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Decolonising Australian Gold Rush Narratives with Critical Geopolitics

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Abstract

Settler-colonial futurity and colonial onto-epistemology are embedded across mainstream Australian public education institutions and schooling. While Country is central to Indigenous being, knowledges and pedagogy, Australian public and school education and curricula regularly fail to engage with Country and place in its historical, political, institutional, more-than-human, and relational dimensions. This paper investigates how colonial discourse and narratives permeate public and schooling education resources about mining and the Australian gold rush, including those presented in local Victorian gold rush museums. These support an influential story of Australia's past/present that erases First Nations¹ custodial relations with Country, strengthens settler-colonial futurity and celebrates and legitimises its colonising and extractive relations between people, Country, and ecologies. The paper presents an argument for attending to critical, relational geopolitics in education and environmental education to destabilise and shift these ways of understanding. It considers opportunities and challenges presented by Australian curricula in terms of their capacity to develop geopolitical understandings of past/present/future social and ecological in/justice, and to support new political understandings and sense of connection and belonging with Country.

Keywords: decolonising education; truth telling; Australian curriculum; mining; geopolitics; gold rush

Position statements

Robin Bellingham is a former secondary school teacher, a senior lecturer and mixed heritage settler-colonial descendent from Aotearoa New Zealand. She now lives on Dja Dja Wurrung Country in Australia and teaches and researches in Pedagogy and Curriculum. She is concerned with joining efforts to assist education institutions, teachers and learners to grapple with the responsibility and unsettling questions of how we can challenge and reimagine the conditions of modernity. These include colonial ways of being and forms of privilege; disconnection from care and responsibility for place; ecological devastation; and political and educational disengagement and disempowerment.

Al Fricker is a proud and sovereign Dja Dja Wurrung man and has a mixed cultural heritage. He was grown up and now lives on Wurundjeri Country. Due to colonial and then state and federal policies, he grew up separated from culture, Country, language and community and has

¹Please note, throughout this paper we use the terms Indigenous, First Nations, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander interchangeably. We acknowledge that there is no term that is universally accepted by the First Nations community in Australia, and we use these terms with respect.

spent much of his adult life learning and considering what it is to interact as a sovereign First Nations person in neo-colonial Australia. He is a former Primary and Secondary teacher. He is a lecturer in Indigenous Education and his research focus is on decolonising education in Australia to allow all students regardless of their cultural contexts to access and benefit from the oldest pedagogies and teaching knowledges in the world.

Introduction: The language and mattering of Australian coloniality and extractivism

People have lived on the Australian continent and the adjacent islands for tens of thousands of years (Rasmussen et al., 2011). During this time, First Nations Peoples thrived through ice ages, mega-droughts, sea level changes, and extinction events. Much of the success during these challenging eras was the outcome of building a profound understanding of the scientific principles of managing the environment to be completely sustainable, and of applying the ethical and moral imperative to care for Country. These ways of living were profoundly impacted with the arrival of the British colonists in 1788 and the ensuing continental conflict and genocide that followed (Poelina et al., 2023).

As the British colonists pushed their colonial frontiers, a mythology was created to downplay the trauma and violence of the invasion, erase the existence of First Nations people and complex cultures, and to claim and co-opt what could not be completely erased (Wolfe, 2006). Part of this process was the subtle use of language to achieve these goals. Most glaringly, was the use of the terms “Settler” and “Settlement” to describe the people and processes used to establish the British colonies. What may well have begun as a process of separating the convicts from the Free Settlers, that is, those forced to be in the British colonies as distinct from those choosing to be there, soon morphed into something far greater and has shaped contemporary discourse, and Australian history and its curricula ever since (Fricker, 2017). The terms “Settler” and “Settlement” helped to establish a version of history involving peaceful occupation of an allegedly uninhabited land or region. However, the invasion and colonisation of Australia was anything but peaceful. Other problematic terms in this mythology include the “discovery” of the Australian continent and adjacent islands, the “taming of the wilds,” “pioneering,” “exploring,” and, importantly “civilising” both the landscape and the people already living within. Together, these terms have acted to reinforce specific colonial power structures and erase First Nations sovereignties (Alderman, 2016; Tucker & Rose-Redwood, 2015; Williamson, 2023). This paper is concerned with the ways that similar colonising discourse and associated narratives today permeate public and schooling education resources, and how they continue to help shape and constrain relations between people, Country, and ecologies. The paper is particularly concerned with the discourse and stories of mining and the Australian gold rush.

