

# Curriculum as invader: Normalising white place in the Australian curriculum

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## Abstract

Curriculum, as a policy and way of moving through educational experience, is entwined with an ongoing history of invasion in Australia and similar invader-colonial contexts. As a result of this, the conceptual foundations of curriculum in Australia reproduce colonial epistemologies as normative modes of knowing and consideration. One way of seeing how this is possible and easily reproduced is through a consideration of how renderings and representations of “place” – the complex entanglements of lands, histories, and identit(y/ies) – mediate both how (a) invasion can be normalised as a historical, geographic, and political “placial” reality, and (b) students and teachers might experience education in and of place. Indeed, “place” is a central guiding concept in official curriculum policy just as much as place is an experienced curriculum both within the school and in the broader world. In this respect, this paper looks to unpack how the concept of place is represented in curriculum policy and the attendant assumptions and implicit discourses that this (re)produces about the experiences of people in/of invaded place. Through a look at the coming revision to the Humanities and Social Science's learning area of the Australian Curriculum, I look to how the curriculum as policy frames place as synonymous with invader place epistemically and how this mediates what students can know and themselves feel about the embodied experience of learning about/in/of place.

## KEYWORDS

curriculum, decolonisation, humanities and social sciences, place

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All places in Australia, whether urban or otherwise, are Indigenous places. Every inch of glass, steel, concrete and tarmac is dug into and bolted onto Country.  
(Porter, 2018, p. 239)

[A] linear conception of time thus establishes Australian place, defined as coming after a time before—Aboriginal time. As this discourse paves the way for a postcolonial state, it justifies the rendering of Indigenous sovereignty as past.  
(Potter, 2012, p. 132)

Above, Porter and Potter speak to two interrelated ideas that anchor the argument that follows. When read together, we are called to engage the articulation and creation of place as, at once, both spatial and temporal, a dialectic of material and symbolic practices that work in the service of Indigenous erasure and invasive<sup>1</sup> advance across time and space. Spawning outwards from Warrane (what is commonly called “Sydney” today), invaders drew lines, regulated space, and encoded their placial desires into a land where “white nervousness” about the non-white Indigenous population ha(d/s) to be pacified (Byrne, 2003). From the moment of permanent arrival, “Australia” became a place for invaders both as a location for a future (originating in a clear beginning) and as a location to dig into Indigenous Country with a new cultural and physical geography. A common issue here in bearing critical witness to the spatial and temporal expression of colonisation's mediation of place-(re)making is the normalisation of this process as ostensibly endemic and natural. The placial imaginary of the coloniser comes to monopolise the space through which people can conceive of place, where the entanglements of colonial control and “neutral” place are seen as the metaphorical water that we swim through. Yet, the whiteness encoded into place and the epistemologies of home that this makes for invaders create a racialised landscape that is anything but neutral or natural (Ho & Chang, 2022; Smith, 2020a). Such a normative intervention of colonial place-making as putatively divested of historical and political projects of colonial violence succeeds, in part, because the taught reality of “home” is one through which invaders position themselves as “native” to a place (Sharma, 2020).

From the perspective of curriculum, the challenge lies in making sense of the complicity of curriculum in the normalised conceptual development of colonial place for learners and educators, in presenting a vision of colonial place as having a history and geography that seems ordinary. In the Australian context, the nationalisation of the curriculum has worked to support the needs of the colonial formation in the globalising context (Lingard, 2018), the result of which is, and has been, the nation-state's (re)investment in the reproduction of a settler national (colonial) imaginary through curriculum. Further to this, curriculum has been used as an outlet of anxieties about the (mis)representation of colonisation, a contestation that extends beyond content to the epistemic foundations of the disciplines subsumed under curricular banners (Parkes, 2007; Smith, 2020b). The concept of place is a critical concept in this curricular problem, central as it is explicitly (or otherwise) to how young children are asked to think about the locations of their own and others' ongoing historical and geographic identifications (on stolen lands). Indeed, as Yunkaporta (2019) reminds us, Indigenous notions of place and land, in particular, take up a divergent conceptual form that requires unsettling Western epistemic notions of land; such a provocation prompts a critical consideration of place as an organising concept in a colonial curriculum that remains engaged in crystallising Western disciplinary placial logics. In this respect, it's imperative to understand how curriculum becomes a regulatory mechanism for students entering into a space of knowledge and understanding about this key social concept.

