Some Thoughts On the (Im)Possibilities of Teaching Australian Literature

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I N 2008, FERVENT PUBLIC DEBATE FOLLOWED THE ANNOUNCEMENT THAT THE NEW national Australian Curriculum, then in early development, would mandate the study of Australian literature for all students 'across the compulsory years of schooling' (Davies, Martin and Buzacott 21). Conservative commentators welcomed what they saw as assurance that 'young Australians' would learn 'to appreciate, value and celebrate this nation's identity and history' (Donnelly, 'A Canon'). More progressive voices argued that rather than the texts to be read, focus should be on practices of reading that respond to 'students' needs, interests and experiences as national and global citizens' (Davies 47-8). Conservatives were less enthused by the final language of the new curriculum: in *Quadrant*, self-proclaimed 'culture warrior' Kevin Donnelly complained that it had replaced the Western canon and Judeo-Christian morals with 'politically correct perspectives', likely the three cross-curriculum priorities: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia, and sustainability (Donnelly, 'The Ideology of the National English Curriculum 28, 27; ACARA, 'Cross-curriculum Priorities'). *Australian Curriculum: English* is separated into three strands, 'language', 'literature' and 'literacy', each with an enormous set of extensively detailed descriptors, outcomes and performance indicators

(ACARA, 'English'). Teachers and educators worried that its unwieldiness would create a 'culture of compliance and checking off... content' that in turn risked extinguishing students' capacity for 'creativity and critical engagement' (Moni 15; Davies, Doecke and Mead 22).

As this debate played out, I trained as an English teacher and began my career at a mid-size comprehensive high school in rural New South Wales. I arrived there in the final scramble to prepare for the new curriculum, and I helped select texts and write content. For grade 7 my suggestion was *Dream of the Thylacine* by Margaret Wild and Ron Brooks, an allegory of loss and resiliency about the last Tasmanian tiger, 'Benjamin', who died in a Hobart zoo in 1936. In Wild's text the tiger 'mourns' and 'yearns' in a 'twisty wire cage', but in the wilds of her imagination she still runs 'through trees of striply bark' and 'over creeks of flickering fish' (n.p). Brooks' art juxtaposes black and white stills from the famous film of 'Benjamin' in the months before her death with rangy, hyper-saturated paintings of untouched Tasmanian wilderness.

In an effort to impress my new colleagues, I prepared a careful sales pitch for my chosen text. As one of many, many tellings of the tiger's story—the AustLit database lists 233 entries under 'thylacine'—the book would allow students to explore the workings of cultural iconography and settler mythology in the context of their perpetual rewriting and fundamental instability. In this way, *Dream of the Thylacine* would introduce students to 'Australian literature', the creature they would grow to know over their secondary schooling career in English. I like to think my colleagues were convinced by the strength of this epistemological argument, which was no doubt influenced by an Honours degree at the University of Wollongong where Leigh Dale taught Australian literature through the lens of its contested history and complex legacies as a discipline.[2] The truth is though that most decisions about text choice were made for practical reasons, and in response to the school's 'local realities' (Ditchburn 259). *Dream of the Thylacine* made the cut for three reasons: its brevity and reliance on visuals made it accessible to our year 7 students, many whom arrived at high school with literacy levels well below average for their age group; the English Teachers Association had already produced some teaching resources for it which saved time we didn't have; finally, it was a large-format picture book which meant we could probably get away with one copy for every two students, saving money we didn't have. I wrote up a detailed unit plan on the book for our new grade 7 syllabus and submitted it to the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership as part of my mandatory teacher proficiency review, but in the end I did not get to actually teach *Dream of the Thylacine*. My contract at the school ended due to funding cuts, and soon after that I quit full-time teaching to enrol in a PhD program. I begin with this anecdote

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2 See Dale, *The Enchantment of English*.

about my lofty goals for the book and their ignominious end because I think it is salutary for the concerns of this paper, namely the (im)possibilities of teaching of Australian literature.

