examination, something in addition to the transmission of a valued knowledge is being disclaimed: what is also disavowed is the school subject's role in providing students with the knowledge base they will require should they elect to pursue further study in the field at the university level. Whether it was intended to do so or not, this particular change in effect erodes the connection between subject and discipline. That this change merely formalised the removal of these genres from the unseen section of the examination—a survey of examinations from the preceding years indicates that poetry and drama have been unofficially sidelined for some time—means their explicit exclusion is best understood in the broader

context of the school subject's historical retreat from the literary on a national scale, a trend that over the past half-century has led to less exposure to poetry for the majority of the nation's students. Departing from Guillory's claim that, if the discipline is to honestly appraise its efforts to reach 'nonprofessional readers', it ought to begin by 'admitting that teaching at the secondary level is more consequential for the political formation of the young adult population than teaching at the postsecondary level', this essay reflects on curricular mismatches between the secondary and tertiary system (77). Attending to recent points of divergence in the study of literature at Australian schools and universities, this essay asks what it would mean for subject and discipline to understand their educational project as continuous rather than contestatory.

Dating back at least as far as 1969, by which point every Australian state had opted to split secondary English into literature- and expression-oriented courses or streams under the auspices of accommodating a growing student body, curricular changes that deemphasise the study of literary genres are neither new nor particular to the Australian educational system (Dolin, Jones and Dowsett, 28, 45-6). Guillory describes the broad shape of this trend when he identifies the tendency that is 'most conspicuous' among 'the selection biases that prevail today': an 'extraordinary inversion' of the longstanding pedagogical and critical elevation of poetry over prose (368). Earlier, this inversion is described as a 'contraction of the disciplinary field' along historical and generic lines, a reduction of curricular breadth that favours recent examples of 'the form of representation—prose narrative—most amenable to interpretation within a political thematic' (76). This is also a bias, especially acute at the secondary level, for prose that is markedly prosaic, a tendency symptomatic both of good-will efforts to acknowledge and address the issue of student accessibility and a newfound willingness to prioritise these efforts over the older disciplinary project of imparting high-level literacy skills by acquainting students with writing in literary modes. This pragmatic preference for ease of access over thoroughness of discipline knowledge and skill development is of greater concern to the extent that it speaks to a broader historical trend in Australian school curricula, one that, as the essays collected in Tim Dolin, Jo Jones and Patricia Dowsett's important collection *Required Reading* (2017) convincingly demonstrate, has been characterised by a decline relative to the postwar decades in the share of curricular space afforded to biographies, short stories, and poetry nationwide. That this difference in emphasis, as John Yiannakis astutely notes, is in no small part attributable to 'reduced university influence on [school] syllabuses' which had previously been 'heavily influenced by tertiary selection requirements' is indisputable; that the increasing divide between subject and discipline has uncomplicatedly constituted a 'liberat[ion]' of the former is less clear (30).

In *Privilege* (2010), a subtle ethnography of educational elitism in the US school system, Shamus Khan gives us reason to believe such divisions have inadvertently served a rather different end. 'What marks elites as elites', writes Khan, is no longer the question of 'what they exclude', but the practice of 'including everything': their authority no longer lies in bourgeois snobbery but in managerial omnivorousness, their advantage in the ease with which they 'pick, choose, combine, and consume a wide gamut of the social strata' (151). Elite school curricula distinguish themselves from those that serve the majority of students, in Khan's account, by audaciously disavowing 'knowing [...] things' and rendering 'concreteness irrelevant'; the point is not to acquire knowledge or truth per se, but to practice the skill of information management, and thereby prepare students for upper-level administrative and professional careers (162). Counterintuitively, then, changes that separate subject from discipline by de-emphasising student knowledge of older literary genres in fact facilitate educational stratification of a kind. Guugu Yimithirr activist, lawyer and social commentator Noel Pearson makes a similar point from a different angle in *Radical Hope* (2011), via his scathing critique of social relevance as a justification for curriculum design. To 'confine the content of curricula to the particular circumstances of students', Pearson argues, is not only to 'eschew Shakespeare in favour of popular culture': it is to uncritically reproduce 'assumptions about the educational aspirations of lower-class children' (80). When a curriculum disclaims responsibility for the transmission of literary knowledge, then, it does so in order to strengthen its broader claim of relevance to the lives of students, but this is a claim that presumes a foreknowledge of these lives, limiting aspirations at one end of the privilege spectrum while inculcating their future employers at the other.

