Can We Talk About *How*, Not Just *What?* Teaching Australian, Indigenous, and World Literatures in Complex Classrooms

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In his essay collection *Of Color,* Jaswinder Bolina observes:

> The white masters, masters though they may be, are oblivious to those experiences of bigotry and exclusion that are condemnably common for the rest of us. In this essential matter, those writers of the literary canon are utterly ignorant, and so their reports on the human condition are gapingly incomplete. (302)

While the practice of teaching literature that challenges dominant worldviews may present students with expanded narratives of the human condition, the often-unacknowledged effects of colonialism in contemporary classrooms can make literary studies a conflict zone. Diana Brydon acknowledges this in her essay, "Cross-Talk, Postcolonial Pedagogy, and Transnational Literacy." Yet, apart from Brydon, only a handful of scholars, including Ingrid Johnston, Jyoti Mangat, and Cynthia Sugars in Canada, or Sandra Phillips and Clare Archer-Lean in Australia, have raised the issue of how difficult texts might be unpacked in complex classrooms. In general, most literary studies academics continue to focus their scholarship on the world of the text, instead of the dynamics of the text in the world. Given the growing interest in and teaching of Indigenous lives and texts, as well as a resurgence of interest in the legacies of colonialism raised by movements like Black Lives Matter, Free Palestine, and the Australian referendum on the Voice to Parliament, there is more to unpack in the classroom encounter.

This essay draws on a definition and practice of postcolonial literary studies that derives from Australian and Canadian literary criticism of the first decade of the millennium, which acknowledges the ongoing effects of colonisation in the present day. It avoids the hyphenated form of the term "post-colonialism," which can suggest a correlative of political independence, or invoke a timespan after colonialism, as if the present is to some degree free from the structures of colonisation. As Victoria Kuttainen explains in *Unsettling Stories*:

> As for that most acrimonious term "postcolonialism," its use here [as one word, without the hyphen] draws from theorists such as Brydon, Hutcheon, Tiffin, and others who argue that the "post" is not a marker of time in which [a society] has surmounted colonialism, achieved independence, and somehow, impossibly, recovered from the experience of colonisation, but rather that it is a signal of the enduring aftermath of colonialism. (20)

In Australian classrooms marked by the enduring aftermath of colonialism, the introduction of texts that attempt to address that "gapingly incomplete" record of the human condition can

reproduce colonial violence, even in attempts to draw attention to "those experiences of bigotry and exclusion that are condemnably common" (Bolina 302). This worries Indigenous studies scholar Ailie McDowall, especially since the relatively recent introduction of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature and content into secondary school classrooms has been carried out, in her estimation, without significant "reflexivity" (McDowall 1).

As North American Indigenous writer and scholar Thomas King observed in 1990, unreflective practices of teaching Indigenous and postcolonial literatures can reinscribe the dynamics of colonialism they purport to deconstruct (King 184–85). Alison Ravenscroft concurs and observes that "despite non-Indigenous writers' best efforts to revise the colonial story, they nevertheless risk revitalising it" (65). This is a risk, we contend, that carries over to the teaching of Indigenous texts, as well as texts by and about culturally and linguistically diverse authors and experiences. King explains that this kind of approach to Canadian or American First Nations' texts in classrooms often involves unconscious biases that put the colonial encounter at the centre of Indigenous experience (King 185); privilege European theories and knowledge systems (184); treat Indigenous content in an essentialised way as a corpus of content to be mined (185); or convey indigeneity as principally characterised by deficit and deterioration (189). As McDowall notes, this last issue is particularly problematic in the current Australian environment where the only Indigenous person many urban Australians meet is the one represented in statistics about the inequities of health, incarceration, and educational outcomes presented in the Closing the Gap agenda (McDowall 12). This is what Maggie Walter calls the "5D Indigene": one characterised by disparity, deprivation, disadvantage, dysfunction, and difference (80). Even attentive reading and teaching can reinforce unconscious biases and stereotypes and entrench marginalisation and exclusion. In this essay, we extend these considerations regarding the reading of Indigenous texts to other culturally complex texts taught in contemporary classrooms.

