

# Strange Home: Rethinking Australian Literature

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**D**URING MY FIRST SEMESTER OF ONLINE TEACHING IN 2020 I BEGAN KEEPING A FORM OF teaching archive that was new to me.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the usual lectures and slides, I began to accumulate a number of files with a .txt suffix. This is an archive of one of the unexpected affordances of teaching over Zoom: the chat window. I did not know what to do with the chat window, but my students did. They asked questions. They made jokes. They developed extended comedic and often critical conversations about the texts we were reading and how I was teaching them. These chat.txt files are an archive of students seeking and finding social connection in an online English classroom during a pandemic. They are also important to me as a record of a semester in which I tried to use that online classroom to begin to rethink what it means to do the work that has been the focus of my career: teaching and researching Australian literature.

Buurma and Heffernan's *The Teaching Archive* prompts us to think about how much of the institutional history that structures our work as academics plays out in forms that are not easy to document. This is true of the conversations that take place in the classroom, and it is true of the conversations that take place between

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colleagues in hallways, on zoom and telephone calls and in meetings that are not minuted. *The Teaching Archive* speaks to assumptions about how scholarly authority travels in literary studies and challenges the idea that published research filters 'outward' and 'downward' to the classroom. I agree that teaching is where much of our thinking happens, and that some of this thinking ends up in our published research. I would like to suggest here some ways in which this movement (from classroom to published research) is not the only or best measure of the worth of what we do as teachers. The classroom is not always the origin of our thinking. It is also a space where other conversations are tested and crystallised.

The conversations that upended my understanding of the relationship between nation and literature began in 2015, where I was lucky enough to sit next to Alice Te Punga Somerville at an Australian literature conference, her hand going up again and again to challenge speakers with what they presumed, ignored, elided. Since then I have seen so many of the hands of First Nations critics and scholars go up, in conversations, conferences, online and in print. In this essay I document my attempt to use the classroom as a way to pay attention to them and encourage my students to do so as well. This is a modest undertaking, very much in the vein of decolonial practice within the academy that Evelyn Araluen describes as 'safely contained within the classroom, in the form of critical frameworks, unsettling questions or creative-thinking assessments' ('Resisting'). It is motivated by my investment in the teaching of and writing about literature as a space where students and teachers alike might not always feel safe and where the questions of authority and value that underpin our encounters with literary texts can be shaken.

The course to hand was 'ENGL2085 Strange Home: Rethinking Australian Literature'. This is a survey course that I inherited in 2008 as 'Introduction to Australian literature'. For some years I had used this course to overturn students' negative preconceptions about Australian literature. The 'rethinking' I had been doing with it was nothing particularly radical, except perhaps for largely excluding texts by straight white men. I used transnational, feminist and queer frameworks for thinking about Australian texts, and included texts by Aboriginal writers each semester. In the latter respect I was using the kind of approach Burma and Heffernan describe as a 'supplemental model', adding 'a few contemporary Black novelists to existing courses, invoking a majority/minority model of representation' (113). *The Teaching Archive* tracks how J. Saunders Redding challenged this model in his teaching of American literature in the 1970s. This is a disciplinary history that remains to be written in the Australian context but I would suggest that a similar 'supplemental' approach to teaching First Nations

literature in Australia has been in play since at least the early 1990s.<sup>2</sup> In a classroom setting, this majority/minority model relegates First Nations writing to a subset of 'Australian literature'. It does not necessarily address how First Nations writing offers a profound challenge to how it is possible to think about the nation and the role of literature within it.

This challenge is to the foundation of my career, almost all of which has been bounded by the descriptor 'Australian literature'. I majored in 'Aus lit' in my undergraduate degree not out of anything I would admit to as nationalism but from what I saw as a progressive (moralistic, ex-Catholic) imperative to think about the political and ethical work literature does in the place we live in. The researchers whose work I was drawn to when I studied in the 1990s were feminists taking apart a masculinist cultural legacy. I took the racism of this masculinist legacy for granted. We studied Lionel Fogarty, Lisa Bellear, Jack Davis, Ruby Langford Ginibi, Sally Morgan, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Kim Scott. It never occurred to me to take any of these authors as the focus of my research when I went on to do Honours and a PhD. When I look back on it, I had a fairly narrow view of what it meant for something to be political. I was thinking about how the Australian polity was discursively constructed in the work of white writers: I was looking at what is included and excluded by the 'we' of Australian political language when it enters the field of literature. I wrote about how it excluded Aboriginal people, and how it was used to justify the ongoing inhabitation of land owned by Aboriginal people. I didn't refer to any Aboriginal writers or critics in my PhD, or in my published research.