Australia and Canada are now the biggest extraterritorial mining countries on the planet (Yusoff, 2018), and Australia (in particular Western Australia) is the one of the world’s top producers of gold (Geoscience Australia, 2023). The ongoing need for continued development and expansion of mining operations for new scientific frontiers and industries is argued fiercely by the mining and gold industries (for example, see Gold Industry Group, 2021; World Gold Council, 2021). Mining’s implications for climate change and ecological devastation are known, but our concerns should not be siloed into environmental and economic realms. Yusoff (2018) argues that the new justifications and new markets for extracted materials represent continued solidification of narratives of the superiority of the white male subject and his imperial intellectualism. The age of critical minerals and the necessary environmental, medical, and space travel technologies they enable represent yet another chapter in the ongoing story of revolutions and transformations that privilege white subjects and white politics and actively exclude Indigenous peoples. This paper proposes that mining sites across the globe are significant nodes of decolonial learning as the narratives, practices, politics, and relations that support massive scale mining are central pillars of

the ongoing reification of colonial-capitalism's habits of being. These sites have special potency as places of extractivist mattering and meaning-making.

Much of the gold that was mined from the Victorian gold rush was shipped to England to pay for the various global conflicts that had largely drained the government coffers (Doyle, 1951). This and the use of the remainder to generate the industry and capitalism of the colony preempted Australia's success as an important nation in the global colonial project. Mining as a social-material phenomenon has shaped how exploitative and damaging processes have been celebrated and incorporated into the Australian colonial mythology. We argue more specifically that gold mining and the gold rush are inextricably entangled with the geopolitics of Australia and the state of Victoria, its landscapes, origin stories, memories, histories and cultures, and its eco-social exploitation and damage.

This paper discusses the need for improved geopolitical understandings in contemporary education. It then identifies prominent Australian gold rush imaginaries and narratives sustained by industry and politics and by public and school education resources for learning about the gold rush. Here we focus the investigation on sites of the Victorian goldfields with which both authors have strong connection. We present an account of visits to two prominent Victorian gold rush museums as part of an enactment of the critical, relational, geopolitical approach that we describe. The sites and narratives valorise the goldfields as the bedrock of civilisation, industry, technology, economy and democracy. Following this the paper examines the erasures and the opportunities presented by Australian curriculum documents to propose suggestions about what can be done to advance understandings of past/present social and ecological in/justice, and facilitate a sense of belonging, which are necessary for movement toward a decolonial society where First Nations people can flourish, and Country can be well cared for.

The need for relational geopolitical understandings in contemporary education

While global and local Australian ecologies and communities are dealing with the unprecedented impacts of climate change, in mainstream Australian education there remains limited attention to this. Globally, in many contexts, there is next to no attention to the inextricable relations between climate change, colonisation and ongoing coloniality (Stein & Hare, 2023). In Australia, the existing "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures," and the "Sustainability" cross-curriculum priorities (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2024), are separate gestures that are not mandated or well supported in schools. They are of diminishing significance against surging political and educational discourses about the inadequate performance of Australian students in national and international testing regimes, school funding (see Australian Government Department of Education, 2023), the poor preparation of teaching graduates, concern about the acute teacher shortage (see Teacher Education Expert Panel, 2023), and debates relating to the nature of the content to be included within the Australian curriculum (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023; Salter & Maxwell, 2016). Concerns about how Australian education can address injustices and should better support care: for each other, for the most vulnerable, and for all that is part of our planet, are absent from these dominant debates.

A relational approach is necessary to support understanding of injustice and foster care. We conceptualise a critical, relational geopolitics that emphasises attention to how place and Country are entangled with political relations, and shape and constrain the ways we understand place and Country and the possibilities of more-than-human relations with them. We suggest that attention to critical relational geopolitics offers possibilities for stronger connections to and understandings of Country and place, and enables the complex histories, erasures and injustices of these places to be felt and made visible, a prerequisite for responsive action. In the following section we briefly

trace some of the historical and present relations of corporate, industry and political actors with Australian mining, to provide a sense of these entanglements as shapers of discourse and narratives.

Corporate-political relations with the Australian mining context

In the Australian context, the impact of the mining industry through their primary lobby group, the Minerals Council of Australia, should not be underestimated. This lobby group has had long-standing influence through multiple federal elections in Australia and has exposed Australian democracy to risks from foreign actors (Aulby, 2017). The lobby group has led and shaped many anti-social change movements, a notable example being a response to the legal complexities in the aftermath of the Mabo Decision involving their commissioning full-page advertisements making false statements that land claims would inhibit mining activities to the detriment of the nation (Galloway, 2017). During the Gillard-Rudd government, when the federal ALP proposed a super profits tax on the mining sector, the Minerals Council embarked on a national advertising campaign that resulted in the tax being renegotiated and far less effective (Kirk, 2012).

