

“Just Passing”: Teaching and Learning with Non-Indigenous Students through Acknowledgement of Country

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“How can acknowledgement be divisive when it’s responding to welcome?” asked one baffled student.

“Walking out of a room is divisive,” added another.

“I dunno, I think she has a point, in a way . . .”

In July 2022, on my way to a class of undergraduate Creative Writing students, I saw breaking reports from the opening of the Federal Parliament’s Senate Chamber. Senator Pauline Hanson had staged a demonstration against the President of the Senate’s Acknowledgement of Country with a prepared media statement and a performative walkout from the chamber. The act of acknowledging Ngambri and Ngunnawal Country, Hanson had stated, was a “divisive” custom and not a traditional one anyway (qtd. in Morse).

In the classroom, the students and I read through the coverage, and a spirited conversation ensued. As it happened, I had tasked this second-year class with composing a personal Acknowledgement of Country for their first assessment of the semester. They pounced on the news story with vigour, curiosity sharpened by proof that their academic learning had stakes in public debate.

It was a debate more complex than first appeared. Within a day, Walpiri woman and Northern Territory Senator Jacinta Price had followed Hanson’s demonstration with a statement against enshrining the Voice to Parliament, describing it as a “wedge” between First Nations and non-Indigenous Australians. Price claimed the Voice would be as “pointless” for “real change” as was the “symbolic gesture” of Acknowledging Country (qtd. in Keogan).

Senator Hanson’s stunt was easy for our fully non-Indigenous class to critique, but the diversity of Blak perspectives suggested by Senator Price was harder to process. If any of my students had thought that their first assessment task was a favour to First Nations people, they were now thinking twice. Acknowledgment of Country is not, as Senator Price pointed out, the same as material action towards equal rights and justice for First Nations. It is not equivalent to direct action. What, I imagined my students silently asking me, is the point?¹

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I’m forty years old and have been teaching Creative Writing and Literary Studies in south-east Australia since 2006. I’m non-Indigenous: a visitor where I grew up on Gweagal lands and waters, in Cronulla; and where I now live, in Dja Dja Wurrung forest near Castlemaine. To get to work at RMIT University in Melbourne, I commute from highland valleys and plains, through Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Country to the banks of the Birrarung.

As a teacher you get older, and your students stay the same age. At some point on the brink of this widening gap I developed an assumption that the late millennial generation I teach must be

equipped with a greater cultural competency than I'd possessed as an undergraduate in the early 2000s. I imagined that most of my students had been privileged to receive wider cultural access and awareness than I had, through their secondary education, at least, augmented by an increasingly diverse Australian media and culture.

My assumption persisted despite a mounting number of classroom experiences that suggested otherwise. When I included the work of First Nations authors on syllabus, many non-Indigenous students were afraid to speak about these texts as readers. If they did, fellow students often shut them down with accusations of inappropriateness—sometimes reasonably, but without discussion. When I shared methods of place-based writing through recordings and readings on deep listening by First Nations knowledge holders such as Vicki Couzens, students were amazed to discover that such sources of knowledge were publicly available (“Deepening the Conversation”). When I invited First Nations writers such as Lionel Fogarty and Ellen van Neerven on residency to RMIT, senior peers and community members visited the residents’ workshops, but non-Indigenous students avoided the opportunity. And, on the few occasions when a student (non-Indigenous or First Nations) drafted a piece of original work that included a reference to First Nations or colonial history, the classroom workshop conversation was too fragile with anxieties, hesitations, and unlanguage complexities for constructive consideration to happen within the allotted time. Something was missing from our capacity as non-Indigenous teachers and learners; opportunities for more nuanced and informed conversations were being lost.

Most of my students—largely young adult, non-Indigenous Australians—lacked tools for imagining, articulating and expressing their complex relationships with unceded places and the fact of their co-existence with sovereign knowledges and histories. The absence of tertiary coursework that directly addressed this lack only reinforced an absence from their earlier education.²

Back in 2000, when I was starting university as an eighteen-year-old, Peter Read published his important book *Belonging*, which includes a chapter dedicated to interviews with non-Indigenous young adults. Read’s research problem—“how will [non-Indigenous Australians] place themselves in relation to the Indigenous past and present?”—returned vastly mixed responses from his participants (5). In their remarks, there is a strong note of ambivalence and resistance towards recognition of land rights and generational disadvantage, which some of the interviewees see as reinforcing “Aboriginal privilege”:

That’s why people become so racial about them, because they get these special exceptions and we don’t, and we hate them for that.