But what, we must surely also ask, has the discipline's curriculum disclaimed? Any student of discipline history—or for that matter, any undergraduate who has taken a class on literary theory—will be aware that the half-century or so since the splitting of the subject in Australian schools has seen tertiary syllabi revised along all manner of lines. These revisions have, of course, also shaped the content of secondary curricula, yet when their proponents refer to these curricula they tend to do so in the abstract, in ways that are not always accurate. As Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan argue, revisionist efforts of this kind have tended to perceive 'the classroom as the canon's fortress and main site of reproduction', a characterisation revealed to be 'at best a very incomplete story, and at worst a figment of our imaginations' when they turn to the kind of teaching that took place in the 'classrooms of a broader array of secondary educational institutions' (4). Curricular disavowals of the kind with which this essay began, whereby seemingly minor differences in self-justification lead school subject and tertiary discipline to slowly diverge, could thus be said to find an unlikely echo in the form of a remark made by Wiradjuri scholar Jeanine Leane in her essay 'Other peoples' stories' (2016). In its reconstruction of the author's brutal ostracisation by her high school

peers in the mid-1970s, abuses catalysed and exacerbated by a literary curriculum that in her view amounted to ‘a catalogue of misrepresentations of me and my people’, this essay is itself a contribution to curricular history and a lively rationale for the more circumspect approach to representing alterity that has increasingly defined the contemporary creative writing classroom. But what might Leane mean when, midway through this piece, she declares in a standalone sentence that ‘We must remember that [Patrick] White is still the most taught author in Australian schools’? We must remember this, per her essay’s line of argument, because White’s curricular centrality makes the need to contest ‘the previously unchallenged authority of the settler canon’ clear. The pedagogical and political imperatives of Leane’s critique of appropriation in the classroom, defensible as they are in the main, at this moment draw their impetus from the purported authority of said canon, insofar as it continues to be embedded in the curricular structure of the school subject and can therefore be said to remain relatively uncontested in the present. There is some truth to be found in this, at least as it speaks to the overworked teacher’s understandable tendency to lean on previously taught texts with large bodies of supporting material, even when provided with open-ended reading lists. As Dolin notes, less than ten percent of the four hundred or so titles on the WACE Literature Prescribed Text Lists were taught between 2007 and 2016: this is indicative of the way such open-ended text lists often remain in practice ‘every bit as narrow and ideologically circumscribed’ as the more rigidly prescriptive school curricula of the postwar decades (344).

Yet the problem with the particular example of White is that he is not, and has never been, the most taught author in Australian schools. At no point in his six-decade overview of findings from the Australian Literature in Schools Database [ALIAS], which draws its data from ‘all available syllabuses, reading lists, examination papers and subject manuals and/or handbooks from 1945 to 2005 for Western Australia, New South Wales, South Australia, Tasmania and Victoria’, does John Yiannakis identify a year in which White could contend for the distinction of being the most taught author (21).<sup>2</sup> Leane’s misapprehension may

---

<sup>2</sup> White also has little presence on tertiary curricula. According to Open Syllabus Analytics, which draws on a corpus of over twenty million anglophone syllabi across all disciplines, White’s most assigned novels are *The Aunt’s Story*, *A Fringe of Leaves*, and *Voss*, which appear on 64, 45, and 33 syllabi respectively. For comparison: Alexis Wright’s *The Swan Book* appears on 139 syllabi, *Carpentaria* on 108; Christina Stead’s *The Man Who Loved Children* on 72; Tim Winton’s *The Turning* on 104, *Cloudstreet* on 59; Christos Tsiolkas’ *Loaded* on 116, *The Slap* on 82. Henry Handel Richardson’s *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, once widely taught in Australia, now appears just 32 times, narrowly beating out Thea Astley’s *It’s Raining in Mango* (29). Kim Scott fares better, with *That Deadman Dance* (99), *True Country* (62) and *Benang* (44). Sally Morgan’s *My Place* appears on 274; Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* on 306; David Malouf’s *Remembering Babylon* on 396. Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief*, which a preliminary inquiry suggests is a contender for the title of most widely assigned Australian novel, appears on 410 in total. But it is still small fry in the curricular sea: J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* appears on 1615; Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* on 2960. The curricular presence of any Australian novel is minute when compared to the most widely assigned American novels, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (5422) and

stem from White's reasonably regular inclusion on secondary reading lists, at least compared to most of his contemporaries: while still nowhere near widespread enough to render him a plausible contender for the unenviable distinction of being the curriculum's (dead, white, male) poster boy, this does, as Jacqueline Manuel and Don Carter write, somewhat mask the reality that 'the actual take-up of [White's novels] in the classroom was miniscule', evidenced by the fact that he was read by less than 0.003 percent of Higher School Certificate [HSC] students in his home state of New South Wales between 1999 and 2005 (129).

