

Poetry Writing Workshops as ‘True, Impossible Archives’ (or, Teaching as Collaborative Research)¹

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IN MY POETRY WRITING WORKSHOPS I OFTEN TEACH ‘WILD FLOWERS’, A STUNNING POEM BY Yankunytjatjara author Ali Cobby Eckermann. Several years ago, my first-year students at Western Sydney University were reading ‘Wild Flowers’ alongside ‘Rise Again’ by Palestinian poet Najwan Darwish. One student offered an electrifying reading of Eckermann’s poem that I’ve never forgotten.² He began by recalling a trip to Beirut he’d made as a young adult, long after leaving the city as a child and migrating with his family to Western Sydney. *How did the city appear to you*, I asked? *The same*, he deadpanned, *with more bullet holes*.

My student observed that each stanza of ‘Wild Flowers’ marks a different phase in Australia’s recent history—the first, colonial invasion, the second, pastoral settlement, and the third, contemporary Aboriginal experience:

Mallets pound fence posts
in tune with the rifles
to mask massacre sites

¹ ‘True, impossible [...] archive’ cited from Buurma and Heffernan (2). I am grateful to my colleague Dr Ben Etherington for reading and commenting with acuity upon a draft of this work.

² To respect privacy, students’ names are not shared in this piece.

Cattle will graze
sheep hooves will scatter
children's bones

Wildflowers will not grow
where the bone powder
lies

(Eckermann n.pag.)

My student saw the three arcs of Eckermann's poem as succinct reflections of past, present and future times co-existing in the land. I've shared his acute response to 'Wild Flowers', with attribution, in many subsequent classes. His readings and his insights into violence and displacement, drawn from lived realities, were searing. They matched the stories of many young people I've been privileged to meet at Western Sydney University, including students whose families have experienced and remember long, cross-generational histories of colonial dislocation and diasporic migration.

Another former student is a well-known rap artist and author from South-Western Sydney. During a week in which we surveyed poems, videos and songs linked to the roots and poetics of contemporary hip-hop, he suggested we study 'Alphabet Assassin'. The 2008 collaboration by Lowkey and Faith SFX is still in my syllabus for the undergraduate unit Writing Poetry. It sits alongside work by the Last Poets, Sara Mansour and the Gowrie Boys, whose superb track 'The Brotherhood' riffs: 'We write mad lines likes we're in detention / Grade 8 to Grade 12 with no exception / Living in two worlds I forgot to mention / Gowrie Boys got no phone reception'.

I'm indebted to my students for the most essential pedagogical insights of my academic career. For almost 15 years, students in the English and Creative Writing undergraduate majors at Western Sydney University have been teaching me how to teach, and guiding me to experiment with teaching as a shared practice of inhabiting multiple worlds. I'm still coming to understand what this might mean. Writing mad lines and living between worlds—digital and analogue realities, bilingual cultures and communities—my students in countless classes have offered stellar readings of literary works, and built better reading lists than I've been capable of making. Once I was teaching Netwurker Mez's code poem '_trEm(d)o(lls)r_' and hazarding an arms-length reading via the work's visual, historical and linguistic elements. In response, one of my students explained what would actually happen if that piece of code was programmed into a computer. This

generous reading was far beyond my abilities, and the poem leapt into transformative and wonderful focus.

The student-led moments of reading and linkage that I've described above might find a home in Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan's 'true, impossible teaching archive' (2). Buurma and Heffernan propose 'a fuller and more detailed history' (213) of how the disciplines of literary studies and writing have 'actually been practiced in all kinds of classrooms' (213). Their capacious archive is an assemblage of materials—conversations, notes, student interventions, scrawled lists, improvised lesson plans, shudders of recognition—that rarely appear in metrics-driven versions of literary scholarship and its grids of value. These embodied tracings, they argue, comprise a more significant record and corpus of literary studies than 'the famous monographs and seminal articles' (2) that typically mark Western canons of literary studies (as abstract object, rather than active labour).

We might also characterise such an archive as a limitless reservoir of research findings and practices, always undertaken collectively, and largely missing from carousels of career citations and publication prestige. Buurma and Heffernan argue that an archive of the 'lived but uncounted use' (212) of literary texts in classrooms might produce something radical: an expandable, miscellaneous, ongoing and cooperative experiment in 'core practices of reading and thinking' (212) that are essential to generating new knowledges and, perhaps, new cultures of storying.