Curriculum, while not the only site of potentiality here, is a critical starting point to understand the discursive logics and representational practices that come to frame how place

can be and is made to appear, pedagogically speaking, normative. Curriculum, understood in a similar form to a fort, comes to naturalise the division between colonial logics about land and history while relegating Indigenous epistemologies and knowledges to an entirely separate domain (Donald, 2009). In this light, it's necessary to see how place comes to cohere as a curricular concept that re-affirms the idea that imported and invasive thinking about affective and cultural connections to place are not only normative but necessary. Further, it is critical to consider how curriculum, both in its policy form and as a reflection of socio-cultural anxieties around valued knowledge, is subject to colonial expectations about the terrain of knowledge that shapes the pedagogical experience, making the normative Western epistemologies of place themselves necessary in schools. In response to these connected challenges, I explore the construction of place as a concept in curriculum, with specific attention paid to how place is negotiated and represented in the *Humanities and Social Sciences* learning area of the *Australian Curriculum*, a colonial state policy that encircles the terms of knowledge production by licensing certain conceptions of knowledge as possessing an authority over truth. Given both the curriculum's inclusion of place as an organising concept from the first years of schooling where foundational conceptual work is done and research highlighting young children's attachments to and knowledge of place from an early age (Koller & Farley, 2019; Scannell et al., 2016), I focus on the primary years (up to year/grade 6, that is, approximately 11 years old) to explore how curriculum frames what an official knowledge of place is and how it can be imagined to be in a colonial context. I conclude with some thoughts about how to navigate a rather circumscriptive curricular context for educators.

## PLACE, CULTURE, INVASION: A THEORETICAL FRAME

Noted in the introduction, to speak of place is to speak of more than just the location of action and presence. Rather, to understand what place is, three key dimensions need to be teased out:

1. Place is the “site” of the collision between context and culture, where place necessarily needs to be understood as more than just a point in space and more as the entanglement of location and cultural (re)production (Anderson, 2010).
2. Further to the entanglement of culture and context, place is also the site of individual subjective (re)formation and a location where place and the personal are enmeshed (Marcus, 2021). Place and the self can thus be thought of as existing in a relationship of what Edward Casey (2001) calls “constitutive coingredience,” wherein the subject and place exist in a perpetual dialectic.

These first two ideas gesture towards the interrelationships between self, culture, and the location(s) of their (re)creations. Yet, taken as is, we would neglect the broader operations of power that set the ideological and symbolic terrains for what can be identified as congruous or “legitimate” notions of self, culture, and their intersections in/of place. Put differently, the “constitutive coingredience” is perpetually haunted by the spectre of state and cultural power that can and does mediate placial practice. In that light, a third dimension is required:

3. Place is not an inert site of cultural and subjective (re)production but, rather, is subject to politics and power (Butler & Sinclair, 2020), and in settler colonies, place is (re)made and regulated through settler state power in service of normalised invasion, ontological and corporeal dispossession, and white possessive logics of geographic making (Bonds, 2020; Moreton-Robinson, 2015). The result of this is that

place comes to work in favour of invasive cultural and subjective identity (re)formation.

Understood this way, it will become easier to see how place services what Moreton-Robinson (2015) calls “white possessive logics,” the form of rationalisation that services a normalised dominion and control and the suturing of settler identification with the logics of invaded place and invasion writ large.

## Place: Context and culture

I begin here with a rather simple proposition from Anderson (2010) as a starting point: “the product of the intersection between context and culture is *place*” (p. 3). The culture/context nexus becomes representationally and materially manifest through the traces that give form to place. As Anderson (2010) argues, “places are constituted by imbroglios of *traces* [...the] marks, residues or remnants left in place by cultural life” (p. 5). These traces, they contend, can be both material and symbolic, but “in both material and non-material form they function as connections, tying the meaning of places to the identity of the cultural groups that make them” (p. 5). There exists then a dialectic where places become archives of cultural representation and practice just as much as these traces give a particular (cultural) form to a location, making it into place. These traces serve to (re)produce a context as of a particular cultural form just as, inversely, the “imbroglios of traces” feed back into the context, shaping it both symbolically and physically.

The preceding reminds us that place is a point of meeting, one where convergent pressures/forces (context and culture) make for locations that people can bond to and express themselves. Within such a domain, individual selves are measured and articulated, both as cultural and contextual beings, that is, “placial” ones.

## Place and the self

Place signifies the diverse and intersecting worlds in which I dwell, to which I contribute meaning, and from which I take the measure of my being.