To be clear, our aim is not to dwell on what in the context of Leane's essay is a relatively inconsequential error of fact—one that matters little to the purchase of her central claims—but to recognise it as an enunciation of what Morgan Day Frank usefully summarises as a general 'disciplinary tendency to cast the school as the institutional site where literature derives its larger social meaning' (7). We use her comment as an example only because of its unusually explicit positioning of the school as such a site, in this case a site of canonical reproduction. By inviting readers to remember, rather than to learn or to realise, Leane's claim takes the nature of the school subject's literary syllabus to be such common knowledge that its deficiencies need not be established, only recalled. To orient one's teaching against that of the school system is, by this logic, merely to do what most academics already agree we should be doing. In other words, this minor counterfactual claim concerns us primarily as an indicative illustration of the way that curricular reform in the discipline draws part of its impetus from the assertion of a revisionist relation to school curricula. What Guillory calls the literary scholar's overestimation of aim here finds a corollary in the classroom, where syllabi have long been 'the site of a proxy war' wherein a politics of surrogacy has displaced 'criticism of society' onto 'criticism of the disciplinary object' (69). In short, we tertiary educators are inclined to overestimate the political efficacy of our classrooms if we construct an antagonist in the shape of a school curriculum that has never quite existed, at least not in the form we take it to have done. Behind the latter conviction lies the undeclared wish that secondary curricula could ever be to tertiary syllabi either an ignorable irrelevance or a site of straightforward contestation.

While to the day-to-day operation of schools the tertiary discipline of literary studies is largely forgettable, occasional enrolment-boosting outreach initiatives and appearances on student reference lists notwithstanding, the same cannot be

---

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (5067), let alone the single most assigned novel: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (11,091). And the presence of any single novel is negligible compared to that of the most widely assigned cultural theorists, such as Michel Foucault (50,609), Karl Marx (34,589), Judith Butler (26,365) and Edward Said (24,162), whose writings are widely assigned beyond literary studies. For research that draws on this data to examine the contemporary novel's preoccupation with history, see Alexander Manshel's *Writing Backwards* (2024).

said in reverse. The relation of subject to discipline is incompletely, but nonetheless considerably, determinative of how the latter is taught, in ways we have to date done little to document.<sup>3</sup> This is only moderately the case at the level of text selection, insofar as there is some effort to avoid assigning works popular in the school system for fear of repetition, but the relation is significantly determinative at the level of genre fluency, where familiarity with an array of basic conventions in genres students now only rarely encounter outside the classroom has historically been carefully cultivated by the subject and assumed as prior knowledge by the discipline. As the unpleasant thought experiment with which this essay began makes clear, school curricula in this sense exert a kind of vertical coercion on university syllabi: when they disclaim a measure of the responsibility to transmit knowledge of certain genres—say, poetry and drama—would-be climbers of the disciplinary ladder find themselves less capable of grasping its lowest rung. To teach poetry to a classroom composed primarily of students who have not been assigned a poem since the age of fifteen would require a set of expectations and practices very different from those currently in place; it would preclude much of what we have to date asked of our first-year students. This is not for a moment to suggest that accessibility is an unworthy endeavour. We have both taught for an array of access initiatives, for which expectations of this kind must be tempered or abandoned, but few of even the most committed exponents of such programs would argue that all undergraduate courses ought to perform the work of bridging units.

Moreover, to assume that the cause of friction between subject and discipline lies in the former's excessive canonicity, rather than its steady marginalisation of older literary genres and innovative work in favour of conventional realist narratives and informational writing in various bureaucratic sociolects, is in some sense to cede the argument for poetry by disclaiming a shared responsibility for the transmission of literary knowledge. To play on Guillory's analogy, it is to risk mistaking ladders for snakes. Rather than opposing the discipline's teaching to the school's, the more pressing task for literary educators lies in the question of how we might continue to provide students with the historical-generic knowledge and interpretative skills they need to experience literature as a form of 'aesthetic pleasure' at all stages of their education, across the primary, secondary and tertiary system (379).