When Buurma and Heffernan argue that 'Literature classrooms are in the business of creating literary value, not merely receiving or reproducing it' (5) the texts that they are referring to, by and large, are literary ones: novels, plays, poems. The value that is created in classrooms is not just through an encounter between a student and a text. It is routed through the secondary readings we ask students to do for tutorials and to cite in their essays. If Leigh Dale is correct in suggesting that 'what is actually taught in the literature classroom is *not* "the text", as we might assume, but the proper mode of responding to it' (24), then literary studies academics need to think about the models for literary critical methods and practice that we present to our students, as well as expanding the range of texts we teach. For years I have lectured students about 'entering the scholarly conversation' in their academic writing, exhorting them to confidently engage with other critics and take part in broader discussions about literature. I have blithely assumed that such conversations were spaces that students would want

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<sup>2</sup> There have also been standalone courses in Aboriginal Writing in Australian universities since the 2000s, although to my knowledge few if any have survived the rationalisation of tertiary English curricula across the country that has happened over the past decade.

to be able to enter. The past few years have shifted my sense of where these conversations take place and how equitable they are.

The claim made in *The Teaching Archive* that literary value does not emanate from texts, but is made by people (6) is a truism in sociologically-inflected studies of the book (see, for example, English). Buurma and Heffernan uncover a history of how that process of value-making is made visible to students in the classroom. I have always made clear to students the role of the classroom in mediating and creating literary value, but the stakes of this enterprise have never been more clear in my teaching than they were in 2020. In this course I tried to shift the focus from representation ('including' texts by a range of authors) to the question of authority (foregrounding critical frameworks by Indigenous scholars and thinkers). In a sense this is a way of thinking about what a teaching archive might be able to tell us about the nitty gritty of cultural consecration: is it just the setting of a book on a syllabus that magically bestows it canonicity? What happens to that book once it is there?

I began the semester by telling students that I didn't know what I was doing. My lecture notes read: 'So this course is not so much, anymore, about me telling you how I think we should see Australian literature—using my knowledge to challenge your understandings—so much as all of us rethinking the thing, together'. The challenge I set us, as a class, was a straightforward one: to put the voices of First Nations critics first, and not just when we were studying texts authored by First Nations people.

University teaching takes place under intense time pressure, and this semester was no exception. I do not teach in a particularly authoritative manner at the best of times but this semester felt even more than usual like I was learning on the fly. It was unsettling, and I didn't know how it was going to go. The first lesson I learned was that scarcity is no excuse for failing to set Indigenous-authored criticism in our literature courses—it abounds—but that teachers may not always be looking in the right places for it. Because of the legacies of racism in the academy and the accordant barriers to entrance into academic jobs and PhDs, literary criticism by First Nations writers is not always or often published in traditional venues of literary studies scholarship. My reading for the course crossed disciplinary boundaries—looking to sociology, critical race theory, history, media studies—and looked beyond the academy to public policy reports, reviews, and essays published in magazines and public facing journals. So much important thinking about Australian literature happens outside the institutions of literary studies as an academic discipline, and this is especially the case in relation to First Nations writers.

Here I give a partial account of how the semester went, which feels as exposing as it should. We started the course with Jeanine Leane's essay 'Tracking our Country in Settler Literature':

It may be tempting to think, as the permanent invaders of this Country, that the British might be 'settled' but the journey for settlement and resettlement is ongoing ... the continuing settler quest is to 'write a nation' because you do have to write nation. In contrast, you do not have to write Country because Country *is*. But a nation, as Benedict Anderson pointed out in his seminal work, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, is an imagined political community (5). In Australia, the nation attempts to write over many Countries. ('Tracking' 2)

Leane's thinking framed our reading of settler Australian writing across the semester, both in her arguments about the body of settler-Australian writing as a 'quest to belong to country' and her thinking about the meaning of Country itself ('Gathering'). Building on Leane's reading of Anderson, we talked about Palawa sociologist Maggie Walter's contention that 'Aboriginal people are largely invisible, as people and as peoples, in conceptions of everyday Australian life except as pejorative (statistically-informed) stereotypes. This invisibility extends to the nation-state's concept of itself' (86). The class was thinking about the role of literary works in the ongoing negotiating of 'the nation-state's concept of itself', and a touchstone that we continued to return to throughout the course to think about this was Melissa Lucashenko's 'Country: Being and Belonging on Aboriginal Lands'. She writes of an attempt to write about what seemed to her to be a self-evident concept:

And after all this talk and reading my answers were still false, disgusting to me. I wavered politically. First to one edge—this is our country, not yours in your historical murders and current shame—and then to another—we all share country, we all must live here, Aboriginal and Other alike, and the only question is how to do that honourably. I tried to tease out some ways in which non-Indigenous people have understood country. I made categories: Country as Economy. Country as Geography. Country as Society. Country as Myth. Country as History. Words came, but they were unsatisfactory and shallow. (9-10)