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'Australian literature' is a little like the thylacine: they are both frequently misunderstood and according to some, (almost certainly) extinct. As an object of study in schools and universities, Australian literature 'never was, and never is, inevitable. It will always be contested ground' (Dale, 'New Directions' 134). The most recent crisis to make national news was in late 2019, when the University of Sydney announced that the prestigious and historically significant Chair of Australian Literature would not be filled following the retirement of Professor Robert Dixon. In response, Michael Heyward asked 'what kind of country can't bear to teach its own literature?', and Rosemary Neill blamed a 'shocking' case of 'cultural cringe' (Neill, 'Uni "joins ranks of the paltry"'; Neill, 'Shocking Case of Cultural Cringe'). In the opinion pages of the *Australian,* Peter Craven launched an emotive defence of the field that name-dropped 25 writers and academics. Of those named, only four were women. There were no Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers or thinkers, no writers of colour, and no one whose career began after 1977. There was nothing inherently bad or wrong with the work of anyone on Craven's list, but as a summary defence of Australian literature's strengths and significance, it left me cold. In late 2019 I happened to be teaching Australian literature at the University of Sydney. The thing in the press was circumscribed, static and retrograde; it didn't particularly resemble what I had been teaching, know my colleagues to teach, and believe deserves continued presence in the classroom.

Twice now I have begun classes by asking students to consider Michael Griffiths's concept of '~~Australian literature~~', 'in which thinking "Australia" is a necessary but insufficient condition for considering this settler-colonial political, legal, economic, social, and imaginary construct—and thinking it *otherwise*' (23). From Barbara Baynton pointing out the violence against women that enabled the bush mythology to Alexis Wright's refusal of settler logics and aesthetics, much of our best literature contests the powerful and the accepted. Then there is the Australian literature that is awkwardly placed or ill-mannered, exceedingly clever but unjustly forgotten, or sets goals for itself so lofty it inevitably falls short. This work is good because it prompts us to reconsider our own processes of meaning and our own being in the world. This is the Australian literature that is relevant and valuable to the contemporary literary studies classroom, and indeed to a university education more broadly.

In the apparent death throes of Australian literature at the University of Sydney, I taught a 3000-level seminar class originally conceived and developed by Brigid Rooney. Entitled 'Writing Australian Nature', the unit introduced a diverse roster of Australian texts through which students would explore the aesthetic, socio-political and ethical ramifications of our discursive relationship to the natural world. With its present continuous tense and unstable noun, the title of the unit of study modelled its conceptual and pedagogical approach. *Writing*—an act that continues in perpetuity; *nature*, Raymond Williams's 'most complex word' (293)—a meaning that is never assured. The thylacine appeared, as she is wont to do in scenes of readings like this one. First as the desired other of the eponymous mercenary in Julia Leigh's *The Hunter* (1999), and then as a kind of unspoken mascot as the course accumulated more animals and changelings and almost extinct things. In their novella 'Water', award-winning Mununjali author Ellen van Neerven augments sci-fi tropes with cultural lore to tell the tragic love story of a queer interspecies romance doomed by the techno-chemical violence of the colonial capitalist state. In Tracy Sorensen's *The Lucky Galah* (2018)—a novel that might best be described as 'camp Australiana' or 'zoomorphic satire'—a Donald Horne reading galah ponders the meaning of luckiness as she recounts her unlikely involvement with the moon-landing, 'translating from screech to English' for her 'probably mammalian' audience (74). At the end of the semester we read Thea Astley's novel of endings, *Drylands* (1999)*.* In this 'book for the world's last reader', the death of reading and the death the land via drought are imbricated in ways that invite consideration of the role literature can and should play in crises—ecological, social, political—so unwieldy and so terrible that they may prove impervious to narration (Ghosh).

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Griffiths's ~~Australian literature~~—the object of study written down, crossed out but remaining legible—models the reflexive engagement that literary studies can encourage in students towards their own learning processes. Most domestic students arriving at university today will have experienced standardised testing and prescriptive performance indicators across all their years of formal schooling. In senior school the competitive ATAR system forces teachers and students to engage in the transmission and reproduction of highly specific language, ideas and forms (Wescott). The nature of our discipline means that it is in the English classroom where students will likely learn to replace these norms with independent modes of reading, interpreting and writing. This development is not assured, however: there is still enough of a leap between secondary schooling and tertiary English that some students will fall through.