---

<sup>3</sup> The aforementioned *Required Reading* is an important exception to this generalisation: two others include the ALIAS database, and the AustLit database's records of literary texts taught at the tertiary level. These two databases represent vital attempts to understand the content, and by extension the interdependency, of secondary and tertiary curricula. That they are at present, respectively, inaccessible and incomplete, is a lacuna in the self-knowledge of Australian academics and teachers alike.

Given the particular niche it occupies within this system, there is good reason to emphasise the importance of poetry to an expanded conception of the discipline. Poetry is the oldest literary form. It elicits modes of attention and builds emotional intelligence in ways that cannot easily be acquired by exposure to other genres of writing. As Edward Hirsch states: 'Poetry is a form of necessary speech': if readers are not exposed to 'the devices and techniques of poetry', they cannot be expected to grasp 'poetic thinking' (xii). This amounts to a defence of what Guillory calls 'artifactual language', by which he means 'language wrought into an object': it is 'the artifice of writing, its technicity', in his view, that 'requires cognitive abilities that have to be taught, that are beyond intuitive practice' (351). His point, to combine his terms with Hirsch's, is that while learning to think poetically has often been 'assumed by the university professoriate as the mission of the lower levels of the education system', this relegation is a mistake (Guillory 352). The development of specifically literary modes of thought and feeling in readers is a venerable yet indispensable rationale for literary study across all levels of the educational system.

\*\*\*

The tension between subject and discipline sketched in this essay's first half is no doubt to some degree determined, in ways this essay can only briefly gesture toward, by the waning fortunes of literary study within the Australian tertiary system. In 2020, the total number of undergraduate majors in the discipline was, by Leigh Dale's estimate, likely comparable to the number enrolled in 1975, a figure that is less than encouraging when one considers that 'the number of students in Australian universities has increased some 20-fold since then' (168). Contraction, or at very least perceived stagnation, is part of what has intensified the jostling for curricular space outlined above, and a proportional decline in enrolments also lends the impression that such space is increasingly finite. Absent a steady influx of undergraduates, desperation for student follow-through can lead disciplines to perceive deficiencies in their subject counterparts. But this is a pitfall that this essay has thus far been careful to avoid: as several contributions to this special issue state or imply, a discipline's fortunes owe much to economic, political and social exigencies, be they job-ready graduate schemes (Gelder 100), research assessment frameworks (Dean 95-6), the discontinuation of chairs (Ng 43-4), or outright wage theft (Marian and Robinson 83-4); decline cannot be properly accounted for by confining one's field of view to the educational system alone. This essay's claim, more modestly, is that the teaching of literature across all levels of the educational system would be better equipped to respond to such exigencies if the relation between the school and university system was understood as determinative rather than contestatory, or worse still simply forgotten. Turning now to what is by any reasonable measure a key flashpoint in the recent history of literary education, yet one which to our knowledge has received no scholarly

comment, this essay's second half asks what the discipline might learn from and contribute to a singularly unsuccessful instance of the subject's efforts to transmit the experience of aesthetic pleasure.

In the first of the five sections that comprise non-binary Munanjali Yugambah poet Ellen van Neerven's remarkable collection *Throat* (2020), 'they haunt-walk in', it is not only the persona who haunt-walks but their memories: the former is 'walking-dead-haunting-live', their footsteps ghosted by an unspecified traumatic 'incident' (3). The prose poem leaves the nature of this incident unspecified. What it does briefly detail is the incident's aftermath, when the persona's inbox is inundated 'with sympathy and unsympathetic requests' (3). These tactless requests are 'commissions'; the senders want to pay them to 'write about [their] trauma' (3-4). Haunt-walk thus describes more than just a trauma-induced ghosting of their mind. It is a performance they are solicited to repeat because, it is implied, there is the potential to profit from such performances.