As Phillips and Archer-Lean have pointed out, despite scholarly attention to the subject of reading, close readings of texts continue dominate teaching approaches in literary studies. Phillips and Archer-Lean stress that without careful attention to the encounter between the text and student, the role of the reader, or the context of literature, the inclusion of Indigenous writing in literature classrooms becomes a form of "contemporary colonisation" (24). Philips and Archer-Lean suggest that standpoint theory,[1] which has long been adopted in disciplines such as sociology and anthropology, is imperative for literary studies, to consider the provisionality of literary value, the circumstances under which texts appear in the classroom, the context of a text, the background of the writer, and the role and positionality of the reader, especially in relation to subjugated knowledges, and texts from or about other cultures. They explain that there is a need when teaching Indigenous-authored texts "to militate against the very real potential for ongoing colonising encounters in the classroom" (26), addressing the risk that in studying Indigenous texts and themes in an attempt to redress colonialism, the effect may be its unintended revitalisation. In this essay, we extend Phillips and Archer-Lean's consideration of the context of reading beyond a singular encounter between text and reader into the broader, often latent, dynamics of the classroom. In addition, we extend their attention to standpoint into a consideration of the geographical standpoint of the classroom in which the texts are taught. This is because, contrary to McDowall's observation that the only Indigenous person most people have ever met may be Maggie Walter's "5-D Indigene," in many classrooms in regional Australia, the proportion of Indigenous students in the classroom may be much higher than in other places (McDowall 12; Walter 80).

Moreover, the potential for conflict and alienation is exceptionally high where the effects of colonialism are both tenacious and persistently ignored. What's more, in some regions of the

world, the legacies of colonialism are extremely personal to students, while potentially invisible and distant to others. These dynamics are most likely to occur in an environment such as the one where our classroom is located, at the interstices of what Mary Louise Pratt has described as a "contact zone": "social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they [are] lived out in many parts of the world today" (5–6). Teaching and learning dynamics in such places are often characterised by what Martin Nakata has identified in his longstanding research on Indigenous studies classrooms as learning environments where students of Indigenous and non-Indigenous heritages come together in ways that present collisions of various cultural backgrounds and knowledge systems (285). For students and teachers, these environments can be characterised by the kinds of conflict Pratt describes. From the perspective of Indigenous students, Nakata explains, these can be classrooms that invoke the "constant tension and negotiation of different interests and systems of knowledge" (286).

Regions like the one where the authors of this article are situated present intensified dynamics of potential classroom conflict; they also present rich opportunities to think through the complexities of how best to structure learning environments in ways that open students to richer understanding and authentic, transformational learning in ways that look to Paulo Freire's model of biophilia, envisioned in his foundational work of critical pedagogy *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (77). In his work, Freire considered how to overcome the colonial structures that can be reproduced in educational contexts. His observations challenge literary studies practices in which educators have been taught to foreground deep attention to the text, using the New Critical approach to close reading. Freire recommends what he calls a "biophilic" way of teaching that focuses instead on the lives and taken-for-granted perspectives of students and their potential liberation from invisible, oppressive structures. This is a practice motivated by principles he contrasts with teaching techniques focused on the content or cultural value of texts, and which reify oppression by transforming students into receiving cultural objects in ways that are "necrophilic" (58).

In Part One of this essay, we consider the unique human geography of regions like North Queensland within the context of what Pratt would call their "contact zone" status, where students meet at what Nakata identifies as "the cultural interface," and where Freire would emphasise the need for biophilic teaching and learning. Written from the perspectives of university English students and their lecturer, this essay reflects on how careful pedagogical considerations designed for a high degree of reflexivity mean that teaching and learning Indigenous and migrant literature in complex cultural milieus models frontiers of learning that are transposable to other complex environments, including but not limited to the online interface. In Part Two of this essay, we consider these dynamics in the online classroom. We argue that these considerations are necessary, not only for teaching Indigenous and world literature in Australia, but more broadly, as student demographics inevitably continue to shift, and as modes of learning become more complex. We advocate and investigate what Paulo Freire identified as biophilic praxis: teaching and learning practices that are life-giving, even when mediated by a second, digital interface.

Part One: Geographical Standpoints of Teaching and Learning in the Regional Classroom

North Queensland and James Cook University, Townsville, where EL3050 Postcolonial Narratives is taught, have dark histories that settler descendants, and migrants, often fail to acknowledge. North Queensland and the Torres Strait Islands were originally home to almost one hundred and eighty separate First Nations language groups ("Austlang"). After the British invasion, "The

Protector of Aborigines" received complete control of Indigenous lives (Anti-Discrimination Commission Queensland 60). This legislation allowed the forced removal of Indigenous children to institutions in order to assimilate them into settler society, and relocated Indigenous groups from their homelands to controlled missions and reserves.[2] Some students in a class like ours have been directly affected by this relatively recent past, while other students remain oblivious to these dynamics.