But they’re creating the segregation. I don’t get this whole blackfellow whitefellow yellowfellow brownfellow, it’s absolutely staggering that we can live in such a multicultural society and still have a race debate. (qtd. in Read 59)

While these reactions remind me of the air I was breathing as a fellow non-Indigenous young adult at that time, Read’s question continues to be a live one even if the attitudes of this population are somewhat changed.

Education studies and linguistics researcher Donna Starks presents the results of a 2017 survey in which adolescent Australians were asked, “Where are you from?” While the expected complexities of multicultural identity arise, nowhere in Starks’s published interview responses do the participants use sovereign nations, language groups, or even place names or community landmarks to indicate where they are from. This is valuable information for teachers of Creative

Writing students—students who aspire to have a cultural voice, cultural power, and an audience in Australia. It highlights the reality that secondary education is not providing tools for articulating the place-based and culturally based identity that I once assumed it was. Education scholar Larissa McLean Davies has undertaken considerable research in this area, focusing on how “text selection evidences how the political history of Australia has resulted in practices and approaches in subject English that reveal a tacit, but tenacious and uncontested imperial allegiance,” and seeking to activate the untapped agency of English teachers to “unsettle” these imbalances in the national curriculum (McLean Davies, Truman and Buzacott 817).

The young people interviewed by Starks are not far in age or educational stage from those more recently studied by Anna Hickey-Moody and Christine Horn. In 2022, they published an article focused on primary school learners, arguing that engaging the lived experience of students within syllabus is a way for teachers to draw out ways of knowing that exceed the limits of Western discipline areas so dominant in Australia’s settler-colonial educational institutions. Their research identifies a gap in Australian teaching and learning that starts much earlier than higher education, a gap that swallows formal learning opportunities to acknowledge sovereign peoples and places as well as recognition of individual cultural positions. As Martin Nakata states in his highly influential article, “The Cultural Interface,” “things cannot be fixed by simply adding in Indigenous components to the mix” (8). The interface of knowledge systems and their contexts within educational institutions calls for all Australian teachers and learners to develop skills for articulating their standpoint. As Nakata argues, standpoint is more than accounting for one’s perspective; it is “theorising knowledge from a particular and interested position” (12).

The adolescents and young adults featured in the above studies have and will become those I teach. When I combine these researchers’ findings with my own classroom experiences, I see a population of non-Indigenous young people who lack the means of storytelling about their origins as visitors on Country and have not yet been supportively provoked to consider how to address this within their aspirations as creative culture-makers. This problem is obscured by the milieu into which they write; a literary tradition that repeats erasure, what Bundjalung author and scholar Evelyn Araluen has called the “melancholic paralysis” of non-Indigenous Australian writing. The aspiration of non-Indigenous writers, Araluen says, constitutes a “profound imaginative need” (“They Haunt-Walk In”). The dangers of this need are legion and, as Araluen’s analysis of a White social psychology indicates, they are dangers felt by already exploited and obscured First Nations generations *and* by the non-Indigenous mind and body.

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Araluen’s poem, “Acknowledgement of Cuntery” satirises the profound need of the non-Indigenous voice to perform a gesture of reconciliation and also serve its own symbolic limits. This voice is caught within the power of the speech act like a blowfly in a glass. The customary words of Acknowledgement of Country become a smokescreen and, worse, a withdrawal or an inversion of the gesture itself:

Would like to would like acknowledgement
 Invitation/invite you all
 To be acknowledged
 And welcome invitation and respects
 To any Indigenous past present

Emerging now watching me acknowledge
 To be acknowledged with my respects and my conciliation
 After the show during the show during acknowledgements
 As I regard Indigenous with glances with acknowledgement