As Dan Sinykin writes, conglomerate publishers have for at least a few decades now demanded 'market-friendly representations of race': they have welcomed, 'especially, narratives about the traumatic legacies of colonisation and racism, which masochistically soothe the liberal soul' (157). This is a formula and an end that *Throat*, as well as numerous other titles published by small presses like UQP (such as Evelyn Araluen's *Dropbear* (2022) and Alison Whittaker's *BlakWork* (2018), the latter published by Magabala Books), reflect both an awareness of and an orientation against. It matters, for this essay's purposes, that what haunts *Throat* is not (or not only) these legacies in their systemic or institutional form but a particular 'incident': this incident was, as we shall see, the minor landmark in the history of English as a subject in Australian schools referred to above, one that emerges from and speaks back to a longer historical sidelining of poetic literacy.

In 2017, without prior consultation with the author, a poem from van Neerven's first collection *Comfort Food* (2016) appeared as one of three unseen texts provided for use in Section I of the English (Standard) HSC examination, to be read and written about by some seventy thousand high school students in New South Wales. The poem in question, 'Mango', is a tightly controlled minimalist exercise in tonal subtlety and careful understatement, a lyric dividing eighty-two words across twenty-five lines without punctuation except for a single comma:

eight years old  
 walking under the bridge  
 scrub, swamp  
 abandoned machinery  
 insides of tennis balls  
 bits of fences

meeting the boys  
at the dam  
bikes in a pile  
skater shoe soles  
not cold in  
never is  
boys talking about mangoes  
slapping water  
some have never had one  
listen to the taste  
the squeeze of a cheek  
dripping chins  
a dog jumps in  
they pull on tufts of hair  
fill ears with mud  
breeze full  
clouds break  
they remember my birthday  
is tomorrow (19)

Students were tasked with explaining ‘how the poet conveys the delight of discovery’: optionally, they could pair this poem with an extract from Pierre Peju’s *The Girl from the Chartreuse* (2002) or Geoff Dyer’s *White Sands* (2016) as one of the two texts that, in their view, ‘most successfully explore the idea that unexpected discoveries can be intensely meaningful’.

Such prompts seem of little relevance to the poem assigned, an impression only reinforced by marking guidelines which encouraged examiners to reward students who identified the poem’s ‘listing of images’, its ‘appeals to the senses, including taste’, its ‘lack of punctuation’, its ‘stream of ideas’, and (most egregiously) its depiction of ‘doing something for the first time’ (1). It’s unclear exactly what lies behind the timid inkling that the poem is about ‘doing something’: is it circumspection, or limited comprehension? Even if one is oblivious to the fact that mango is a euphemism, even if one misses the possibility that the ‘something’ done for the first time in this poem could well be the boys—whose age is not stated—sexual assault of an eight-year-old, it’s hard to see how the idea that this poem is about a discovery that is delightful or otherwise intensely meaningful could be supported with evidence. What in the poem could qualify as discovery, in the sense of ‘doing something for the first time’? Not the eight-year-old walking, we hope; not encountering the boys, when the article implies familiarity; not swimming in the dam, which ‘never is’ cold; not the poem’s conclusion, in which the date of the pointedly non-gendered child’s birthday is not discovered but remembered. Did those who wrote these guidelines take ‘the

squeeze of a cheek / dripping chins' to indicate that the boys had somehow progressed from 'talking about mangoes' to actually eating them, an experience which for some of them would've been a first, and thus a discovery of a kind? This line of interpretation requires discounting the synesthetic imperative of the preceding line, 'listen to the taste', which chimes with 'talking' to render what follows an impression heard and imagined, not literally experienced. That the guidelines seem to miss the poem's minimalist preference for reticence and intimation, that they appear to be unaware of the prurient edge to the boys' tugging on 'tufts of hair', or to the coercive undertone of their filling an unspecified referent's—the dog's, their own, or the persona's?—'ears with mud', constitutes a series of interpretive oversights that can withstand little further elaboration, and were judged by at least one contemporaneous commentator to be risible. Tony Birch, quoted in a piece by Bhakti Puvanenthiran, makes the case with admirable forthrightness: this prompt was in his view simply 'a stupid question', one unlikely to do more than perpetuate the 'base level of commentary on poetry' that he routinely encounters as an educator in the tertiary system (2017). His point is that this was no laughing matter. Not for the poet, nor for the examinees.