In 2022, the Australian Minerals Council threatened to embark on another damaging advertisement campaign for the newly elected federal Australian Labour Party government if they went ahead with a proposed windfall profits tax in the wake of increased profits gained through the Covid pandemic and the Ukraine war (Karp, 2022). In 2023, the mining sector through its richest member Gina Rinehart, the owner of Hancock Prospecting, has embarked on a more overt campaign to influence education in Australia. The federal opposition leader Peter Dutton, invited to speak at a Rinehart hosted event, stated that there should be a stronger focus on the role of mining in building the contemporary nation-state of Australia and that “we need to hear more teachers tell their children that the schools they attend, and the cities they live in are only possible because of the mining sector” (Butler, 2024, para. 3). As part of wider lobbying activities, the mining sector in Australia has embarked on a new round of pressure of the various state, territory, and federal curriculum authorities to include more content relating to the positives of the mining industry (Stutzer et al, 2021). The Australian gold industry is an important channel for this pressure, evident for example in extensive school curriculum resources provided by the Gold Industry Group (see Gold Industry Group, 2024).

This latest drive by the mining sector to rehabilitate itself has been impacted by the negative press and fallout from the Rio Tinto Juukan Gorge scandal. On the 24th of May 2020 during the period of Covid lockdowns across Australia and large parts of the rest of the world, Rio Tinto sought to expand their iron ore mining capabilities at Juukan Gorge. To do this, they legally blasted a site of the highest archaeological significance in Australia (ANTAR, 2023). This site had archaeological materials dating back 46,000 years and was a site of significance for the Puutu Kuntjira Pitjantjatjara People (ANTAR, 2023). The event resulted in several Rio Tinto executives resigning and placed a temporary spotlight on poor heritage protection laws in Western Australia which prevented First Nations stakeholders halting the destruction.

The fact that there is ongoing support for mining from the Australian public at large despite such negative national press about such cultural damage, and ongoing global coverage about the links between mining, ecological devastation and climate change, suggest a deeply embedded regard for mining. While there may be increasing public pressure on mining companies to develop more eco-socially responsible practices and better communication about these practices (Miklosik & Evans, 2021), there is no strong evidence that there is any decline in support from the general populace for the mining industry. A Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation survey (Moffat et al. 2018) illustrates little change in the generally favourable views of mining since 2014, including majority agreement that mining was necessary for Australia, is important to Australian way of life, and will support Australia’s future prosperity.

That the mining industry sustains itself through a broader political economy that is dependent on it is not in dispute. But there are a range of other material-discursive forms that also ensure its ongoing success, including the mythic narratives of the gold rush of Australia. Drawing on and critiquing public and school education resources for learning about the gold rush, these narratives are considered next.

We built this city on rock and gold

In Victoria, the central sites of the gold rush occurred on Dja Dja Wurrung and Wadawurrung Countries, in and around what are now known as the towns of Ballarat, Bendigo, Daylesford, Castlemaine and Maryborough. These gold mining locations are geopolitical sites coproducing globally shared, but differentiated, histories of deeply unequal more-than-human power relations and forms of violence. The gold rush produced sudden and extreme impacts on Country via digging, hydraulic sluicing, dredging and altering water courses and adjacent land for alluvial and deep lead mining (Cahir, 2012; Frost, 2013; Waldron, Blake, & Mennen, 2023). Eventually regulations were created to limit destruction caused by hydraulic mining practices, but not before irreversible devastation. The Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation (2017, p. 22) explain the impacts of this:

In the mid-1800s, large deposits of gold were discovered in our Country, enticing flocks of people looking to make their fortune. The miners cut down trees for firewood and building, diverted creeks and rivers and dug holes in the ground, pulling up large volumes of earth. Since that time, mining has been constant in Dja Dja Wurrung Country. This has left a legacy of soil erosion, salinity and toxicity from contaminants such as arsenic and mercury. The Country around the goldfields is very sick and a significant program of remediation is required.