(Casemore, 2008, p. 1)

As cultural beings, it is inescapable that there exists a deeply informative relationship between place and the self. As Edward Casey (2001) puts it (and noted earlier), place and the self-exist in a relationship of “constitutive coingredience,” one where, as Casemore (2008) argues, the self and place are mutually informative. Put differently, as Casey (2018) argues, the “body is at once the occupant and the animator of place” (p. 20). Such realisation speaks to the essential location of place in the human experience, where the constitution of our (cultural) identities is measured and forged out of and in relation to the collisions of context and culture. The result of this is, in part, a binding of encounters with place to identity formation as we grow (Lengen et al., 2019). Such a recognition pulls us closer to seeing how we become subjects of/in place, compelling us to see place as existing in a complex dialectic between subjects, communities, cultures, and their spatial and symbolic juncture. One result of this is the fostering of a sense of place attachment wherein young people (although not exclusively) can and do build strong psychological and social attachments to place (Koller & Farley, 2019; Scannell et al., 2016; Scannell & Gifford, 2017). It is critical, however, to read said attachment against the cultural/contextual circumstances, wherein an individual's attachment is mediated by the cultural milieu in which it is saturated.

With regard to the first point above – the contextual-cultural dynamic – the exploration and measure of one's self in/of/against place might be seen to exist in relation to and as a singular and localised conversation that exists in relation to a complex constellation of placially anchored subject formations. One's attachments, for instance, are part of an individual's relationship with the contexts and cultural formations that they live in relation to as they move through and contribute to their places (and those of others). Such connectiveness presumes, however, that the navigation and creation of connections with place are innocently conceived and divorced from the geographic and historical circumstances that make for particular expressions of place (and self in place). As Till (2012) argues, “as human and non-human lives move, interact, and engage with others through complex temporal and spatial pathways, the symbolic and material places they make also become part of their bodies-selves-environments” (p. 6). Yet, as they further contend, places can be and are “wounded,” “harmed and structured by particular histories of physical destruction, displacement, and individual and social trauma resulting from state-perpetrated violence” (p. 6). The development of a placially anchored subject position must thus be understood in relation to ongoing projects of violence that harm not just places but, by virtue of the cultural and subjective dimensions, the peoples and cultures that inhabit place. In contexts such as Australia, the ongoing invasion and project of white supremacist violence renders the harm perpetual and wedded to ideological logics that normalise corporeal and symbolic violence against racialised non-white and Indigenous peoples whose ontological and epistemological relationships with places are incessantly scarred by ongoing colonisation.

In a settler colonial context such as Australia, where the logic of *terra nullius* “disrupted the relationship [...between] the human and non-human—the entire natural world—as one connected being” (Watson, 2014, p. 510), connections between selves and places are policed (quite literally in many instances) to support the disruptive needs of colonial politics and conceptualisations of place. Such a practice threatens the deep connectedness of Indigenous peoples to land; as Terare and Rawsthorne (2020) put it, “Australian First Nations People relate to the land in markedly non-western way: rather than owning land, the land owns them” (pp. 946–947). In this regard, the relationship between self and land is qualitatively distinct, a distinction that colonial politics regulates through practices of exclusion and power in support of division between self and land.

## Place, power, and colonialism

To understand the implications of power here as a colonial practice of place, we need not only to see how place is political (Butler & Sinclair, 2020) but also understand the epistemic imposition work done through invasion. In contexts of invader colonisation, “it is land/place, that is the ultimate pursuit, rather than extractions (spices, gold, or labor) as in other forms of colonialism” (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015, p. 635). The pursuit of land and dominion results in a displacement of Indigenous bodies, communities, and epistemologies of place to make way for the material and symbolic needs of invaders. For Indigenous communities, the notion of land helps to capture the interconnectedness of all natural domains – encompassing as it does water, land, sea, and air – whose relationships “are not between owner and property, as typified in settler societies” but, rather, are collective (Tuck et al., 2014, p. 10). Place in Western traditions, conversely, is often corrupted by spatial practices and violence that seeks a decoupling of people from the lands, preferring instead to commodify place and translate it into a medium of economic and cultural exploitation.

In settler formations such as Australia, practices and conditions of ontological homelessness have further rendered Indigenous ways of being and knowing place foreign to the locations of their creation through corporeal and ontological displacement, accomplished through