I would like to say sovereignty and reconciliation
 I would like sovereignty and reconciliation (Araluen, *Dropbear* 30, lines 9–19)

Again, I imagine my students asking, what is the point? I don't believe that the point of Araluen's poem is to suggest that the custom of Acknowledgement of Country is itself corrupt. Rather, I read it alongside Senator Price's statement about the misuse of the custom to replace tangible acts of social justice and solidarity. In the poem, this bungling of purpose becomes a verbal panic and a public self-congratulation. The standard phrase "I would like to" used in Acknowledgements of Country has, in philosopher J. L. Austin's terms, illocutionary force as an intention and is a performative speech act whose saying makes it so. In Araluen's poem, however, it is repeated until it becomes not only estranged from its customary context but impotent as an act. Yet this was not the problem that Senator Hanson perceived when she walked out of the Senate Chamber during an Acknowledgement. Paradoxically, Hanson's protest reflected her sense of the power in speaking recognition of the original law of the land.

A fundamental conflict of interest, if Australian settler colonial law is to recognise First Nations sovereignty, has been exposed by Goenpal scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson and Wiradjuri and Wailwan lawyer Teela Reid among others. Moreton-Robinson has shown that the laws of possession are in practice a creature of white patriarchal logic, not a way of being that accommodates reciprocal and equal co-existence. It is a problem of how we the non-Indigenous seek to respectfully get along with sovereign lore and law. As Goldie Osuri explains: the problem of "Co-existence . . . does not mean that we don't already co-exist in a spatial and temporal sense, but that the terms and conditions under which we do are fundamentally unequal." Teela Reid suggests that co-existence might be defined as equal accountability for policy and its consequences, through self-determining mechanisms such as a Voice to Parliament as well as state treaties and settlements. Against this necessary structural change, an Acknowledgement of Country may seem miniscule and pointless—a feel-good rearranging of deckchairs.

However, for many non-Indigenous Australians it is a first step towards consciously recognising themselves, not only historically or socially but lawfully, alongside sovereign peoples and Country. The potential impact of this on non-Indigenous ability towards further learning and action should not be dismissed as merely symbolic. Nor should Acknowledgement of Country be defined as something only to be publicly presented and ratified. Whether or not it is a traditional custom is a moot point, and in this respect Hanson's leaning on the binary of traditional and non-traditional culture is itself highly problematic. In doing so, Hanson is carrying on a form of "elimination of the Native" from cultural practice or cultural influence within contemporary Australia (Wolfe 33).

An Acknowledgement is an opportunity to articulate personal accountability in a lawful exchange that sits outside of settler colonial law. It is a chance to think through and word up a commitment by the individual who arrives as a visitor. Sarah Maddison has rightly pointed out that White guilt fixates on apology, however, for the non-Indigenous person Acknowledgement does not perform the same social, cultural, or psychological function as apology. I look to Quandamooka woman Karen Martin's explanation of the First Nations protocol of self-

introduction, which involves “claiming and declaring my genealogy, my ancestry, and my position . . . This also allows others to locate me and determine the types of relations that might exist” (204). Martin explains how self-introduction relates to Country in her Quandamooka ontology, since “country is not only Land and People, but it is also the Entities of Waterways, Animals, Plants, Climate, Skies and Spirits. . . . All things are recognised and respected for their place in the overall system” (207). Adapted from the protocol of self-introduction, a non-Indigenous Acknowledgement of Country not only recognises one’s status as a visitor on geographical Country but engages the visitor with a relational ontology that extends to resources, interspecies kin, and lore. As such it accounts for the non-Indigenous speaker’s own situation between two sovereignties, witnessing the moment of their interface.

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I began to consider the role of the Acknowledgement in pedagogy through the work of non-Indigenous Design scholar, Peter West. West’s scholarship, which takes place in Design studies, considers the agency of the non-Indigenous person invited to co-exist with sovereign practices. In this context, West understands “the position of being the witness not as passive but as an active one in which I am invited into a reflective repositioning directed through the offer of the sovereign relationship” (48). West’s recognition of a relationship is a fundamental recognition of sovereign law’s existence; his inhabiting the position of witness is the acceptance that he has been invited.