Most Australians are familiar with prominent Victorian gold rush narratives presenting a version of history celebrating gold as the bedrock of civilisation, industry, technology, economy and democracy. A crash course in the prevailing imaginary of gold in Victoria can be obtained by viewing the ABC series *The Gold Rush* (Macias, 2019), and the *Gold* episode in the ABC Landline series, *Things That Made Australia* (Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), 2022), both intended as education resources and for use in schools. These tell the story of the gold rush in terms of hard work, waves of migration and population growth, miners' strong bonds and mateship, the growth of towns and a nation, the birth of democracy and representation as the "backbone of Australia's political system," a multicultural society, and, most overtly, the ongoing significance of gold to Australia's economy.

In the dominant imaginary, gold is depicted as social energiser and definer (Bate, 2001); the lucky discovery that through hard work and turbulent times shifted Australia from irrelevant backwater to possessing significant social standing and wealth on the world stage. Wikipedia (2024a), another prominent source of public information, unproblematically presents a narrative from the Victorian Gold Discovery Committee in 1954, which has not been substantially challenged in the seven decades since:

The discovery of the Victorian Goldfields has converted a remote dependency into a country of worldwide fame; it has attracted a population, extraordinary in number, with unprecedented rapidity; it has enhanced the value of property to an enormous extent; it has made this the richest country in the world; and, in less than three years, it has done for this colony the work of an age, and made its impulses felt in the most distant regions of the earth.

Taglines on school resources currently available from the Old Treasury Museum in Melbourne endorse this triumphant narrative, for example: “Find out how Victoria’s new-found riches shaped Melbourne,” and “(c)ompare panoramas of Melbourne from 1862 and 2012 to discuss the growth of the city” (Old Treasury Building Museum, n.d.).

Goodman (2001, p. 24) notes that while there have emerged some diverse stories and perspectives around the Australian gold rush, the primary significance of gold rush narratives is never in doubt. Economic utility – the relationship of gold to wealth and development – is related over and over as the undisputed meaning of gold. For example, the text *Black Gold* (Cahir, 2012), commissioned to address the absence in the academic literature of Indigenous experience of the Victorian gold rush, beneficially fills a number of gaps in the colonial narrative but still does not manage to escape extractivist, colonial assumptions about the meaning of the gold rush. Cahir states that in contrast to their representation in many historical records as wholly “silent,” passive, non-participants in the Victorian gold rushes, there is much evidence that Indigenous people “demonstrated a great degree of agency, exhibited entrepreneurial spirit and eagerness to participate in gold mining or related activities and, at times, figured significantly in the gold epoch” (Cahir, 2012, p. 1). Indigenous people are presented as active economic agents in narratives that maintain the same extractivist premises as the colonial perspective and that, further, fail to properly acknowledge the highly uneven distribution of wealth from this participation, that is designed into the colonial system.

Underlying this singular view of gold as commodity is the generally unremarked upon Western understanding that there is a clear and meaningful demarcation between phenomena that are living, classified as Life, and phenomena classified as Nonlife (Povinelli, 2016). In this thought system, gold is definitively Nonlife and as such, it warrants no care and has no rights or agency. Further, as Nonlife with clear economic utility, its singular meaning is commodification to support accumulation through colonial-capitalist systems. Povinelli makes the argument that the primary mechanism for exercise of power in late liberalism is now this commonly held and powerfully reinforced view that there is a clear and meaningful distinction between Life and Nonlife, and the related belief that it is natural that these classifications should in themselves make a difference to how we relate and engage with the entities with which we coexist. Povinelli terms this form of biopower, geontopower. Povinelli (2016, p. 173) argues:

... late liberalism geontopower is a social project whose purpose is to keep an arrangement of accumulation in place through the specific governance of difference and markets that stretches across human and nonhuman forms of existence. Late liberal geontopower is an activity of fixing and co-substantiating phenomena, aggregating and assembling disparate elements into a common form and purpose. It is a set of dominant patterns, constantly tinkered with and revised according to local material conditions, according to which Life is fabricated and Nonlife is used.

In this gold imaginary gold rush cities and towns are “monuments made to these moments of extraction” (Yusoff, 2018, p. 12), and the righteousness and rationality of instrumentalisation of any beings or entities that can be economised is embedded in ontology. But as Povinelli (2016) notes, this not a universal way of understanding being and enacting relationships with the more-than-human world and is not shared by many Indigenous peoples.