Different ways of knowing, unknowing and reconsidering are at the heart of *all* education, regardless of discipline. Humanities classrooms endure as venues for making and testing original art and thinking, both within and beyond academies. This makes them important sites of research. Buurma and Heffernan argue that conventional accounts of English disciplinary history across the 19th and 20th centuries—replete with methodological turns, canon-busting swings and roundabouts, and tropes of *researcher-as-expert-scholar* versus *classroom-teacher-as-literary-critic*—have largely ignored classroom practices (8). They have instead recycled stories 'in which scholars and critics have traded periods of supremacy' (7) like frozen action figures on opposing sides of a cartoon battleground. 'Measurable' research has dominated disciplinary discourse in recent decades, write Buurma and Heffernan:

Knowledge production in the classroom has been difficult to talk about in part because we have come to accept that knowledge production involving students must imitate the forms of professional research the university can count: work like co-writing an article with a student, directing a senior thesis [...] The citation metrics that universities

increasingly use (which are based on models for assessing scientific research) mistake citation for engagement and counts for values; they fail to trace how teachers and students use scholarship, and therefore actively devalue these long-standing practices. (211-2)

Poetry writing workshops within tertiary settings are a valuable example of the kinds of collaborative reappraisals of teaching-as-research that are identified in *The Teaching Archive*. Writing workshops are a zone in which disciplinary stakes and myths come under all sorts of energising pressure. In my experience, they can trouble any number of overdetermined dualisms that drive what Buurma and Heffernan call 'the disciplinary pendulum, with its reliably contrapuntal swings' (7): literature and writing, scholarship and instruction, researcher and critic, reader and writer, marginalia and canon, and that persistent dyad, 'apprentice' and 'expert'.

Students in my Writing Poetry unit are not taught that critical work is distinct from creative labour. They are not asked to choose between basic or applied literature, between research fundamentals or developing skills that might transfer to different spheres of vocational training. Rather, they learn to think about their own experience of different worlds, to collectively build worlds in language, and to rummage through ways diverse poems have undertaken those same tasks. Students invent creative work, undertake scholarship, and recommend readings to each other. They produce criticism, edit one another's writing, and learn to perform their artworks in community.

Our touchstone question in workshops is not: *What is the meaning of this poem?* More often, it's something like: *Why read and write this poem?* Or: *How does this poem help me to understand particular stories and experiences?* Or, by extension: *What might be the labour of the imagination?* Or, significantly: *In what systems of power and cultural knowledge does this poem circulate?* Students are not expected to digest literary catalogues but to think about writing as a shared work of living, and as a lifelong practice of labour. They participate in that practice by thinking *in* writing.

Buurma and Heffernan's 'true, impossible teaching archive' (2) encourages the critique of well-worn routes of institutional power by which certain artefacts and voices are fetishised as 'marginal' or ex-centric, sometimes precisely by processes that cement those works into counter-canonical narratives. The increasingly squeezed demands upon class and reading time in tertiary Humanities programs can mean defaulting to a pedagogical approach that relies upon isolated examples to carry the weight of entire historical periods. This risks replicating neo-colonial and orientalisating paradigms (after Edward Said), including those in which particular texts are hauled forward, lionised for an hour, and asked to speak for

networks of cultural events, and even for whole cultures. Due to the ongoing aesthetic and institutional legacies of colonial settlement, many English teaching programs across Australia, in assorted educational venues, still prioritise modes of literary production and consumption—writing and reading—that turn feted examples into synecdoches for culture. These are often dominated by white interpretations that continue to be positioned as norms of literary ‘value’.