white settler notions of place layered almost opaquely atop stolen lands and deployed to regulate place-making (Keys Young, 1998; Moreton-Robinson, 2003; Watson, 2009). Place, in this context, is subject to what Moreton-Robinson (2015) calls “white possessive logics,” “a mode of rationalization, rather than a set of positions that produce a more or less inevitable answer, that is underpinned by an excessive desire to invest in reproducing and reaffirming the nation-state’s ownership, control, and domination” (p. xii). Such a logic is marshalled to normalise the incommensurability between Indigenous and settler ontologies of sovereignty (Moreton-Robinson, 2021); this is fixed and safeguarded through both physical force and discursive and ideological practices including the law, politics, and curricula. This logic is largely possible because, as Bonds (2020) argues, whiteness invests itself “in producing both racialized space and white propertied power” (p. 779), the consequences of which are not just the regulation of material space but also any geographic, political, and curricular imaginaries that may arise and get asserted (e.g., an imaginary of place). This is further buttressed by the rendering of invaders as “native” that came with the ascendancy of settler nationalism, the result of which was the addition of a form of legitimacy to claims over place as “theirs,” backed by the power of its own state apparatus (Sharma, 2020). Indeed, notions of “home” in a settler formation are infused with colonial logics, in large part because the affective attachments of home that underscore attachments to place are often possible only because of the ontological and material homelessness that are central to settler projects (Smith, 2020a) and the making of a discourse that allows those foreign to a place to make somewhere else a “native” home. Making this difficult to unpack is a practice of what Nelson (2014) calls “place-defending,” a refusal to acknowledge white supremacy through a defensive posturing which positions racism as antithetical to and not present in a locale.

In sum, place can be understood as a constituent feature of identification as informed by and informative of the cultural context in which it is expressed. In places such as Australia, this process is inextricably entangled with colonial epistemic and material consumption that furnishes residents with a powerful vocabulary and geographic imaginary against which identity is crafted and represented. What such conceptual understanding does for us is complicate the potentially idyllic and critically divorced notion(s) of place that see subjective, cultural, and placial co-creation as an innocuous process of representation and (re)creation, and, rather, we are critically directed to the racialised and colonial logics that interfere and control place-making.

It is here that I turn to the *Australian Curriculum*, specifically the *Humanities and Social Sciences* learning area for primary aged students (up to year/grade 6, approximately 11 years old),<sup>2</sup> to unpack and critically assess how it is that the national curriculum constructs place as a guiding concept to make sense of how the curriculum teaches students to think of the cultural and subjective constitution of place as normatively colonised.

## CURRICULUM REPRESENTATIONS OF “PLACE”

To explore the representation of place in curriculum, I am guided by the following questions:

- How is “place” defined as a term and a conceptual guide for thinking?
- What is the taken-for-granted epistemic foundation guiding the representation of place?

Methodologically, this analysis draws from Mullet’s (2018) general framework for educational critical discourse analysis (CDA). Specifically, I’m drawn to analysing the ways in which the curriculum is productive of a particular colonial ideological condition, one that produces a normalised frame of reference for teaching “place.” Here, then, I look to how a colonial curriculum universalises notions of (in this case) place and, as a result, reproduces

what Donald (2019) calls a mythology, “invisibilized expressions of ideology that, despite their seeming obscurity, actually form the foundational roots of worldviews” (p. 107). Such analysis of the discursive work is shaped by a critical positioning, one understood here to be invested in the unpacking of unequal power that is manifest conceptually in the makings of colonial “place” as a curricular mythology. Here, then, I am taking up Mullet’s reading of the field of CDA in taking a problem-oriented” approach where the problem is the normalisation of what Mignolo (2011) calls the “Western code,” the belief that Western epistemology (or curricular mythology) is the only legitimate and worthy epistemological position worth representing.

A critical part of Mullet’s (2018) argument, and of CDA more broadly, is the role of the analyst’s subjectivity as a powerful mediator of their reading and argumentation. In that light, I take up their suggestion for increasing researcher transparency by way of a “self-as-researcher” statement: as a racialised white, male, migrant settler whose first (and only) language is English, I come to my scholarly work as a beneficiary of the discourses that I critique. I was educated in a context where the aforementioned “Western code” (Mignolo, 2011) was a given, a condition of knowing that has indelibly marked my reading of the world, however much I make efforts to resist its explanatory power over my imaginary. In this respect, I invite critical engagement with my conclusions and the latent epistemological influences that may inform my reading of the curriculum and its representation of place.

In what follows, I critically unpack and assess the representation(s) of place and its epistemic support for normalised white invasion and possession, beginning with a look at how place is defined explicitly.

## Defining “place”

The curriculum presents place as a rather taken-for-granted idea, foregoing a specific definition of place in favour of presenting it as a given or as something whose meaning needs to be inferred. In the curriculum itself, a set of concepts is framed as guiding conceptual work where “place and space” is presented thusly:

Students explore the characteristics of places (spatial, social, economic, physical, environmental) and how these characteristics are organised spatially (location, distribution, pattern).

(Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2022a, p. 33)

While place itself is not defined in the curriculum’s glossary, “characteristics of a place” is:

Tangible or intangible environmental and human characteristics that can be described to identify, classify or give meaning to the uniqueness of a place (e.g. location, topography, scenic quality).

(Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, n.d., p. 3)

Implied here is a recognition of the contextual and cultural features of place, wherein “meaning” and “uniqueness” might generously be read as indicative of a recognition that places are subjectively and culturally important. Beyond this, however, little conceptual specificity is provided, leaving the notion of place as potentially easy to conflate with “space” and thus, potentially neutral.

Where notions of place are perhaps most explicit is in the curriculum’s presentation of “Country/Place”:

Spaces mapped out that individuals or groups of First Nations Peoples of Australia occupy and regard as their own and having varying degrees of spirituality including lands, waters and sky.

(Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, [n.d.](#), p. 4)

Here, an acknowledgement of the spiritual dimensions of place provides an opportunity to speak to the emotional and cultural facets of place(-making). However, the articulating of place with Country risks collapsing the two ideas, representing place and its contextual, cultural, and subjective force as isolated to the epistemological and placial feelings and knowings of Indigenous communities. This is explored in greater detail below.

In each of the definitions, a conceptual and semantic terrain is established wherein place is devoid of much breadth and complexity. Instead, place is rendered rather (a) synonymous with space and/or (b) when infused with cultural and subjective dimensions, a concern for understanding Indigenous connections to Country/place exclusively. Each of these requires some specific analytic attention.

## Creating “place”

In some form, place is taught across all seven years of the primary curriculum, both in the “Knowledge and Understanding” strand (where the disciplines reside) and the “Skills” strand (where inquiry skill development is done). As a concept, place is heavily concentrated in the years up to year three, becoming less prominent (explicitly) as students move into year four. Conceptually, there is a near even split between teaching students about a universalised (i.e., unqualified) version of place (eight content descriptions<sup>3</sup>) and notions of “Country/Place” (seven content descriptions). All instances of place in the Knowledge and Understanding strand are isolated to geography except for two, both of which are in year four history. Broadly, the teaching of place throughout the curriculum is done in such a way that presents it as rather unqualified, tacitly connected to notions of a universalised idea of place and grounded in settler epistemology (Seawright, 2014). As Grosfoguel (2012) rightly contends, Western universalism is premised on a belief of an epistemic neutrality and a claim to a general truth divorced from the location (subjective and placial) of its articulation. A recognition of the cultural and historical tradition from which place as a concept is deployed is absent, reifying the idea that a universalised idea of place is not only possible but immune to explication. The result of this is the re-assertion of a Western curricular mythology (Donald, 2019) where colonial visions of place are made invisible by way of the omnipresent and banal use of “place.” Consider, for instance, the articulation of place in the Foundation year as an area of curriculum work:

the features of familiar places they belong to, why some places are special and how places can be looked after.

(Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2022b, AC9HSFK03)

The year level description identifies place as connected to identity and belonging – “students discuss and share personal observations and perspectives on their histories and special places, contributing to their sense of identity, connection and belonging” (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2022b, para. 2) – but fails to elaborate, presuming that identity, belonging, and their expression through and in relation to place are intelligible without qualification. This begs the question: on what conceptual foundation is place, its special presence in the lives of a young child, constructed? The curriculum, by failing to detail this,

encourages a drawing on Western universalised renditions of place. Thought of differently, by avoiding a consideration of how place is imagined differently, there is a tacit acceptance of colonial place-making and the echoing of the “good white people desire to belong in a reconciled nation” (Slater, 2019, p. 22) where exclusion does not mediate how places become familiar, special, and/or can be looked after.

Similar work continues in year one, where different features of place (natural, managed, and constructed) are of central concern, with a particular reference to Indigenous groups in an elaboration<sup>4</sup> focusing on the relationship between creation stories and the natural features of place:

listening to and viewing Dreaming and Creation stories of First Nations Australians that identify the natural features of a place.

(Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2022b, AC9HS1K03)

While not troubling in its own right, as knowledge of Dreaming stories is and can be an integral part of conserving natural environments (Robin et al., 2022), the lack of extension beyond the natural domain (or “features”) risks re-articulating Indigenous knowledges with the natural spaces of the world, excluding or trivialising the contributions of Indigenous knowledge to the material and symbolic spaces of managed and constructed places. While this can help to critique a reading of natural environs as the purview of colonial discourse and modes of thinking that informed and continue to inform relationships with the natural environment (Ho & Chang, 2022; Mar, 2010), the lack of further detailing risks reinscribing an exoticist view of Indigenous peoples as people attached to representations of nature and wilderness. Further, there is an essential relationship represented in the curriculum, one where Indigenous peoples are assumed to have a uniform relationship to caring for and influencing place. Take the following:

Year 1: “how places change and how they can be cared for by different groups including First Nations Australians”

(Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2022b, AC9HS1K04)

Year 5: “the influence of people, including First Nations Australians and people in other countries, on the characteristics of a place”

(Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2022b, AC9HS5K04)

While the lack of specificity around individual groups is understandable (as a national curriculum), the notable absence of any language requiring a localising of required content work here risks a circumstance wherein “First Nations Australians” are (a) sufficiently represented as uniform in epistemological relationships to place, and (b) the reading of Indigenous peoples perspectives of/on place are read in relation to the reified national category or what Sharma (2020) might identify as the “white National-Native” signifier. Further, such positioning represents the preservation of place as a special concern for Indigenous peoples, the result of which could be the teaching of caring for place as an Indigenous concern or principally one (a problem exacerbated by teacher discomfort with teaching about Indigenous issues and concepts (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2020)). While it is true that Indigenous perspectives on the work required to care for place is critical, given the colonial project’s vehemence that the natural environment is a resource to exploit, what is missing here is the critical dimension

that identifies the historical and economic causes of damage and one that troubles the idea that Indigenous peoples are uniquely responsible for caring for place.

A final concern here concerns the scoping of placial concerns to the settler nationalist context, moulding the content and skill work in a way that privileges the (re)creation of nationalist modes of knowing and reading the world (Smith, 2022). As Doherty (2018) argues, curricula engage in a form of nationalist practice called “curricular nationalism,” “the habitual and unquestioned national framing that constrains how schooling might be conceived and conducted” (p. 205). We can see this at work in the curriculum’s framing of how to understand place in comparative work:

Year 3: “the similarities and differences between places in Australia and neighbouring countries in terms of their natural, managed and constructed features”  
(Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2022b, AC9HS3K05)

Year 6: “the geographical diversity and location of places in the Asia region, and its location in relation to Australia”  
(Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2022b, AC9HS6K04)

Year 6: “Australia’s interconnections with other countries and how these change people and places”  
(Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2022b, AC9HS6K05)

Of import here is an essentialised idea of “Australian places,” implied as it might be, one that is predicated on the imagination of places in Australia as being sufficiently uniform. Such a phrasing serves to reinvest the curriculum in the practice of legitimising invasion by reifying the idea that places have to be understood as “Australian.” While it will be true that nationalism has rendered places in Australia as sharing some similar cultural, historical, and political form(s) (through an ongoing history of violent force), the teaching of this without complication contributes back to an idea of place that is wedded to the settler national context.

## **Teaching country/place: Unresolved concept**

A common conceptual presentation in the curriculum alluded to earlier is the idea of “Country/Place,” used to identify curricular moments where the focus is on Indigenous notions of place. The notion of “Country/Place” is used exclusively in the curriculum when outlining content requirements that centre on Indigenous notions of place and land. Such conceptual collapsing as it occurs in the curriculum is problematic for two reasons:

1. This specificity to content descriptions that are uniquely focused on Indigenous content knowledge positions ideas of Country and, by extension, Indigenous notions of place, as only worthy of consideration in isolated moments and for Indigenous related content.
2. The virgule splits the idea of Country and Place but, by presenting them as a single grammatical item, weds Country to the colonial epistemic framing throughout, which, without complication and texturing, risks Country being imagined as simply “the Indigenous version of (colonial) place.”

To fully understand the challenges of the “Country/Place,” we need to understand what Country is. As Tynan (2021) puts it,

Country is agentic and encompasses everything from ants, memories, humans, fire, tides and research. Country sits at the heart of coming to know and understand relationality as it is the web that connects humans to a system of Lore/Law and knowledge that can never be human-centric. (p. 597)

Tynan here picks up on two important ideas. First, the storied essence implied by Tynan is echoed by Burgess and Morrison (2007) who argue that notions of Country and colonial place are divergent, in large part because Indigenous ontologies of place are rooted in narratives of belonging and spiritual connection, whereas colonial ideas of place are wedded powerfully to notion of place as commodity or object. Second, Tynan identifies the inherently relational nature of Country, an idea elaborated by Watson (2009) who argues that,

the ethic of caring for country encompasses a relationship to ruwi. The land is a relation: a mother, father, grandmother, grandfather. It is where we have trekked from in the past, what we stand on today, and that which allows us to connect with tomorrow. (p. 41)

The specificity of content descriptions that mention Country/Place are both limited in terms of total number (seven across four disciplines and seven year levels) and their ability to teach content about Country/Place as anything but a specific concern or way of thinking for Indigenous peoples. Country, in this respect, is made to be a preoccupation for Indigenous peoples, a way of concerning oneself with place and being shaped by place that is inescapably anchored in Indigenous ways of knowing. This is not to suggest that non-Indigenous students be taught to adopt Indigenous epistemologies as their own in a form that is reflective of colonial imperatives to co-opt Indigenous ideas, but, rather, I want to gesture towards a problem that positions connectedness with Country and a respect for it as being worthy of consideration only in isolated instances and when Indigenous peoples are mentioned (as though Country cannot be a helpful epistemic lens for unsettling the normative use of place throughout).