To attend to the shortcomings of the examination's framing is not for a moment to excuse or downplay the unequivocally racist remarks that were made online, and in some cases sent directly to van Neerven, following the 2017 examination. These slurs, which we see little point in reprinting here, have been documented at length and were discussed in a range of online fora: by Guy Rundle in *Crikey*, Osman Faruqi in *Junkee*, Michael McGowan in the *Guardian*, and Andrew Taylor in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, to name but a few. In the words of Lauren Lancaster, then a student in the year below those examined, the 'online attacks should be treated as what they are—racist, sexist tirades from young Australians against an unsuspecting poet—not glossed over as misplaced exam venting from the state's distressed teens'. But sensible as this sentiment is, it would be a cause for regret if adhering to it precluded us from attending to the strangeness of the fact that it was 'Mango' specifically that elicited such an outpouring of student vitriol. This specificity begins to emerge when we consider that the list of prescribed texts for the 2017 HSC examination included Wiradjuri novelist Tara June Winch's *Swallow the Air* (2006), an inclusion that did not receive comparable student backlash and goes unmentioned in any of the pieces referred to above. More broadly, Indigenous texts by 2017 were on their way to claiming their rightful place on school curricula: in 2005, per the examiners' report, Noongar writer Jack Davis' *No Sugar* (1985) was the play most frequently written about in the WACE Literature examinations, beating out any single play by Shakespeare, and it has remained a mainstay on this and the WACE English course since (Yiannakis 33). So when Birch rightly identifies the systemic context of van Neerven's abuse, as he does when he remarks that he has previously been 'targeted on social media in a similar way' and that these comments were 'nothing new to Aboriginal people', we

take his point also to be that consideration of this context should include the way racism and misogyny were channelled through the deployment of van Neerven's poem within a particular assessment structure.

While neither necessary nor sufficient as a condition for verbal abuse, and indefensible as an excuse for it, what nonetheless distinguishes van Neerven's case from that of Winch or Birch is thus a specific academic context, in which incomprehension meant students' futures were potentially at stake. This is not to claim, as Rundle does, that 'Mango' was readily available 'as a symbol of all that was paradoxical and tortuous about HSC, in which juicy, delicious life and success dangle tantalisingly, just out of reach', which seems far too generic an allegory. Rather, what distinguished van Neerven's poem from the two other texts offered alongside it that year, and indeed from those assigned as coursework or provided in preceding years, is its unusually apposite treatment of incomprehension through the figure of a persona whose mode of narration is imagistic and impressionistic rather than discursive or explicatory, implying at best a partial apprehension on their part of what has taken place. It is a poem in which precious little is understood or discovered, as the prompt would have it. To insist on this point is to take seriously the agency of 'Mango' in all that transpired, including its capacity to inadvertently draw hostility from student readers who could not articulate, only intuit, that a shade of their own incomprehension was part of the narrative functioning of the poem before them.

Deferred to the penultimate line, the first person arrives in 'Mango' only as the subject of an afterthought, returning us to the lyric's first line with its reminder of their youth, now subject to a leer. In doing so, it recasts the clipped utterances that precede it as observations with implications that are not apprehended by the speaker who voices them, as acts of noticing deliberately arranged at the authorial, rather than narratorial, level. Such a deferral of the subject is mirrored syntactically, through the speaker's repeated excision of pronouns: 'bikes in a pile / skater shoe soles' are detached from the boys who rode and wore them, just as—more ominously—answers to the question of who performs, imagines, or is subjected to acts of 'listen[ing]', 'squeeze[ing]' and 'dripping' are trimmed from the lines where these actions are described. 'Mango' is, then, a poem that turns on the uncertain apprehension of meaning—there is little evidence to suggest the persona understands the boys' innuendo, or for that matter the structure of hetero- or homosexual desire that animates it, as potentially directed toward their prepubescent body—set as part of an assessment that rewarded students for perceiving in it something like the opposite: the pleasures of discovery are to be discussed, in the case of the second question, insofar as they can be construed as intensely meaningful.