This helped me to understand the Welcome to Country as an invitation. When one of my students queried Senator Hanson’s protest as ignoring a welcome, they were pointing to this very relationship as it existed in the Senate speaker’s reply to the Ngunnawal Welcome to Country. That Welcome to Country appears in many places of Federal Parliament and surrounds, including Reconciliation Place, Canberra Airport, the National Museum of Australia, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, and more. This is to say, Senator Hanson had been Welcomed to Country like everybody else in the Senate Chamber, an invitation which the President witnessed by making an Acknowledgement of it. For Hanson, the speech act of witnessing could only be walked away from (ironically, to another part of Ngunnawal Country).

West explains that “the question posed by Indigenous sovereignty—I come from here, where do you come from?—is ignored or obscured as a practice of the colonial” (67). This fundamentally colonial culture of ignoring and obscuring can be seen in the gaps in education experienced by my non-Indigenous students. Its insidious presence became the rationale for a Creative Writing course I designed and first delivered at RMIT in 2020, and again in 2021 and 2022. I have discussed some of the institutional context and pedagogical methodology for this course elsewhere (Cassidy, “Structural Whiteness”; “Un-knowing Expertise”); here, I want to focus on the Acknowledgement of Country assessment task that underpins the coursework. To do this I will draw on the voices of students from the 2021 and 2022 cohorts, who are my collaborators in an action research approach to critical pedagogy, and whose work forms the core evidence for my claims in this discussion.

I designed the course “Writing with Sovereign Spaces” for second-year undergraduates majoring in Creative Writing, who were able to opt into the course from a range of core units. All three cohorts of students who opted to take this course self-identify as non-Indigenous, from a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and birthplaces, as well as gender identities and sexual orientations. The majority are between 19 and 25 years old, with some older students, including two who feature in the voices presented here. Much of the coursework is captured in

private group blogs. In the first week of the course, some of the 2021 and 2022 cohorts posted their reasons for enrolling in “Writing with Sovereign Spaces”:

I want to learn to decolonise my own approaches to problem-solving regarding writing in sovereign spaces, as I believe the tools I have been given through my education process are insufficient for attempting to solve this issue. (Jamil, Class Blog, 2022)

We were not educated on the spiritual significance of these places or told of their violent histories. The most I learned at school was of the name of the Wurundjeri people, the land on which the school was placed (and was taught the wrong pronunciation). (Ged, Class Blog, 2021)

These remarks illustrate the students’ own perception of how their education has or has not prepared them for the question posed by Indigenous sovereignty. They also keenly communicate these students’ independently formed desires to actively engage with that question. The students’ posts point to a gap between their broad cultural self-awareness, and questions about how their identity encounters or meets sovereign knowledges, identities, and Country.

The students quoted here were speaking at the beginning of the course, preparing to approach the first assessment task in which each of them must deliver a personal Acknowledgement of Country as an oral presentation to their classmates. The task requires that they may pre-record their delivery, but it must be spoken and it must be delivered in real time within the classroom. No template wording or structure is provided, but the students may seek out examples for themselves if they wish. “What words should it include?” is a common question, and “Should I be saying sorry?” The presentation must last five minutes, a requirement that immediately prompts another question: “But how will I find enough to say?”

With three weeks of coursework to scaffold and detail the Acknowledgements, the main learning that we undertake is concerned with, as Peter West puts it, “the question posed by Indigenous sovereignty—I come from here, where do you come from?” My approach to the question is to work backwards, beginning to address the complexities of self-knowledge before naming the moment of encounter. We start with a prompt to simply articulate a specific, individual relationship with place: naming it, describing it, understanding a lived experience with it. Rather than “Where are you from,” I ask the students, “Where are you a local?”—a question that African British writer Taiye Selasi suggests is so much richer. The following responses to this question were made by my 2021 and 2022 class groups:

Am I as much a visitor
as the old bloke next door?
does a shared fence make us local
in a temporary home? (Ged, Class Blog, 2021)

I run past, cycle past, I bring my dog past. But I am still just passing. I cannot enter because I no longer belong there. The people I knew, we no longer belong to each other. The school must make room for new locals.