> **Tracey Hough, student:** *These laws allowed my family to be punished for just living their lives according to their lived practices, in their own language, according to their own spirituality. This caused a damaging break in our lived memories and a loss of who we are as Aboriginal people; a disconnect psychologically, spiritually, and bodily from our Country.*

In addition, an estimated 62,000 South Sea Islander people were coerced from their nearby island homes, and were forced to work in the region's cane fields in the process of servitude known as "Blackbirding" (Short). After Federation in 1901, and the introduction of the "White Australia" policy, 10,000 South Sea Islanders were deported and replaced by Italian migrant labourers who were tokenistically regarded as white (Castles 5). This part of Australia was, until relatively recently, known as the "frontier," and the effects of colonialism are not just historical, but some of its worst excesses occurred within living memory. North Queensland's last "frontier wars" occurred as recently as 1912 (Ryan et al.). Segregation and wage control were not officially repealed until 1968 (Anti-Discrimination Commission Queensland 60).

> **Sarah Burke, student:** *My father, an Aboriginal man, was born in the early [nineteen] fifties and spent most of his life working for little or no pay on various cattle stations and mines in the Gulf. In 2016, I was successful in repatriating his stolen wages when photos of him were found in a memoir published by previous managers of a cattle property he had worked on.*

The name of the university itself implies an uneasy colonial heritage. James Cook University (JCU) was officially opened by Royal Charter in 1970 when Queen Elizabeth II visited North Queensland as part of a tour for the bicentenary of Cook's voyage to the Australian continent (Harding, "Vice Chancellor's Message," para.2). The university is also the site from which Eddie Koiki Mabo and Henry Reynolds launched the landmark High Court challenge recognising First Nations land rights prior to British occupation (Harding, "Media Release"). Even in name, JCU is marked by the colonial aftermath that informs it as a complex learning environment. On average, Indigenous people comprise 3.3% of the Australian population. However, at JCU, 16% of students identify as Indigenous (James Cook University). This percentage is almost eight times the average representation of Indigenous students in Australian higher education. Students also come from neighbouring Papua New Guinea (a former colony of Australia), the Australian South Sea Islander diaspora, or other migrant backgrounds. For many students in this classroom, colonialism is personal, and their personal background—whether migrant, settler, or Indigenous—informs not only their standpoint of reading, but also the classroom dynamic.

Nonetheless, despite the complex demographics of this region and the official policy of multiculturalism, Australia as a whole is still dominated by a core Anglo-Celtic identity. Moreover, difference is often invisible in the classroom. Even in the face-to-face environment, students from

Indigenous backgrounds, non-English-speaking backgrounds, and English-speaking migrant backgrounds often pass as being from non-minority backgrounds, and many Indigenous students do not openly disclose their backgrounds or even identify as such. This complexity is compounded by an education system that, until recently, emphasised Anglo-Celtic culture as mainstream. It also creates a situation in which students from migrant backgrounds often disavow their implication in structures of colonialism, attributing colonisation to an event in the past:

> **Karla Destefani, student:** *Australia is a country filled with people from many nationalities. Yet, our education often does not look beyond our connection to the Western world. We ignore the many diasporas and waves of migration that have arrived here from all over the world. This causes many to gravitate towards the mentality: "Well, I didn't colonise Australia. Why am I being held accountable?"*

Students in literature classrooms like ours arrive with different learning styles, motivations, and opinions that are informed by this complex colonial history; this must be accounted for when considering how students encounter texts from various standpoints, as well as how they engage with one another. These dynamics may prime the classroom for either conflict or deeper engagement, depending on how they are handled.

Given longstanding reflections on the multicultural classroom in Canada, and the reliance on postcolonial theory there to address both First Nations and migrant-authored texts, it is perhaps unsurprising that some of the earliest reflections on the "how" of teaching such texts in ways that consider the classroom environment, alongside the "what" of the reading list, come from Canada. As Ingrid Johnston and Jyoti Mangat point out, it can be helpful in such a unique environment to initially use "texts that are culturally distant from [students'] own literary and experiential histories" (vii). Johnston and Mangat advocate such an approach not to depersonalise the material, but rather because migrant and Indigenous texts are always-already going to be read in personal ways and from many conflicting standpoints.

> **Victoria Kuttainen, lecturer:** *When I began to teach postcolonial literature in this area of regional Australia . . . I also decided to begin with texts that were culturally and geographically distant from my students' backgrounds. I begin far from their experience, and then move closer to home, first with Australian settler texts and then with Australian Indigenous texts. In this way, students are less likely to impose their own experience on a text, and to understand that they need to research context, background, and culture before and as they read.*

The complicated act of interpreting culture involves an understanding of difference that is sensitive, respectful but also fluid, open to negotiation, and multi-perspectival, as Johnston and Mangat observe (viii). Beginning with unfamiliar cultures and texts helps to defamiliarise the politicised terrain of texts and issues closer to home. This can encourage students to question their own authoritativeness, putting them on equal ground with one another within the contact zone, where each student, no matter what their familiarity is with issues or cultures in the text, is more inclined to offer and to embrace a studious attitude of respectful inquiry.