But the pleasure one might take from poetry is not reducible to discovery, which is but one component of it. Nor is the end of pleasure served by examination questions that elicit from students a highly selective focus on the poem in front of them: these would be a poor answer indeed to Guillory's invitation, near the end of *Professing Criticism*, to consider 'the question of what social conditions must obtain in order for individuals to develop the possibilities of pleasure, including the pleasure of reading' (342). In the reception of 'Mango' we have seen how comprehension was vexed by an assessment in which these conditions were compromised, and more broadly by the gradual sidelining of literary works as objects of study. This is all to make the modest claim that the form English takes as a school subject has historically shaped and will continue to shape, as Birch has already intuited, the future of literary study, whether we choose to acknowledge its determinative influence or not. Guillory's assertion of the need to establish 'a more engaged and rationalized relation to the system of media', absent which the place of literary studies 'within that system will continue to contract', seems especially pressing in this context (355). The answer is not to continue to cede curricular space to contemporary and non-literary works under the auspices of readability and relatability, an imperative that in practice can preclude student engagement with the real conditions of the verbal artwork's production and circulation over time. The idea is to teach students to engage with poems like 'Mango', not to absent poems from the classroom altogether. A workable answer to the problem of curricular disarticulation would first require, on the part of the tertiary discipline, a serious re-engagement with the content, structure and assessment practices of the school subject in lieu of its inaccurate evocation as a bastion of outmoded canonicity. This would entail, moreover, dispensing with the assumption that the work of the subject is largely discontinuous with the work of the discipline. To do so would be to re-conceptualise the role of both as, to borrow the terms of Guillory's modest rationale for the discipline, related elements in a 'program of study [...] continuous from the earliest to the latest phases of the educational system' that takes as its proper object the development of specifically literary modes of cognition in all of its students (352).

**JOSEPH STEINBERG** is a Forrest Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow in English and Literary Studies at the University of Western Australia. His articles, reviews and interviews have appeared in *Australian Literary Studies*, *JASAL*, *The Review of English Studies*, *The Cambridge Quarterly*, *Australian Humanities Review*, the *Sydney Review of Books*, and *The Cambridge Companion to the Australian Novel*.

**SARAH-JANE (SJ) BURTON** is a Research Fellow and Curriculum Lead in the College of Arts and Social Sciences at the Australian National University. She is a literary

historian, a novelist and a poet and currently serves as the Official Historian for the New England Poetry Club in the United States. Her work has been published in *The Conversation*, *Westerly* and the *Sydney Review of Books*.

### Works Cited

- Buurma, Rachel Sagner, and Laura Heffernan. *The Teaching Archive: A New History for Literary Study*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2021.
- Dale, Leigh. 'Australian Literature in the University.' *The Routledge Companion to Australian Literature*. Ed. Jessica Gildersleeve. New York: Routledge, 2021. 163-70.
- Dean, Andrew. 'Bureaucratic Reading.' *Australian Humanities Review* 72 (2024): 89-98. <<https://doi.org/10.56449/14429291>>.
- Dolin, Tim. 'Literature's ghosts: Cultural Heritage and Cultural Analysis in Subject English.' *Required Reading: Literature in Australian Schools since 1945*. Ed. Tim Dolin, Jo Jones and Patricia Dowsett. Melbourne: Monash U Publishing, 2017. 339-58.
- , Jo Jones and Patricia Dowsett. 'Discipline and Subject: Academic Literary Studies and School English in Australia Since 1945.' *Required Reading: Literature in Australian Schools since 1945*. Ed. Tim Dolin, Jo Jones and Patricia Dowsett. Melbourne: Monash U Publishing, 2017. 38-58.
- Faruqi, Osman. 'Analysing MangoGate: How a Year 12 Facebook Group Became Ground Zero for Harassment and Abuse.' *Junkee* 19 October 2017. <<https://junkee.com/mangogate-hsc-facebook-group/131116>>.
- Frank, Morgan Day. *Schools of Fiction: Literature and the Making of the American Educational System*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2022.
- Gelder, Christian R. 'The Passion for Knowledge.' *Australian Humanities Review* 72 (2024): 99-110. <<https://doi.org/10.56449/14487931>>.
- Guillory, John. *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2022.
- Hirsch, Edward. *How To Read a Poem: And Fall in Love with Poetry*. New York: Harcourt, 1999.
- Khan, Shamus. *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St Paul's School*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2021.
- Lancaster, Lauren. 'A Student's View: Why Attacks on Poet Ellen van Neerven are Inexcusable.' *The Sydney Morning Herald* 20 October 2017. <<https://www.smh.com.au/opinion/a-students-view-why-attacks-on-poet-ellen-van-neerven-are-inexcusable-20171019-gz3zyy.html>>.
- Leane, Jeanine. 'Other Peoples' Stories.' *Overland* 225 (2016). <<https://overland.org.au/previous-issues/issue-225/feature-jeanine-leane/>>.