Writing allows us ‘to see what we have all inherited’, observes Waanyi author Alexis Wright, as a way of understanding the deep footings of social and cultural power: ‘It is about dragging our memories, realities and losses back up to the surface and letting the whole world see them in the full, glaring light of day’ (18-9). Within English classrooms in Australia and related settler-colonial contexts, these inheritances can manifest in habitual choices to prioritise settler stories and voices in reading lists, textbooks and guest lectures, and to make them an invisible index of acceptability and aesthetic consequence. In her 2016 talk and article ‘In Our Way: Racism in Creative Writing’, Claudia Rankine addresses pedagogical racisms that, in the U.S., find analogous and different expression. Rankine relays part of a conversation with Beth Loffreda, her collaborator on the U.S.-based *Racial Imaginary* project:

Loffreda also pointed out that reading assignments and visiting writer choices ‘are public value judgements, are decisions about what writers and kinds of writing you value... You’ve praised yourself and each other for recruiting students of color, and then your decisions upon their arrival say, “we don’t actually value writers who look like you; we value writers who look like us.”’ (par. 2)

Rankine responds to Loffreda’s insights by reinvesting pedagogical settings with the collective effects of individual agency: ‘These choices within our academic institutions are not accidental formations specific to a single writing department, they are historically determined ones actively maintained in the present, perhaps by some of you—white people surrounded by other white people’ (par. 3). These attributions of complicity in choice are vitally important, and translate to many Australian environments. Complicity can form ‘the ground for ethical engagement’ (70), writes Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, by emphasising ‘proximity to the problems of colonialism’ (71) rather than maintaining fictions of both critical distance and, in Rankine’s words, ‘accidental formations’. Sarah Ahmed links Probyn-Rapsey’s readings of *complicity* to her own appraisals of *difficulty* as a necessary zone of beginning-again, and as a generative place from which to face and address institutionalised racism and its diverse imaginaries (Ahmed 5-6). In *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, Ahmed observes: ‘When description gets hard, we need description’ (10). Enter the creative writing classroom.

Whether in tertiary institutions, schools, public educational communities or virtual networks, classrooms can be opened to cultural accountability and ethical engagement when our teaching present is understood to encompass all the temporal fields—including past histories, current difficulties and evolving obligations—that determine its fabric. Poetry is an especially rich artform in which to encounter and imagine co-existing temporalities. Poems can exceed the limits of linear narratologies, or perform tectonic shifts among past, present and future worlds and tenses. When read via metaphor, a mainline in the weave of any creative writing classroom, archives themselves can be understood as useful figures for these kinds of cross-temporal reckoning. Buurma and Heffernan's *Teaching Archive* collates detailed and long histories of resistance to racialised and gendered paradigms that have underwritten English literary programs within U.S. and U.K. institutions, and that bear relevance to Australian programs and pedagogies. Part of Buurma and Heffernan's purpose is to disrupt canonised versions of English, as a discipline, that are nostalgic for what the authors identify as a 'mid-century flourishing' (207). Even in the early 21st century, they argue, literary-historical scholarship (with its focus upon cultural contexts and often, biographical author stories) is sometimes understood in opposition to what they characterise as a 'democratizing and student-centred classroom pedagogy' (208) grounded in post-war New Critical close reading methods, which might include the analysis of texts as self-contained aesthetic objects.

This heavyweight ghost hierarchy (hist-lit vs. new-crit) implies no ground on which those two approaches might overlap. Such accounts of 'the discipline' often periodise literary-critical methods as though the seeds of counter-colonial and feminist politics weren't sprouting decades and centuries earlier:

[W]e have shown how scholars have remade national literature courses to talk about race in America and decolonized literature surveys since at least the 1930s [...] Far from being a post-'68 phenomenon, ideology critique—Marxist and otherwise—threads through literature classrooms across the entire twentieth century. (Buurma and Heffernan 207-8)

It's no exaggeration to say that reading and deploying poems as scenes of resistance to dominant cultural mores would extend Buurma and Heffernan's paradigm as far back as the global origins of poetics: where there are poems, there are arguments.

The Teaching Archive details a range of teaching methods and syllabus choices (opening with Caroline Spurgeon's appointment, in 1913, as the first woman professor of English Literature in the U.K.) that depart from sole-author,