> **Victoria Kuttainen, lecturer:** *I like to begin with a pair of postcolonial texts from the other side of the world that establish a dynamic of counterpoint: Jean Rhys's* Wide Sargasso Sea *(1966), and George Lamming's* In the Castle of My Skin *(1953).* Wide

> Sargasso Sea *already defamiliarises the English canon and takes students to the other side of the world, into a tropical environment that is both like, and unlike, their own in tropical far north Queensland. But* In the Castle of My Skin *overturns the settler-authored postcolonial perspective of* Wide Sargasso Sea*. Just when students start to get their head around how this class will be taught, I'm quick to help them overturn one perspective with another. I want to start with some degree of familiarity, move into defamiliarisation, and end in open, respectful, mutual unsettlement and inquiry.*

Many students, no matter their background, first assume when attending an English class that it will look a certain way.

> **Sarah Burke, student:** *In the 80s, my parents purchased a monthly subscription to receive beautifully embossed Victorian English Literature books. I now recognise what Jessica Cox calls a "perceived hierarchical value" in having access to the canon through these ersatz neo-Victorian reprints* (102)*. On reflection, I am sure that my parents measured themselves against that value. I read them without [sensing] any relation to my reality of being an Aboriginal kid in the bush.*

Rhys's *Wid*e *Sargasso Sea* (1966) unravels the established orthodoxies of white Western ways of seeing. There is a risk inherent, however, in replacing one way of seeing with another: students can be tempted into binary thinking, which is important to unpick early. Pairing this text with Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953) challenges such dualisms.

> **Victoria Kuttainen, lecturer:** Castle of My Skin *reveals the uncomfortable truth that anti-colonial nationalism is no easy antidote to colonisation, as well as the discomfiting realisation that, in the aftermath of colonisation, simple binaries of black/white, good/evil, victor/victim, aligned along racial lines, are inadequate. Once we begin to break down entrenched positions, students come to a respectful appreciation of differing standpoints and complexity of not only postcolonial texts, societies and cultures, but also of their own rich and complicated backgrounds and lives.*

This approach keeps standpoint in mind, but never assumes any student is assured of firm ground in their reading of literature. Approaching literature in this way—in terms of mutual unsettlement and defamiliarisation—gradually divests all students from their familiar standpoint and initiates them into a mutual journey of co-investigation at the cultural interface. Doing so with the help of an accessible textbook, *Beginning Postcolonialism* (McLeod), while avoiding the kind of abstruse Europeanised theory Thomas King resists, offers a friendly counterpoint. An accessible textbook also assists with stabilising the disorientation that is inevitable with any new departure.

We then embark on a themed approach to the syllabus, which allows a deep dive into some of the complex cultural aspects common to many postcolonial texts, while also acknowledging significant aspects of geo-historical and textual difference.

> **Victoria Kuttainen, lecturer:** *I am careful about how I frame postcolonial literary studies for my undergraduate students in this environment. I have felt a deep responsibility to ease students into a mutual openness and respectful curiosity about each other and the texts and issues we encounter in the contact zone and at the cultural interface. I have developed a sequential and thematic approach to text*

choice to challenge trenchant and often unconscious biases about race while fostering an environment of engagement and mutual respect.

A themed approach to the syllabus allows for the inclusion of diverse texts, to encourage students to make ongoing connections across texts and cultures, and into their own lives:

> **Tracey Hough, student:** *Using a set weekly theme such as place, race, nation, family, gender, history, and indigeneity frames our approach to a given weekly text. In any given week, one text is our focus, but we are encouraged to connect across the syllabus. Focusing on one text at a time allows a deep dive into the historical background of the text, the way the given issue of the week inflects it, theories that help understand that issue, and aspects of the author's background. All this supplements close reading. This highlights how complex the aftermath of colonisation really is. A themed approach focuses ongoing reflection from text to text and fosters the learner's ability to navigate through these themes and texts with open and willing minds.*

Such an approach considers encounters with texts and cultures as an initiation into the unveiling of the ongoing lived aftermath of colonisation. It also requires both students and educators to "abandon the educational goal of deposit-making," as Freire explained, "and replace it with the posing of problems of human beings in their relations with the world" (79). For Freire, this is a key distinction between mere schooling and a liberating praxis. The goal of taking the students around the world and back allows for readings of their own national and regional texts, as well as each other, in new ways.