- Manshel, Alexander. *Writing Backwards: Historical Fiction and the Reshaping of the American Canon*. New York: Columbia UP, 2024.
- Manuel, Jacqueline, and Don Carter. 'Provenance and Transformation: The History of Prescribed Text Lists in Senior Secondary English in NSW, 1965-2005.' *Required Reading: Literature in Australian Schools Since 1945*. Ed. Tim Dolin, Jo Jones and Patricia Dowsett. Melbourne: Monash U Publishing, 2017. 106-136.
- Marian, Jessica, and Nick Robinson. 'Professional Autonomy, Casualisation and Wage Theft in Australian Universities.' *Australian Humanities Review* 72 (2024): 78-88. <<https://doi.org/10.56449/14433300>>.
- McGowan, Michael. 'Indigenous Poet Ellen van Neerven Abused by Year 12 English Students.' *The Guardian* 17 October 2017. <<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/oct/17/ellen-van-neerven-indigenous-poet-abused-hsc-english-students>>.
- Ng, Lynda. 'Decolonising Guillory?: The Contradictions of English in Australia.' *Australian Humanities Review* 72 (2024): 41-48. <<https://doi.org/10.56449/14429352>>.
- NSW Education Standards Authority. 'English (Standard) and English (Advanced) Paper 1 2017.' <[https://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/portal/nesa/resources-archive/hsc-exam-papers-archive/english\\_standard/english\\_standard-2017-hsc-exam-pack-archive](https://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/portal/nesa/resources-archive/hsc-exam-papers-archive/english_standard/english_standard-2017-hsc-exam-pack-archive)>.
- . 'English (Standard) and English (Advanced) Paper 1 Marking Guidelines 2017.' <[https://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/portal/nesa/resources-archive/hsc-exam-papers-archive/english\\_standard/english\\_standard-2017-hsc-exam-pack-archive](https://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/portal/nesa/resources-archive/hsc-exam-papers-archive/english_standard/english_standard-2017-hsc-exam-pack-archive)>.
- Open Syllabus, 'Open Syllabus Analytics.' <<https://analytics.opensyllabus.org/>>.
- Pearson, Noel. *Radical Hope: Education and Equality in Australia*. Melbourne: Black Inc, 2011.
- Puvanenthiran, Bhakti. 'Tony Birch Says Mango Poem Controversy Exposes Student Entitlement.' *Crikey* 18 October 2017. <<https://www.crikey.com.au/2017/10/18/tony-birch-says-mango-poem-controversy-exposes-student-entitlement/>>.
- Rundle, Guy. 'Rundle: Why the Middlebrow Culturati Declared War on HSC Students Over a Poem.' *Crikey* 18 October 2017. <<https://www.crikey.com.au/2017/10/18/rundle-why-the-middlebrow-culturati-declared-war-on-hsc-students-over-a-poem/>>.
- School Curriculum and Standards Authority. 'English ATAR Course: Year 12 Syllabus.' <<https://senior-secondary.scsa.wa.edu.au/syllabus-and-support-materials/english/english2>>.
- . 'Literature ATAR: Year 11-12 Prescribed Text List.' <<https://senior-secondary.scsa.wa.edu.au/syllabus-and-support-materials/english/literature>>.

Sinykin, Dan. *Big Fiction: How Conglomeration Changed the Publishing Industry and American Literature*. New York: Columbia UP, 2023.

Taylor, Andrew. 'Indigenous Poet Ellen van Neerven Subject to Online Abuse by Students after HSC English Exam.' *The Sydney Morning Herald* 16 October 2017. <<https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/indigenous-poet-ellen-van-neerven-subject-to-online-abuse-by-students-after-hsc-english-exam-20171016-gz24g4.html>>.

van Neerven, Ellen. *Comfort Food*. St Lucia: U of Queensland P, 2016.

—. *Throat*. St Lucia: U of Queensland P, 2020.

Yiannakis, John. 'An Overview of the ALIAS Data and Findings.' *Required Reading: Literature in Australian Schools Since 1945*. Ed. Tim Dolin, Jo Jones and Patricia Dowsett. Melbourne: Monash U Publishing, 2017. 19-37.