The centrality of gold extraction to an Australian version of democracy

An integral aspect of the narrative of Victorian gold as an instrument of progress is the story of its centrality to the emergence of Australian democracy. The tale of the Eureka Stockade in which miners banded together to protest a license fee to dig for gold is the central thread of this narrative,

presented by the National Museum of Australia (2023, para 3) in this way: “The rebellion of miners at Eureka Stockade is a key event in the development of Australia’s political systems and attitudes towards democracy and equality.” In the ABC series *Gold*, the Eureka flag “represented unity, and standing up for what’s right” (Macias, 2019). Following the stockade and an adapted licensing system, white miners were given the right to own land and to vote in parliamentary elections. Old Treasury Museum school resources appeal to learners to: “(d)iscover how gold rush immigrants helped shape democracy in the new colony of Victoria and the struggles for democratic rights for both men and women” (Old Treasury Building Museum, n.d.). Wikipedia’s (2024b, para. 8) undisputed narrative also links the gold rush, and specifically the common miner, to an emergent functional democratic system, in that: “(p)olitically, Victoria’s gold miners sped up the introduction of greater parliamentary democracy in Victoria . . .”.

While there exists academic scholarship that reflects on conflicting interpretations of the Eureka Stockade (Weuffen, Cahir, Barnes & Powell 2019) these debates are largely absent from the public discourse and online education resources. Further, egalitarian discourse still pervasively underlies academic gold rush scholarship. For example, Bate (2001, p. 8) states that because the proportion of alluvial gold was very high by global standards and because nature had made it accessible, “no middle man could get between the digger and his winnings” and so “(g)old was the democratic material.” Cahir (2012 p. 64) reports that “(s)mall groups of miners . . . shared much adversity in their quest for gold. Miners from very different backgrounds sometimes formed strong bonds of friendship and co-dependency” and so “(g)old was very much a great equaliser.”

Public and prominent narratives authoritatively establish a significant relationship between the mining persona, the Stockade event, and Australia’s political systems and attitudes towards democracy and equality, without elaborating on the nature of this relationship or serious attempt to represent its complexity, and in so doing, hiding the “prior economy of power” (Yusoff, 2018, p. 13) which goes unacknowledged. A disturbing and significant absence is represented in the continued erasure of Indigenous contexts from narratives of democratic gains and systems linked to mining and the Stockade, in respected public education resources. This speaks to the further reach of geontopower, at work in gold rush narratives as part of the existing arrangement of colonial-capitalist accumulation. Eureka Stockade democracy narratives serve the continued commodification of being and entities in a market “that stretches across human and nonhuman forms of existence” (Povinelli, 2016, p. 173). This market has, from its origins, necessitated the representation of Indigenous people as existing outside of the classification of “human.” As Yusoff (2018) also argues, in this onto-epistemological arrangement, it is necessary that Indigenous people are nonbeings; effectively Nonlife, so as to keep the existing “arrangement of accumulation in place” (Povinelli, 2016, p. 173).

Hidden histories

Having critically considered prominent narratives evident in textual and online research, in February of 2024, the authors travelled to Ballarat on Wadawurrung Country, to Sovereign Hill Museum, a recreated gold rush town, and the Eureka Centre, dedicated to telling stories of the Eureka Stockade. Sovereign Hill has in the past been subject to criticism for its mythic depiction of Australia’s gold rush story (Weuffen et al., 2019). Geopolitical research and inquiry are, and should be, embodied experiences. We went to experience first-hand the places, the narratives they presented, and the histories they co-created, including those of First Nations people. Part of our reasoning for visiting these sites was also the fact that it was not just the gold that supported the establishment of democracy in Victoria, but rather the dispossession and genocide of the Wadawurrung and Dja Dja Wurrung Peoples that predicated the access to the land and gold. It is telling that there are multiple sites exploring and celebrating the impact of the goldrush, but none dedicated to remembering and memorialising the genocides.

Prior to the visit we had accessed the Sovereign Hill website, parts of which were developed in consultation with Wadawurrung community members (Weuffen et al., 2019) demonstrating some investment in and focus on First Nations people and contexts. The website content includes a timeline, quizzes, images, and short video clips of local Sovereign Hill staff, Wadawurrung Elders and community members sharing their knowledge about Country, culture, and history. In addition to content about Wadawurrung pre-colonial resources and practices, videos include mention of First Nations loss of land in the gold rush and the failure of colonisers to provide recompense for this, and an unproblematised account of the contribution of (First Nations) Native Police employed to protect the security of the goldfields (Sovereign Hill Museum, 2024). We considered that these stories potentially contradicted some of our earlier findings about the presence of First Nations narratives at the museum and its capacity to present challenges to dominant narratives about the gold rush.