Thus, my locality is recycled. To a city where I don’t belong. Where people are just names. I will pretend to be a local until I am one. (Lillian, Class Blog, 2021)

I had viewed locality as a question of cultural heritage, as my experience as a child of immigrants and a black person has shaped my understanding of the question “where are you from.” (Jamil, Class Blog, 2022)

These are complicated responses to a seemingly simple question. The students express sophisticated and nuanced relationships with the places they live. What stands out to me is that they are neither fully comfortable in their identification with locality, nor paralysed with guilt or fear of participating in it. West notes: “Both ‘the visitor’ and ‘the guest’ are a challenge to the non-Indigenous (white) assumption that I am connected to place equivalent to Aboriginal people. The term ‘visitor’ differentiates between the colonial position of recent arrival, ownership and possessive logic and the sovereignty of the host” (68). The students’ responses to the question, “Where are you a local?” show a deeply held awareness of the differentiation between sovereign host and non-Indigenous visitor. What I learned from my students’ attitudes of hesitation and querying about their locality was that, unlike Peter Read’s generation of young adults back in 2000, they weren’t concerned with either illegitimacy or belonging; they hadn’t been formally prompted to inhabit their awareness as visitors. They hadn’t been given the opportunity to heed the invitation. This is not their fault or shame; it is the generations of non-Indigenous Australians who continue to project conditioned psyches upon students.

The starting point for our class conversation as visitors on Country already exists. After responding to the question “Where are you a local?” the group is better able to approach the first part of the question posed by Indigenous sovereignty. For staff and students at RMIT, it lies in the Welcome to Country offered by the traditional owners of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and Boon Wurrung language groups. Over the iterations of “Writing with Sovereign Spaces” we have received a Welcome in several forms: during 2020–21 lockdowns we viewed publicly accessible Welcome to Country videos created by Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and Boon Wurrung elders for RMIT and local Council. In 2022 we took a guided cultural tour through the Koori Heritage Trust. At the heart of these encounters is the Eastern Kulin language greeting, *Wominjeka*. It is usually translated as: “Come, what is your purpose, what is your business?” Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung woman Mandy Nicholson describes this greeting as creating a “culturally safe space.”

It’s from this space of receiving the Welcome, and specifically the question asked by the sovereign host, that I ask the students to begin the lawful work of reply which will become their Acknowledgement of Country. While I am on hand for consultation, it is a personal and individual journey in which students find themselves diving into research, journaling, deep listening. They find themselves witnessing truth-telling, and for some, participating in it through their own research. The following remarks are drawn from my 2021 class, recorded on their blogs in the lead-up to the presentation of their Acknowledgements as they each undertook this work alone, together.

Family history through phone calls with my Dad, deep listening under the Pine trees where Grandpa’s ashes were scattered in Nunawading. (Ged, Class Blog, 2021)

Follow the road long enough and it becomes dirt.
 Leave the concrete behind.
 Walk to the end of the line.
 There is a fence, an empty pasture.

Then trees, then mountains.
 Mountains cannot be buried by paddock grass.
 They cannot be built on.
 They resist, and they endure. (Lillian, Class Blog, 2021)

I'm amazed at how little I actually pay attention—just this week I noticed a stand of *Acacia implexa* that I had been walking past for ten years. I like to think that as I walk I'm creating a map, but if I'm unable to notice what is before me, how exactly do I think I'm mapping, or creating a memory of where I've been? . . . I usually feel very refreshed by the proximity of the water; the sounds are soothing and energising. It's such a strong feeling that it over-rides my usual mental fog and allows me to pay attention. It has become part of my personal map, however imperfect. (Lara, Class Blog, 2021)

Whether or not these students considered themselves to be learning Creative Writing, the posts above show that they were developing new skills. Deep listening in the home locality was a practice adopted by several of the students, providing them with new knowledge about their environment as well as deepening their sense of what was unknown to them as visitors. The increasingly long form of their reflections, too, suggests a desire to use language carefully in their announcement of themselves. Indeed, having to script an Acknowledgement of Country as an oral presentation was also a factor in training their focus on the speech act as a customary exchange, and bringing their attention to writing only what they felt able to deliver authentically in their own voice and to a witness of peers.