In 2012, the Department of English at USyd began a 'faculty-driven outreach program' to build 'sustainable partnerships' with low SES schools by positioning

'pedagogic work as a vital site for the advancement of a social inclusion agenda' (67). In a paper discussing the project's aims and methodologies, Melissa Hardie and Kieryn McKay describe a set of visits by University of Sydney academics to low SES schools in Western Sydney and regional New South Wales. The academics devised 'discipline-based learning' activities specific to students at these schools, designed 'tactically to subvert the essentially conservative implications of the centering of English in the secondary curriculum' (67, 72). Stronger links between universities and low SES schools are important for encouraging broad participation and social inclusion in universities, and the outreach work described by Hardie and McKay is exemplary in this regard. It is important to note, however, that not all scenes of learning at low SES schools are conservative in their implications. Rather, teachers find frequent opportunity to augment conservative curriculum with innovative, discipline-based learning activities responsive to the local context of the school and the specific needs of their students. Thus I suggest complementing outreach with an approach from the opposite direction: by developing clearer understanding of the skills, knowledges and capacities students bring with them from school, academics could devise programs of teaching and assessment that *build upon* rather than *make up* for school learning. This is employing a pedagogical model of abundance rather than deficit to navigate the secondary-tertiary nexus.

To illustrate my point, I might mention here that my own transition from a low SES school in western Sydney to an elite sandstone university ended in frustration and despair after three semesters. I don't think it was the school I attended or the standardised tests I sat that doomed my first attempt at an education in literary studies, or at least it wasn't only them. I read all the texts set for study; I comprehended most, enjoyed some. The problem was I had absolutely no idea how to talk about that comprehension and enjoyment using the language that seemed expected but never explicitly described. It was nobody's fault. For me, university was a dinner party at which I stayed hungry, but only because nobody told me which fork to use and I was too embarrassed to ask.

Around ten years later I found myself teaching Australian literature at the same university I had quit. Suddenly I was in possession of all the cutlery, but I realised that there was only one thing about doing literary studies I know now that I didn't know then: the productive capacity of doubt and uncertainty. That realisation is partly why I chose to teach *The Lucky Galah*, a novel that was still on the new release tables at Gleebooks as the semester began and thus had no critical pedigree or established history in the classroom. At the start of the seminar on the novel, I shared with the class that previous iterations of the course had used J. M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* (1999) to explore the same topics of animal representation and anthropocentrism, and I admitted that my decision to shaft a Nobel Laureate for a talking galah was still causing me more than a little anxiety. I

was anxious about the decision because in making it I had prioritised my own immediate and contingent response over an established system of value, in my case an internalised belief that 'serious' literature always has to be *serious.* Teaching reading is to teach that 'understandings might often be partial, contingent, creative, sometimes painful' (Dale and Bushnell 262). Doubt and uncertainty are inevitable; embracing them is how the light gets in.

For their mid-semester assessment, students were required to submit a 'journal' that documented—in any form they liked—their responses to the texts and the reading processes that contributed to them. I adapted one seminar so that its content—the genre of nature writing—doubled as explicit instruction for the task. Essays by Delia Falconer, Melissa Lucashenko and Sophie Cunningham provoked interesting discussion of nature writing's capacity and limitations, while also modelling eclectic approaches to the essay form and the craft of writing. Most students embraced the flexibility of the journal form, choosing to submit a series of separate but interconnected pieces rather than a sustained response. Their work came with photographs and drawings, links to videos or to audio files I was directed to play while reading. Students knew such additions would not influence the grading, but they included them anyway and I think their presence reinforced the task's difference from a regular essay in a way that benefited their written work. Most students produced in the journal more rigorous textual analysis, stronger critical argumentation and employed clearer use of language than in the traditional essay at the end of the semester. My hunch is that the journal format did not generate the drive to mastery that students often believe is required of the sustained critical response. In the absence of this impossible demand, students pursued more nuanced lines of thought which in turn produced more confident readings. No forks needed.