However, our experience in the material space of the Sovereign Hill Museum supported reports that sustainable efforts for this predominantly non-Indigenous organisation to tell First Nations stories in culturally responsive ways (Weuffen et al., 2019) have so far proven too challenging to achieve. An Acknowledgement of Country was presented at the main entrance. Within the 15 or so stories in the first exhibit, a traditional museum display room, there were two signs textually presenting Wadawurrung perspectives, providing brief statements that the gold rush meant loss of land, culture, knowledge and stories for these groups (Wadawurrung Elder Uncle Byron Powell [Sovereign Hill signage], 2016). Outside, within the recreated township of Sovereign Hill, we were unable to find most physical locations in the museum complex indicated by the points of interest marked on the interactive map. We did find a small black and white photo of a First Nations couple in the window of a shop and a possum skin hanging within a miner's hut. The absence of First Nations artefacts and perspectives was juxtaposed with the visible presence of Chinese artefacts and narratives in imagery, writing, and stories of Chinese miners. The "*Hidden Histories*" (Sovereign Hill Museum, 2024) drawn attention to by the title of the interactive First Nations digital map, remained hidden in the material space.

At the Eureka Centre there was a comparatively greater presence of First Nations content, visible in images, narratives and artwork. In most instances First Nations content presented did not have a substantive connection to Stockade histories, instead reporting more generally on local First Nations existence at the time and sometimes making connections between First Nations and other social justice and civil rights movements. Most content in the Centre represented the dominant narrative of Eureka's positive role in establishing democracy. However, two signs provided the seeds of alternative narratives, reporting that (w)hile the Eureka Stockade led to male suffrage in 1858... it was over 100 years until Australia's First Nations People were able to exercise the right to vote (Welcome to Country, [Eureka Centre signage], n.d), and that social reforms were introduced following the Eureka Stockade that denied basic liberties to First Nations People (Indigenous Rights, [Eureka Centre signage], n.d). There was also one acknowledgement that the Stockade tale is contested, for example: "for some, Eureka was an uprising against tyranny, and for others, the protest of small businessmen against over regulation by government. There is no correct answer to what Eureka means now or what it meant in the past" (Debating Eureka, [Eureka Centre signage], n.d).

First Nations presence on Victorian gold fields is now evident in the physical and digital sites of these two museums, minimally addressing some of the erasures in colonial gold rush narratives, including First Nations loss of land and culture, participation in gold rush economies, and exclusion from democracy and social advancement achieved through coloniality and the gold rush. Our engagement with these two sites illuminated some of the work that is still necessary to increase and improve First Nations perspectives, content and visibility.

At Sovereign Hill, despite recent additions of First Nations artefacts, a colonial-capitalist narrative prevails. If they can find this interesting content, the museum visitor is not supported to take steps to consider its implications or to better integrate this knowledge into their

understanding of the complex history of the place. At the Eureka Centre, although some effort is evident to indicate a lack of consensus about the meaning of the Stockade, opportunities to consider conflicts and erasures of experience of people and land, the ways history is narrated, and the ongoing implications of these histories in the now, remain largely unrealised.

Improved visibility of First Nations experience in these sites would go some way toward supporting gold rush truth telling. However, to facilitate real problematisation of colonial-capitalist versions of history, the sites would need to cease subordination of Indigenous narratives to the cherished story of gold and of mining as positive instigators of economic progress, and to find ways to tell multiple tales of the meaning of gold and its relations with Australia. The historical and contemporary investment of political economy and corporate interests in gold mining would need to be unpacked. The commodification of human and nonhuman beings in mining, and the economic and utilitarian ontological premises of the gold rush would need to be questioned. The ontologically very different perspectives of First Nations people and relations with Country would need to be meaningfully presented, and the experience of Country itself would need to be considered.

Mining and gold rush narratives and possibilities in Australian curricula

The above discussion explores some of the limitations and problems of public education resources in relation to the Victorian gold rush, as elements which reinforce a broader colonial-capitalist narrative that sustains damage and exploitation. It suggests the importance of scholarship, curriculum, and pedagogy and resources to better support teachers and learners to extend their capacity to recognise, critique and subvert singular, authoritative historical and present-day narratives and to conduct geopolitical and culturally diverse inquiries into the past, present and future of places.

School curricula, being central resources for learning and significant co-constructors of social narratives, demand scrutiny within this context. Mining features across several discipline areas in the Victorian curriculum, with six mentions in elaborations across Geography and History and one in Economics and Business. Gold mining is consigned to the field of History in the Curriculum, but there, does present some opportunities that might be bent towards critical geopolitical investigations. For example, examination of the gold rush and the Eureka Stockade is suggested as a possible application of learning about the development of “a colony” (VCHHK090) and of “Marvelous Melbourne” (VCHHK136) and the gold rush is suggested as a possible context for investigating environmental and/or ecological features and impacts (VCHHK089). “(P)olitical and legal institutions and cultural expression” (VCHHK136) and “social, cultural, economic and political features” (VCHHK133) might also be explored in relation to the gold rush, within the History curriculum.