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When the students have delivered their Acknowledgement of Country to one another, it has often been an emotional experience. Rather than being a self-congratulatory moment, it tends to push the students into a new phase of questioning self, family, education, and culture; thirst for research and information they have missed about where they live, its history, and its living heritage; and new complications and open-ended problems for their creative practice and aspirations. Peter West reflects on this effect of replying to Welcome, which might otherwise be misconstrued as a salve to non-Indigenous discomfort:

As is the case with most creative practitioners, I am attuned to potency of an emotional narrative and how this can be attached to a brand or a social issue. The term "Welcome" could imply a particular conduct for a non-Indigenous person, one in which you are given a certain level of access to Indigenous people and their knowledges. I argue for an awareness of the privilege and power exerted by this interpretation. To achieve this is to stay with the complexity of the Welcome and to see it as a grounding for an ongoing practice of situatedness. (69)

As a starting point in listening and participating lawfully, the value of Acknowledgement of Country is a non-Indigenous cultural practice. This certainly defines its limits as a decolonial action, but by taking time to interpret an intercultural protocol, non-Indigenous people may witness the meaning of Welcome as a sovereign invitation and may undertake small acts of independent

self-knowledge, learning, and communication that resist educational training in ignorance and obscurity. This brings me back to the nature of the course assessment task as having no script, a minimum duration, and weeks of preparation. It is also not witnessed by anyone outside of the class group and private blog, unless students choose to share it in such a way (which some do). It simply wouldn't work if the purpose was to repeat boilerplate sentences, freeze with anxiety about being correct, then move on.

The following reflections are drawn from blog posts that my 2021 and 2022 students made after presenting their Acknowledgements to one another. They posted these within a week of their presentation, some of them on the same day.

What I thought was a disdain for where I lived was converted to a sense of pride or almost contentment. The strong Wurundjeri history of Simon Wonga and William Barak and sharing a previously unknown connection to sacred places such as Pound Bend in Warrandyte made me determined. (Ged, Class Blog, 2021)

I have reaffirmed to myself that an effective way to foster a connection with where I am is to learn more local stories. In reading a version of the story of Waa for example, I have learnt about firefinches and why they have red tails, as well as why crows like Waa have black feathers. This makes me think of what Bill Neidjie says about story being all around us, and that if we start to listen to story, we can learn and feel a certain nourishment. With regards to my future in storytelling, I feel that part of an acknowledgement of country includes an acknowledgement of stories from country. If I am practising storytelling upon unceded land, and using land to tell my own stories, I feel it is important and crucial to share local stories as well. (Jamil, Class Blog, 2022)

These reflections reveal glimpses of the research that individual students undertook, and the pieces of cultural information they held onto, because those learnings turned a mirror onto themselves. For others, reflection on their Acknowledgement solidified the very question of purpose as a non-Indigenous writer and person.

I was never interested in writing about myself, nor was I comfortable with the idea of other people reading about me . . . I wish more people knew that entire stories and accounts of a life lived could be compiled into a cloak made of possum fur . . . I have also gained a new interest in writing about myself and my life, whether it be as simple as recording the sounds in my backyard, or exploring the history and the roots of the land it is on. (Lillian, Class Blog, 2021)

I see the stands of manna gums at the entrance of the Merri Merri and the ridges of basalt rock lining the creek and I feel your care toward me, despite the violence of the factories and houses, including my own, a few metres away . . . I thank you, Bunjil, for providing . . . especially for us children of immigrants, who have forgotten so much. (Lara, Class Blog, 2021)

The non-Indigenous students I teach think deeply about the problems of co-existence. They have begun to reflect, listen, and communicate this through a developing sense of standpoint.