The curriculum, in placing Country/Place together, however, does offer an opportunity to help students see Country as an epistemic entry into thinking critically about place. Indeed, the virgule presents itself as helping students to see Country as a way of conceiving of place while retaining its unique name and attendant ways of being in place which does reflect an acknowledgement of how place is an important part of Indigenous ways of knowing (Wright, 2020). Yet, the curriculum never complicates or expands on the idea of Country/Place outside of its definition (quoted earlier but echoed below):

spaces mapped out that individuals or groups of First Nations Peoples of Australia occupy and regard as their own and having varying degrees of spirituality including lands, waters and sky.

(Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, n.d., p. 4)

Interestingly, the curriculum begins this definition by making reference to space, suggestive of a colonial way of knowing place that seeks spatial reference for its meaning. In particular, the use of “spaces mapped out” echoes a practice of conceiving space in Australia where a legacy of mapping space is implicated in the colonial process (Benson et al., 2023).

One particularly troubling representation of Country/Place comes by way of a year three content description:

the representation of contemporary Australia as states and territories, and as the Countries/Places of First Nations Australians prior to colonisation and the locations of Australia's neighbouring regions and countries.

(Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2022b, AC9HS3K03)

The use of “prior to colonisation” quickly renders Country as of the past, displacing and containing the idea to times “prior to colonisation.” Not only does such a statement deny the ongoing structural work of colonisation into the present (Wolfe, 1994), it normalises a displacement of Indigenous notions of place to make way for the “contemporary” representation of the island as naturally intelligible as colonial states and territories, that is, colonial place(s). As a result, invasion as a condition of the present is deprived of curricular oxygen in favour of an approach to thinking of place as somehow “post-invasion.” In the following year (four), historical work positions Country/Place affected by invasion, with a particular use of past tense language that positions views of violations of Country to the past:

the effects of contact with other people on First Nations Australians and their Countries/Places following the arrival of the First Fleet and how this was [emphasis added] viewed by First Nations Australians as an invasion.

(Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2022b, AC9HS4K04)

Here, again, we see an effort to relegate the importance of Country to the past, suggesting that Country as a form of place is of import only in thinking historically, not into the present. Here, then, we risk failing an interrogation of Country as contemporary and informative of urban space. As Porter (2018) argues,

Thinking of the urban as already *Country* enables a view of our cities as places where the responsibility for being in sovereign relationship is laid bare. [...] When *Country* sits at the heart of our thinking then place, land, earth, water, sky and rock come to the story not as resources and inert matter to be struggled for but as vital place. (p. 244)

What Porter reminds us of here is the fact that “our” places are “already Country” and that we need to think of place as such. This is not to suggest that we teach as though these are synonymous; rather, what this reminds us of is the obligation to epistemically trouble the conflation of Country with place and to unsettle the normative role of settler views of place as simply “Place.” This epistemic troubling might be challenging (albeit not impossible) given what Lowe and Yunkaporta (2013) identify (with respect to an older iteration of the curriculum) as the low levels of cognitive demand as it pertains to Indigenous content. The content descriptions provided here echo a similar lack of cognitive demand, yielding a framing of Country as something that can be understood, not something that needs to be engaged in more challenging and meaningful ways.

## CONCLUSION

As young people saturated in the sociopolitical ideologies of their time/space, they [children and young people] are always on the edge of both reproducing and subverting dominant discourses and material practices through their active participation in spatialities. *Place* and how young people are situated within and

cocreate their places are central to how they will experience, enact, and confront those discourses and practices.

(Jones et al., 2016, p. 1153)

I conclude by echoing what Jones et al. (2016) note here – that young people, as situated subjects in place, are shaped by and engage in place-making as political beings with agency and power. The curriculum, as a policy artefact of the colonial regime that positions a lack of placial knowledge as a problem to be addressed (Bacchi, 2012), stresses the role of understanding but does so only to an extent that recognises the cultural and subjective force of place(-making), leaving considerations of place emptied of any critical possibility. Here, the crucial role of the educator can and ought to enter into the conversation. Necessarily so, educators can and ought to turn to the banal everyday workings of colonialism (Stanley, 2009) as they manifest in notions of place. As a grammar of colonial thinking (Calderon, 2014), notions of epistemologically invasive place as ostensibly organic and, ironically, indigenous to this land, need to be questioned and part of our work asking students to think about where and how they live.