Simultaneously, the Victorian Curriculum (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2019) sustains broad erasures of Indigenous experience in relation to mining in general, including in relation to mining’s significant colonising practices and their ongoing effects. Aspects of the Curriculum imply that there are critical connections that might be made between mining and environmental “impacts” but are non-specific about the nature or scale of these impacts. Connections between mining and global climate change are absent. There is also silence in both the Victorian and the Australian curriculum about the necessity that we investigate the extractive industries in relation to political and corporate agendas today. These silences mean that these curricula are poorly designed to critique Australia’s significant, complex and problematic relationship to mining, and therefore inadequate to help us meet ecological and social injustices and crises head-on.

While public support for fossil fuel extraction and energy are very gradually waning, the mining industry and political economy promulgate a discourse that there is now a strong “social license”

for continued large scale mining for other materials such as gold and critical minerals, resting on the arguable fact that these are essential for the ongoing progress of technology and science, including sustainability solutions (Miklosik & Evans, 2021). In contrast with the absence of opportunity to make links between extractivism, industry, politics and ecological crisis, is the strong and at times positive emphasis given to the mining industry in these curricula. In the Australian curriculum (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2024), mining for the production of resources is given six mentions, in relation to the economy and industry, six mentions, and six mentions are given to innovative technology and industry solutions in relation to mining. In addition to their relative frequency, these curriculum references are more explicit and specific than those which suggest the possibility of critical investigations of mining. For example, in the Science curriculum, the descriptor: “Students learn to: explain how new evidence or different perspectives can lead to changes in scientific knowledge” (AC9S8H01), is elaborated with the suggestion that students might analyse “how sustainability processes such as efficiency and limiting environmental impacts have led to innovative practices in mining and mine site regeneration.”

As was noted earlier in this paper, the discourse of the mining industry as important contributor to the economy has been normalised in Australia for some time (Moffat et al., 2018). The discourse of the mining industry as necessary stimulus for essential innovations and improvements in technological, social and environmental fields is a newer movement, also shaped by the mining industry public relations (Robinson et al., 2020). These narratives constitute an increasing threat to the future and to our capacity to challenge, critique and reimagine colonial modernity.

While this brief analysis suggests that some critical engagement with gold rush and mining histories and narratives may be possible within the guidance of Victorian and Australian curricula, the prominence of celebrated gold rush and mining narratives in public and school education resources, including within these curricula themselves, raises questions about the support for and likelihood of this occurring. Further, unsurprisingly, the curriculum represents this knowledge in abstract ways, disconnected from selves. Like the education resources discussed above, the curriculum documents are flawed in their capacity to help learners to join the dots between themselves; local mining places and their pasts, presents and futures; larger ecological crises including climate change; and global politics and ideologies including capitalism, liberalism, humanism, and extractivism. The inclusion of more critical mandated content, including about First Nations experiences and perspectives is important, however, such content should be considered the starting place and not the aspiration. That is, increased truth telling about First Nations histories and experience, about place, and about the political economy are essential, but abstract knowledge cannot teach us about such things as care, respect and reciprocity with Country, or about how to understand and develop our own sense of positionality and agency in relation to these.

Supporting critical, relational geopolitical understandings

How then, should we work towards change in this space, given the entrenched nature of our gold rush narratives and of the wider and deeper operation of geontopower within the ethical and onto-epistemological assumptions that those narratives are built from? We could say much about what should happen, but do not pretend to have unusual insight into the practicalities of making these events come about, in a context that powerfully protects itself against the forms of change we believe in. We recognise that in Australia, school curricula, pedagogy and systems, and teacher education knowledge and skills are extensively governed by political interests enmeshed in corporate interests, including mining. One school of thought suggests that change in such a context must happen through small subversive actions and planting seeds of insurgency. Here we

contribute to the question of “what next?” by making a few brief suggestions for supporting education and environmental education inquiries similar to the critical geopolitical inquiry we have briefly undertaken here.