With all this in play, my usual discussion of Dale's account of 'the imaginative authority of English' (14) as a discipline, and its historical work 'to fortify and defend' the past (15) took on new salience. The continued investment in and pressure on the discipline as a site for the dissemination of 'Englishness' was made particularly apparent very recently, when a keynote address at an education

conference made global headlines and prompted outrage by the federal Education minister for daring to suggest that English as a language and subject has been implicated in assimilation (McPhee). Leaving aside this continuation of the current Australian government's language of 'everyday people' against the 'rubbish in our universities' (especially in Humanities faculties): it is clear that to foreground First Nations critique in a literary studies classroom is to question what the discipline is and does.

For twelve weeks I looked again at my old lectures and wrote new ones. Some things were straightforward as they travelled along the grain of how I had taught these texts before. I could easily look to the rich body of scholarship and writing on what Kim Scott describes as 'the great resource of pre-colonial Indigenous cultures and languages' to talk about the use of Bundjalung in Lucashenko's *Too Much Lip* (Scott; Winch). We returned to Leane's work in thinking about trauma its limits as a model for representing the experiences of Aboriginal people in relation to Lucashenko's novel ('Power'). These are questions that have been discussed in a variety of contexts: we read Aileen Moreton-Robinson's *The White Possessive* and media studies research by Cressida Forde, Lawrence Bamblett and others to expand on the notion of deficit discourse that Leane discusses in her essay, and this was repeatedly cited by students in their work that semester.

*Too Much Lip* raised questions about sovereignty that would then go on to structure our thinking about settler-Australian fiction. Moreton-Robinson is particularly useful here, arguing that 'Australian national identity is built on the disavowal of Indigenous sovereignty because the nation is socially and culturally constructed as a white possession' (*White Possession* xxi). Moreton-Robinson's discussion of the discursive production of white possession is a powerful frame for the literature of a settler-colonial nation. Lucashenko's essay 'Writing as a Sovereign Act' takes up the question of the agency and power of the writer in this context:

To talk in this way you need to believe that ordinary stories that aren't old Law stories have power. And they most certainly do... It can be hard sometimes to reflect that the stories about us, told by Australia, are so harmful and so dangerous to us. But the other side of that coin is that only something very powerful can be so harmful, and if we can just hold the line, wrest back some control over the stories told about us, and replace them with our own, then we can exert power too.

The rubber hit the road for me when teaching 19th-century settler fiction by Tasma and Barbara Baynton. My feminist frameworks for reading these authors were set in concrete: I had taught them in pretty much the same way since I first inherited the course in 2008. This time, I drew on Moreton-Robinson's work and

used Evelyn Araluen's ficto-critical essay 'Snugglepot and Cuddlepie in the Ghost Gum' to begin thinking about both pastoral and gothic modes of settler writing about the landscape, and my thinking about this fiction tilted: these weird stories became even stranger, and the reading of them more complicated.

I would say the wheels fell off a little in the latter part of the semester, when I approached my well-worn lectures on Christina Stead and Patrick White, but my students picked up the baton when I dropped it. Part of their assessment was an online reading journal and one student wrote, of Gillian Armstrong's film adaptation of *My Brilliant Career*: 'It's not exactly intersectional in its approach to privilege'. I took this up in my lecture using Tanya Dalziell's reading of Franklin's novel in relation to settler colonialism, but then challenged my students to think about intersectionality in terms of class, as well as race and gender, which brought Franklin's novel and Armstrong's film into conversation with Moreton-Robinson's *Talkin' Up to the White Woman* and Lucashenko's *Too Much Lip*.

When Buurma and Heffernan look to the archive of teaching they draw attention to the recursive temporality of the thinking we do when we teach. We read the same texts with different students, in different social and political contexts, often over very extended time periods. We approach texts as different scholars—and different people—than when we first encountered them. For some years I have used Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* to think about Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children*. She writes about 'the politically charged predicament' of obstructed or suspended agency from which a range of 'ugly feelings ensue' (12). The question of political agency became much more pointed when drawing connections between Stead and Lucashenko's articulation of such ugly feelings of thwarted agency in relation to protagonists Louisa and Kerry, that took on more overtly political implications when we got to the television series *Total Control* at the end of the course. But it was Lucashenko's essay on sovereignty, in the context of that semester's teaching, that really crystallised for me this question of the role of writing in enabling or enacting political agency. As Alison Whittaker says, 'Aboriginal women have a long history of asserting sovereignty through literature', (in Sullivan) and this history can and should shake established thinking about the relationship between literature and politics, in this country and more broadly.