publishable lectures about canonical and page-based works, in favour of participatory immersion within modes of collaborative reading. Some case studies in *The Teaching Archive*, including the feminist archival practices of Josephine Miles in the 1940s and 50s, depart from models of authorised literary ‘expertise’ braced by behemoth anthologies, in favour of student-led classroom talking, improvised reading recommendations, photocopied and stapled bundles of excerpts and quotations, and site-specific lists. According to Buurma and Heffernan, such marginalia exemplify ‘the many real yet under-studied, under-archived, and undervalued classrooms in which our discipline’s history has really been made’ (14). Chapter Seven shares the early teaching notes of leading Acoma Pueblo author and scholar Simon J. Ortiz, whose definitive 1981 essay ‘Towards a National Indian Literature: Cultural Authenticity in Nationalism’ reflected decades of cultural and classroom dialogues about how continuous, millennia-old Native American traditions of storying, art and literature might be understood and discussed within academic locales—particularly, as Buurma and Heffernan observe, when considering those academies’ foundations within ‘historical discontinuities inflicted by white settler society and culture’ (185). ‘Story is to engender life’, writes Ortiz (11). He reflects upon Leslie Marmon Silko’s expressions in the novel *Ceremony* of ‘affirmation and what it means in terms of Indian resistance, its use as a literary theme’ (11). Ortiz describes Silko’s writing in ways that do not separate lived presents from storied pasts and futures: ‘*Ceremony* speaks upon the very process by which story, whether in oral or written form, substantiates life, continues it, and creates it’ (11).

Ortiz made syllabus innovations that respected Native American cultural work as transtemporal and non-linear, powerfully demonstrating that ‘an imagined unified past that dictates and justifies the canon in the present is not the only model possible’ (Buurma and Heffernan, 204-5). I am drawn back here to Alexis Wright’s descriptions of Aboriginal storying practices, which resonate with tropes of archives as places of multiple, co-existent temporalities, and that help us reimagine literary studies and writing beyond the disciplining categories of period, canon and genre: ‘All times are important to us. No time has ended and all worlds are possible’ (Wright 20). New thinking in archival poetics by Narungga artist and scholar Natalie Harkin illuminates a way of conceptualising archives that foregrounds their embodied and cross-temporal nature. Archives collect bodies and their traces, moving them in and out of time and memory. The teaching archives studied by Buurma and Heffernan, and most significantly those of Simon J. Ortiz, involve vital acts of remembering. They necessarily inhabit thresholds of relation among bodies, including those outside classrooms but intimately connected to them. This series of cultural relations is described by Harkin as intrinsic to the poetics of archives: ‘our bodies too are archives where memories, stories, and lived experiences are stored, etched and anchored in our bloodlines deep’ (4).

Extending figures of the archive to include bodies as anchors of shared memory—as expressed, for instance, via classroom interactions—returns me to my students, and the stories they bring to their reading and writing. As in the writings of my student who'd travelled back to Beirut, these traces are often given devastating presence in poetry, sometimes via cultural allegories that offer important protection to their subjects. For Wright, writing fiction offers 'the best way of presenting a truth—not the real truth, but more of a truth than non-fiction, which is not really the truth either. Non-fiction is often about the writer telling what is safe to tell' (13). Wright's understanding of creative writing as both a 'testament' (13) and mediator of cultural truths, when read alongside Harkin's *bodies-as-archives*, suggests important ways of acknowledging and valuing the labours of a vast network of writers, readers and story-makers whose voices often are excluded from what Claudia Rankine describes, in discussing Sarah Ahmed's thinking, as 'the dynamic of institutional whiteness' (par. 3). To the earlier cluster of questions guiding my Writing Poetry workshops could be added: *What does this poem help us remember?* This is a compelling inversion of the canonical imperative: *What do you remember about this (important) poem?* Adjudicating upon fixed sets of meanings and aesthetic categories is rarely a point of arrival for my students' discussions in poetry writing classes. But links between writing and memory are central to every creative writing workshop I've facilitated, whether in universities, high schools, festivals or writers' centres. While thinking along with *The Teaching Archive*, it struck me that the provocations of embodied memory, shared by students over and over, have been my foremost guide towards comprehending 'institutional whiteness'—its tired excuses and omissions, and my teacherly complicity in what Felicia Rose Chavez terms 'the cultural capital dog-eared for white space' (102).

Chavez's 2021 book *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize the Creative Classroom* makes connections between the way writing workshop syllabuses are compiled and accessed, and safe teaching spaces that prioritise 'a student's right to retain their own authority, integrity, and personal artistic preferences throughout the creative writing process' (23).³ Chavez emphasises the value of seeking student input in choosing workshop materials to help determine the aspects of craft, culture and voice given priority in discussion. She describes her steady movement as a facilitator away from paper-based and periodically-arranged textbooks and anthologies, and towards a digital 'dynamic living archive of PDFs' (101) that better reflects students' diverse lived experiences, while enabling her to draw upon multimedia and video content.