If one of the reasons for the entrenchment of these versions of history and place is the normalisation of singular authoritative narratives, part of our job as educators is to develop our own and our learners’ capacities to investigate and embrace multiple place stories, from multiple onto-epistemological positions. This is partly about the capacity for critique. We need to first comprehend that all stories are limited, and that all stories co-create (limited) worlds. We need then to grow the capacity to understand the specific limitations and creations of the stories and constructions of colonial-capitalism and geontopower, in relation to ourselves, and the communities and ecologies of our own local places. This inquiry has brought into sharper relief the truth that it is essential that educators and learners alike engage in greater critical engagement with the political dimensions of knowledge and place. This suggests the necessity of introducing processes and targets of investigation that are often not considered appropriately “politically neutral” in mainstream education. Important introductions include inquiries around the relations between lobby groups such as the Australian Minerals Council, with global and local places and with their associated narratives and knowledge.

Second, to facilitate investigation and embrace of multiple place stories from multiple onto-epistemological positions, educators can seek, produce and share resources that provide alternatives to long-standing colonial-capitalist narratives, and that help us invest care and responsibility for place and history, by developing and sustaining our own relationships with place and history. A slow proliferation of resources telling stories alternative to the tale of the egalitarianism and democracy inherent to mining in Australia, making visible and material First Nations people in these stories, addressing the colonisation and genocide that enabled the gold rush and that the gold rush in turn supported, and localising and connecting learners with these stories would begin to make inroads into the reification and abstraction of these colonial narratives.

The recently published Good Humanities series by Matilda Education is an example of such a resource. In this History and Geography textbook series, the Year 9 History textbook includes a section focused on the Victorian gold rush. Its first paragraph explains the devastation of the lands and food sources of Victoria’s First Nations Peoples (Lawless et al, 2021) by the gold rush, signalling the authors’ agenda of ensuring that the impact on the Wadawurrung and Dja Dja Wurrung Peoples and the landscape is foregrounded and emphasised, rather than marginalised or omitted and forgotten. The Good Humanities: History Year 10 (Lawless et al, 2022) text includes a section focusing on the ongoing legacy of the Australian Civil Rights Movement. This section uses the example of the Juukan Gorge, legally destroyed by Rio Tinto in 2020, to discuss how, despite the many decades long struggle for land rights, Native Title Laws are still too weak to protect First Nations sacred sites from the predations of mining companies.

It is heartening that some education authors and publishers and a growing number of teachers who use these resources are beginning to respond to the need to teach with more criticality, plurality and nuance around the Australian gold rush. There is room for the possibility of hope that in the coming years there will be greater understanding of both the human and environmental costs of the Victorian gold rush and the ongoing mixed legacy that we live with in contemporary Australia. Much work still needs to be done in this space. One of the limitations of modern education demonstrated by the above book series is the representation of such discussions as uni-disciplinary in nature; that is, pertaining for example, to Humanities, and not to Environmental Science, or any other field. Ongoing disciplinary siloing of knowledge and ways of knowing works to continue to prevent the relational understandings that help us to know and experience the inseparability of all things, and to see how imbalances of power or injustice through one dimension of being, implicate and change all others. We need new and better terms than “environmental education” to denote the increasingly urgent forms of learning and teaching that need to be engaged with by all of us.

Concluding thoughts in relation to geopolitical inquiry

From the position that our imaginaries and narratives set the terms for what can and cannot be thought and known, this paper has explored the gold rush imaginary in Victoria and its most powerful stories. For many of the public, the gold rush represents a familiar, cherished and even sacrosanct origin story, involving adventure, sudden and exciting riches, a pioneering and egalitarian spirit, and the emergence of the globally significant city of Melbourne. This makes the gold rush a challenging but a necessary target for critical consideration. Cozy public relations with gold rush history, supported by Australian education, are part of the apparatus that continues to make invisible the relations between the political economy and colonialism, and past, present and future inequities, injustices and violence. This ongoing violence has been done to place, Country and First Nations Peoples most especially, but needs to be recognised as ongoing damage to all of us, as inseparable parts of the ecologies of places. Ongoing ignorance and lack of concern for history, connection to place, and the mechanisms of institutional power contribute to each emergent generation's difficulty in understanding and negotiating the complexities of modernity and its inextricable relations with ecological crisis and colonial violence, let alone challenging these.

These narrative complexities are largely irresolvable; we do not suggest that we should aspire to seamlessly integrated versions or shared accounts of history and place. We propose instead that our context demands curriculum, pedagogy and education resources which help us to investigate and embrace multiple place stories, from multiple onto-epistemological positions. That our education supports us to recognise, critique and be concerned about singular, authoritative historical and present-day narratives, and, in response, to encounter and invest in place and history and our own particular relationships with, care for, and responsibilities to these.

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