My experience of using the ENGL2085 classroom to rethink what Australian literature is and means was partial and rushed, uncomfortable and illuminating. The most concrete outcome was that, for the first time in my many years of teaching literary studies, I saw a bulk of students citing First Nations critics in their essays. Alice Te Punga Somerville writes about how the 'politics of citation' might begin with our bookshelves and 'the mechanisms and structures by which we hold books—scholarship—in relation' (647). Perhaps the politics of citation can also

begin in the classroom. From Richard Delgado's identification of racist citation practices in civil rights research in the 1980s to more recent studies of gender and citation practices, citation has been identified as an everyday practice by which academics shore up and reinforce authority (Chang; Earhart et al.) Buurma and Heffernan note that citation metrics 'fail to trace how teachers and students use scholarship' (212). I would add to this that citation metrics are increasingly shaping the very possibility and limits of an academic career. Citation is encultured, habituated, and very often biased. The classroom is where scholars learn how to cite, and might be a place in which some of these habits can be reset. And in the process, we might enable students think differently about scholarly conversations around literature and their own ability to enter them.

The classroom is, of course, not just a tool for scholars to think with: it is how we frame, direct and assess our students' thinking about literature (and by extension, the world). *The Teaching Archive* poses important questions about how to value the work that happens in the classroom, offering 'a new way of seeing the outcomes of teaching' (3). While I am glad to see 'impact' newly valued by research assessment practices and funding institutions, its framing in terms of 'research impact case studies' showing a direct vector of influence from research to quantifiable 'real world' outcome has little room for the kind of impact I see as most significant in the work we do in literary studies which is in the classroom. For me, this impact has been most visible when I have taught the works of First Nations writers. But I have largely been thinking about this impact in terms of shifting racist assumptions in my non-Indigenous students. I don't know what these experiences were like for the First Nations students who were likely to be in these classrooms and not identifying as such—why would they, in classes where students unthinkingly use 'us' and 'them' to speak about settler and First Nations people? Impact measurement is creating its own peculiar archive of accounts drawing lines with arrows between research and its 'end users'. A teaching archive is, perhaps, a more true and impossible record of the impact of what we do, and this is not always for the just and good. Our teaching can make students feel excluded, not good enough, or alone. It can make it easy for some students and hard for others to talk about their own reading experiences.

I was able to teach ENGL2085 in the way I did because I had a brilliant and (for my institution) unusually diverse group of students who were extremely receptive to the critical voices I introduced into the classroom. They called each other and me out when racist assumptions entered the discussion. They approached the class with a passionate, creative and critical energy that made zoom lectures and tutorials oddly exhilarating. Buurma and Heffernan argue against a model of historical rupture, and I would agree that what I did this semester fits into the longer history of shifts in scholarly and institutional authority. But it is telling how new it felt to me, and how natural it seemed to my students.



As Monique Rooney has discussed in these pages, students' agency is increasingly finding shape in concerns about content and trigger warnings, and this course was by no means exempt from that. These encounters show that students are shaken by what they read, and I find myself often shaken by them, and at the differences between how I read and how students do. At the same time, they are a reminder that students are shaken by our teaching in ways they might not feel so able to express. In ENGL2085 last year such critique ran in unusual forms through the zoom chat window. A running joke emerged, partly at my expense, about a musical based on the course in which all of its black, queer and gender nonconforming characters (who had generally unhappy lives in the texts we were reading) moved into a share house together and lived happily ever after. In the last lecture of the semester I opened up a google doc and let them at it. I will end this essay here, with an example of the ways in which, as Buurma and Heffernan suggest, the margins of the classroom 'cradle new ways of knowing literature' (4).

The opening musical number was a parody of the opening song from *The Book of Mormon*, which begins: 'Hello, my name is...'. There was a long list of titles making fun of my course's name: Strange Tome: Rethinking *The Man Who Loved Children*. Strange Comb: Rethinking Rachel Anderson's hair in *Total Control*. Strange Gnome: Rethinking Australian Garden Accessories. Strange Chrome: Rethinking Zoom Tutorials. Strange Metronome: Rethinking this entire course as a musical. Ideas for scenes included Sybylla from *My Brilliant Career* holding a writing workshop with Louisa from *The Man Who Loved Children*. Alex and Charlie Irving from *Total Control* visit the Salters from *Too Much Lip* and Donny and Alex's sons join forces to fight climate change. Dad Rudd gives a speech in parliament about protecting trans rights, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait flags with Trans colours waving in the background and patriotic music playing ('fades out with eucalyptus. Dadd Rudd winks to the audience'). Monsieur Caloche and E. Twyborn start a 'cottagecore queer outback home'. Sybylla visits often. The Doctor, the shark from *Too Much Lip*, swallows despotic Sam Pollitt from *The Man Who Loved Children*. The song ends, 'This land was stolen, stolen. Hello.'

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