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Pedagogical innovation requires institutional support. I taught at Sydney with the relative luxury of a fixed-term contract: unlike casualised colleagues, I had months instead of a week to prepare, my own office on campus, and did not need to be teaching at one or two other universities to survive. Classes are bigger and teaching loads are heavier, but tenured colleagues must prioritise research to attract funding and secure promotion. The 2019 public outcry about the crisis in Australian literature at the University of Sydney committed a logical fallacy: it equated the status of symbolic Chair and a full professorship—a position that typically requires little to no undergraduate teaching—with what occurs in classrooms. More often than not these classrooms are helmed by precariously employed, underpaid staff: in 2018, fully half of all undergraduate teaching at Australian universities was done by casualised staff; only 13.6 percent of teaching-only work is undertaken by staff with ongoing or tenurial positions (Long; NTEU,

The Flood). When one article reported that the University still employed two part-time lecturers in Australian literature, that statement would only be true for a few months: both of us had been employed on fixed-term contracts, and both of us were losing our jobs at the end of the year (Neill, 'Uni "Joins Ranks of the Paltry"'). It didn't take long to clear out my campus office. I hadn't been there long enough to accumulate much, and most of my teaching archive was stored online—behind the university's firewall, where I would lose access to it the day after my contract ended. Universities have been slow to know what to do about intellectual property rights related to teaching materials, especially as they pertain to casualised staff (Maiwald and Harrington; 'Intellectual Property').

Back in 2013, Anthony Uhlmann addressed claims of crisis in the discipline, wondering: 'might it simply be that a new way is emerging to efface the old, as has always happened, as will always happen?' (100). I'm not sure we can be so certain anymore. A 2016 report by the NTEU warned of 'the rising tide of insecure employment' in Australian universities (NTEU, *The Rising Tide*). By 2018, casualisation was a 'flood' (NTEU, *The Flood*). With Covid, precarious employment has become a tsunami. In 2021, it is not crisis we face but catastrophe. In the *Guardian,* Julianne Lamond tried to redirect conversation about the Chair where it needed to go. Across the six decades of its existence, she wrote, the Chair represented the academy's positive contribution to the development of broader public cultures of Australian literature. The greatest threat to that contribution, and thus to contemporary Australian literary cultures, is 'not—or not only cultural cringe', Lamond argued, but 'the casualisation of the tertiary teaching workforce across the world'.

'If the academy falls silent, who will guard our stories?': Craven's question in the *Australian* suggests an ivory tower and a locked safe of literary heritage—but as Lamond writes, 'the battle lines have been drawn in all the wrong places'. Classrooms contribute to the development of 'reading selves', but they also impact students' 'writing lives' (Davies 50). This means that the what, the how and the who of teaching has enormous potential to determine 'the stories of community and nation that will be told, and heard, in the future' (Davies 50). Australian literary studies needs to work harder to undo the colonial and racialised structures that still determine so much of its practice (Araluen), and it desperately needs to broaden participation to scholars of diverse backgrounds. But casualisation limits participation in academia to those with enough socio-economic capital to survive the brutality of long-term insecure, underpaid and undervalued work. If we want Australian literature to grow and evolve, it does not need a guard at the door. It needs writers and thinkers able to kick the drawbridge down.

Of course, eventually the sector might improve, the tide might turn. But by then it might be too late; we might have lost a generation of potential scholars and emerging writers. Here is an almost incomprehensibly sad fact I learned while writing my *Dream of the Thylacine* unit in 2013: given the current rate of extinction, 'conservation biologists agree that large numbers of species are becoming extinct before they are discovered' (Wilson). In *Dream of the Thylacine*, extinction can be transcended—it offers its young readers the solace of continuance. In the *The Hunter*, however, there is just the tiger's brutal death and the senselessness of its loss. 'If everything is transformed', the novel asks, 'then what is extinction?' (107).

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