Mostly young adults, these students have inherited a cultural terrain shaped by the legal, political, and environmental discourses, legislations, and shortfalls that have flowed from Mabo. However, unless family or community have played a strong role, they do not enter the course with a view of themselves as active cultural or historical visitors in sovereign spaces. Despite levels of self-awareness, they have had projected upon them the silence and paralysis of White education. “Indigenising curriculum” only goes part of the way towards addressing this problem, as Nakata has pointed out. The complementary focus must be on what I’d call developing appropriate tools for cultural participation or responsibility with non-Indigenous learners. Acknowledgement of Country facilitates training in the required skills; it is part of being situated in an academic discipline, while exceeding the motives of discourse, institution or politics.

Writing from the Canadian context, Lila Asher, Joe Curnow, and Amil Davis identify the limits of “territorial acknowledgements” as a learning tool. The equivalent of Acknowledgement of Country in Australia, they argue that territorial acknowledgements are “at best, a tiny part of decolonial solidarity pedagogy, and must be part of a broader decolonial praxis” directed towards rematriation of Indigenous land, language, and lifeways (317). Pointing out similar pitfalls to those sent up by Evelyn Araluen and critiqued by Senator Price, Asher, Curnow, and Davis question the decolonial use value of what may be merely lip service. As with Araluen’s poem, I find it hard to disagree with their argument, as uncomfortable as it might be. Rather, I would only like to differentiate the emphasis of my discussion, which is interested from a White, non-Indigenous standpoint and in dialogue with fellow non-Indigenous learners.

Asher, Curnow and Davis recognise that through acknowledgement of territory or Country, “the pedagogical intention has been to combat erasure and force settlers to grapple with our positionality” (318). This intention, as West has pointed out, is undercut when acknowledgement of the host and the visitor is treated as means to an end. In this case, the force of the performative speech act is defunct—just more White words that make nothing happen. Anecdotally, I see evidence to suggest that while I have situated the Acknowledgement of Country in the discipline of Creative Writing, graduates of “Writing with Sovereign Spaces” regularly apply this work in their day jobs, activist organising, and even career choices. Measuring the medium-term outcomes of these decisions against the goals of decolonial activism and solidarity must be the work of a separate study, however.

My emphasis in this study of one course has been on the situating of the work of Acknowledgement within a disciplinary core unit, thereby prompting students to consider how this protocol is activated and applied through a creative industry. By placing the personal Acknowledgement of Country assessment task as the first requirement of the students, the remainder of the course is framed and informed by this work. It enables our class to critically and practically consider decisions about method, form, audience, intellectual property, editing, and future career goals as creative citizens.

At the end of the twelve-week course, I ask the students to revisit their reasons for selecting it. Their reflections and revisions of their goals, drawn below from the 2021 and 2022 cohorts, are evidence that when given appropriate context, time and space, undertaking an Acknowledgement of Country is a step into a broader praxis of non-Indigenous decolonial solidarity.

The biggest relief . . . was the opportunity to ask the hard questions or try to work around that pesky settler’s guilt. (Lillian, Class Blog, 2021)

I have been re-evaluating my approach to engaging with Indigenous knowledges and sovereignty in relation to my creative writing practice . . . the problem of ensuring that I don't perpetuate the erasure of First Knowledges through my writing is also something I am continuing to explore regarding my writing, specifically the erasure of land. (Jamil, Class Blog, 2022)

In the process of exploring place and practice I came hard up against identity and the need to make clarifications, which I hadn't expected to consider. It wasn't enough to think of myself as being "just here" and First Nations people as "somewhere over there." (Lara, Class Blog, 2021)

I wouldn't say I am a "proud local," but when someone asks me where I'm from in the future I won't be referring to my locality with the usual quips, perhaps instead choosing to refer to it as Wurundjeri country, where my family have lived for over three generations. (Ged, Class Blog, 2021)

NOTES

¹ I would like to thank the student collaborators whose voices appear in this article with the approval of the RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee. I also thank colleagues who helped develop the content in its earlier stages as a conference paper: the RMIT non/fiction Lab research group, Olivia Guntarik, Oliver Shaw and Neil Morris.

² This discussion and the study that informs it have not accounted for First Nations students. The primary reason for this is that none have self-identified within the students enrolled in the course that this article focuses on. When referring to some seven years of designing and coordinating other courses at RMIT, however, I am referring to classroom experiences that have included self-identifying First Nations students.

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