³ I am indebted to Eileen Chong, who first shared Chavez's vital essays with me while working as an author-mentor for The Writing Zone, a mentoring program for emerging writers and arts workers from Greater Western Sydney that I co-lead within the Writing and Society Research Centre.

Materials are organised around key elements of craft and modes of voicing, ‘without resorting to a generic breakdown of genre (that old read this/write that model of imitation)’ (102). This approach recasts pedagogical canons, and by extension, literary canons—both in understanding students *as* living archives of memory, and in jumping off the groove of ‘genre and period’ as organising categories of knowledge. Instead it embraces material, practical and grass-roots vectors. For Chavez, an anti-racist writing workshop is led by the tangible inclusion of student lives and needs—for example, in setting works by their chosen cultural mentors: ‘The living archive does not exist until they make it’ (104).

After a semester teaching Writing Poetry at WSU, I also found myself discarding textbooks, as the reading discoveries (*aka* research findings) of students began to direct my workshops. Poems clipped into PDF readers alongside prose essays, sprinkled with audio materials, interviews, film extracts and videos distributed via digital classroom sites, have become my classroom staples. Pieces from centuries back are taught alongside works published last week. Collective reading methods have replaced overarching ‘how to/must do’ writing manuals. The many ways WSU students *want to do literature*, and express their lives *as and within* cross-generational stories and times, have become important steering principles for my classes. Weekly readings focus upon writing tools and techniques, cultural scenes and translations, recurring concepts and comparative moments of aesthetic eruption. Canons, counter-canons, anti-canons and a-canons (the canon has always been a playlist) are surveyed equally. This helps us to jointly examine how value is generated—whether in relation to ‘good writing’, cultural visibility or scholarly framing. ‘Restoring a full material history to the ephemeral hours we spend in the classroom’ (Buurma and Heffernan 6) also means understanding ways in which these histories are made and contested *outside* classrooms. Teaching creative writing at Western Sydney University has helped me better understand that writing workshops can empower students to craft their own ‘radical take on the anthology’, as Chavez writes (104), while ‘bring[ing] the body back into the work’ (105). In poetry workshops, students can embody and account for their own stories, poems and reading ecologies through voiced responses to each other’s work, and in performances.⁴

⁴ I am not suggesting that literary anthologies and ‘how to’ guides should be abandoned in creative writing pedagogies, but rather, acknowledging their influence in circulating particular versions of ‘literature’. I depend gratefully in teaching upon many exemplary anthologies and archives (physical and virtual) that engage with, and critique, literary anthologies. These include *The Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature*, eds. Anita Heiss and Peter Minter; *Fire Front: First Nations Poetry and Power Today*, ed. Alison Whittaker; the series *Poems for the Millennium*, eds. Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris (especially Vols.1&2); the series *Sweatshop Women*, ed. Winnie Dunn (especially Vol.1); *Cordite Poetry Review*; and *Poetry International Website*. These diverse collections amplify transcultural communities of practice that continue to resonate with my WSU students.

I'm always reluctant to abandon the post-it notes that pile up in my unit readers and books, those spidery pencilled traces of fleeting inspiration. Their sharpness is hard to recover. Far more precious are my desk-drawer and digital archives of poems, emails, hand-made chapbooks, pages and postcards written by my students. I'm sure many teachers' clearest research thinking happens in the 'Comments' function of countless Word documents, tucked into the incalculable e-margins of student writing drafts, creative and critical. Each of these nested collections speaks to Buurma and Heffernan's 'true impossible [...] archive' (2). My most treasured teaching archive is more difficult to see: memories of a thousand conversations with students who keep teaching me how to teach. One student asked during class, *Where are the units on African-Australian diasporic literatures?* We began making a new reading list and transformed the following week's set materials. Another mature-age student who'd never had the opportunity to complete high school, an experience common to much of our cohort, gave an astonishing reading of Natalie Harkin's archival poem 'D Domestic' and its embedded lyric 'Apron Sorrow'. She stayed behind after class and said: *Can I change degrees? I want to be an archivist.* I hear students' voices hovering over particular poems in writing workshops, years after meeting their best readers. Poems endure as archives too—holding the bodies and memories of their classroom interlocutors.

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