Teacher work, here, with the curriculum requires more than just adding more ways of knowing. The curriculum does this already by layering in the language of Country and by wrestling with the importance of thinking about it. However, adding in more content is not the answer and risks re-inscribing the potently attractive “lazy multiculturalism” that already defines a lot of pedagogical practice (Watkins & Noble, 2019). Rather, the goal is to ask young learners to come to engage place as an idea with different meanings and one that is subject to relations of power. While questions of power and authority are challenging for young people (Gill & Howard, 2009), the curriculum opens space to do so by acknowledging that the land was and is, in year four, perceived by some as invaded (quoted earlier but echoed below):

the effects of contact with other people on First Nations Australians and their Countries/Places following the arrival of the First Fleet and how this was viewed by First Nations Australians as an invasion.

(Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2022b, AC9HS4K04)

For educators, what such a curriculum requirement calls attention to is the importance of, in this case year four but across all years, seeing how places are not neutral terrains but are instead seeped in ongoing histories and politics where what we define as place is not only subjectively and culturally important but is only intelligible when it accords with ways of thinking that were inaugurated after the arrival of Europeans. In years prior to year four, a possible intervention might be to open up the idea that place is simple; rather, place can be presented as uniquely influential and epistemically powerful in different ways for different groups beginning at its first introduction. Here, we might recognise what Rigney (2023) has contended is the need to recognise how and where Indigenous children come to pedagogical and curricular encounters as knowledge producers, not passive recipients of a curriculum that frames how and where place is taught. We also need to see how non-Indigenous learners are also knowledge producers who can, and ought to, construct new and divergent epistemologies of place that centre the idea that ongoing invasion (material and epistemic) means that access to notions of place are also regulated.

For those educating young learners, this requires a critical literacy that sees curriculum itself as an instrument of invasion, one that sets the terms of intellectual reference against a backdrop of normalised colonisation. Such thinking, implied above, can begin as early as the introduction of “place.” Instead of proffering a universal conception of

place and building on that, young learners can be asked to grapple with how place as a conceptual idea is not settled. This work requires reminding students that much of what we do in the humanities and social sciences is necessarily incomplete and ought to be averse to reduction. Moreover, if we take seriously that decolonisation work must involve questions of relinquishing land as Tuck and Yang (2012) have famously pointed to, we necessarily must teach students and ourselves that humanities and social sciences curricula will likely, as a policy of the settler national state regime, frame any possible critical imaginings of place as bound to metaphorical work that preferences knowing more content while deemphasising challenges to the legitimacy of the state as the authority over place. Recognising that this puts teachers in a difficult position, a starting point is to centre a discussion of how the pedagogical experience is located on Indigenous Country. As Sabzalian (2019) argues,

All teaching and learning takes place on Indigenous lands. As an orientation, place calls on educators to recognize the Indigenous peoples and homelands of where they are teaching and to teach in locally responsive ways [...] Acknowledging Indigenous homelands, peoples, and nations is an important practice of denaturalizing settlement and rethinking what it means to live within and with a sense of responsibility to Indigenous lands, peoples, and sovereignty. (pp. 328–329)

While no panacea, Sabzalian reminds us that curriculum work requires not just a recognition of place but a denaturalisation of settlement and, resultantly, notions of place. Colonial epistemologies of place, however much they are normalised and made the “neutral” complement to Indigenous ideas of Country, must be subject to efforts to denaturalise invasive curriculum thinking and practice. In practice, this can involve tracing the history of Western place as an epistemic import and, in the earlier years, identifying how any conception of place is a product of cultural, geographic, and subjective perspective. In the early years of the curriculum, students are already exposed to naturalised ideas of Indigenous Country/Place and “place,” and if we take seriously the notion that young people adopt and play with ideas of and about the world from their earliest years in school, we need to begin complicating the cultural foundations and power of invader place from its introduction as a guiding concept.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The choice of language centred on “invasion” here is intentional. While it is common for invasion to be positioned as a distal event and detached from national identity (Lipscombe et al., 2020), it is nonetheless the case that the lands of “Australia” are invaded and that identity in this place is inextricably enmeshed with a history of ongoing invasion.
- <sup>2</sup> At the time of writing, the currently in force version of the curriculum – version 8.4 – is set to be replaced with the recently released version 9.0. In light of this, the analysis done here is done in relation to version 9.0 to ensure the currency of the argument.
- <sup>3</sup> A content description is a description of the content to be taught, presented in the form of a statement. In a given year level, the breadth of knowledge addressed through each content description sets the terms of the content and skills to be taught.
- <sup>4</sup> An elaboration is a statement attached to a content description that, while not a mandatory statement of content coverage, extends and elaborates on the knowledge and/or skills communicated by way of content descriptions.

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