This is guided by Edward Said's understanding that "texts are worldly"—they are "part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted" (4). This requires readers to connect texts to "the existential actualities of human life, politics, societies and events" (5). It requires a pedagogy that respects the complexity of the socio-political backgrounds of texts and the lived experiences of their readers. Because all of our lives are shot through with the aftermath of colonialism, no matter our standpoint, this way of going around the world and gradually drawing closer to our home in Far North Queensland forces us to recognise the traces of world histories and politics in all texts and lives. It means the texts we study may at first appear culturally distant, but gradually we detect patterns in them where their geographies and histories cross over with our own lives, implicating us in the patterns of colonialism and globalisation that shape both texts and readers. If we are not Indigenous, we are all migrants to Australia, and it is important that we begin to recognise that histories of migration do not absolve any of us from the history of colonisation. This is part of making a classroom unsettling and welcoming at the same time.

> **Karla Destefani, student:** *I loved how in this class we looked at world colonialism, and this included texts from Haiti and Barbados, in English. We dipped into the history of colonisation in these places but were given tools to investigate this more. Seizing the opportunity to investigate the Americas, where my family migrated from, I investigated the colonial histories of Latina women. I became aware of the extensive history of Hispanic social expectations and Latina women's vital role in escaping slavery. Simultaneously, I was able to hear the personal histories other students uncovered in our class. Being in a space where we could recognise our mixed nationalities allowed me to feel authentic and to bring in aspects of my own life into the class. It humanised*

> *us, and it allowed me to connect to the theoretical content as I became aware of how far-reaching and ever-present the effects of colonisation are.*

Drawing connections between these texts and our own lives calls on a degree of self-revelation and authenticity, a reflexivity which the teacher must model from the outset. As Herrington and Oliver point out, self-reflexivity is a key feature of authentic learning, a willingness to tackle complex, difficult-to-define problems that call on multiple perspectives. As Nakata observes, the cultural interface demands this kind of authentic learning to empathetically engage across dynamics of difference (286).

> **Sarah Burke, student:** *Emotions are often ignored in an academic setting, however, through reflection I was able to talk back to the texts. What did I take from them? What could I give in return? I was no longer an observer of the texts but a participant.*

> **Karla Destefani, student**: *Speaking to my classmates about how we were approaching the texts, research, and grappling to understand different world views together allowed me to grow alongside them.*

By the end of our journey through the world of postcolonial literature, including locally authored Australian and Aboriginal texts, students were equipped to investigate another set of paired texts closer to home, within the context of the complex aftermath of colonisation and Indigenous identities. We used two Australian texts: *The Secret River* (2013) by settler author Kate Grenville, and *The Swan Book* (2014) by First Nations writer Alexis Wright, set on her spiritual lands—*Waanyi* country located in North Queensland. By this stage, students were primed to approach this text in respectful ways, without being explicitly told to do so. Moreover, they respected their Indigenous classmates, never asking or expecting any of the Indigenous students in the class to speak for a pan-Aboriginal culture. The Aboriginal students in the class also seemed relieved that colonisation was not a burden only experienced by them.

> **Tracey Hough, student:** *Colonisation must be put into a global context to understand that Australia's Indigenous people were not the only ones affected by it. This context helps students to recognise the effects of colonialism locally and abroad. I feel the movements across the world with Black Lives Matter, and the unearthing of thousands of children's unmarked graves at residential schools in Canada, are creating a strong bond between many Indigenous peoples globally.*

The teacher is a co-investigator, guide, and discussant, rather than master of knowledge. Whenever students shared, the teacher sat back, always drawing others out, never shutting students down. This was modelled in and through the material studied, and in the assessment, which required regular reflexive journals. Taking this broad tour through the history of colonialism found in these texts can widen our understanding of our complicated social worlds, and build a sense of participatory community as well as respectful alertness to others in an environment of mutual respect, where students feel welcome to share. Text order, global cultural contexts, and self-reflexivity can modulate the challenges that arise in a contact zone and in the cultural interface and help contribute to an environment of openness, authenticity, and transformation. What we learned together is how various perspectives can be addressed and accommodated, while defusing the potential for alienation or harmful conflict. We also learned that the cultural interface is a rich

environment in which to study the effects of colonialism *in situ,* where the texts we read are not dead artefacts, or books upon which we imposed our own lives, but books which seemed to be able to both read, and open us up, to ourselves and each other.

Part Two: The Shift to Online Learning, a Second, Digital Interface

The shift to online learning in a complex cultural environment adds another interface: the digital one.

> **Victoria Kuttainen, lecturer:** *After the COVID pandemic brought about a move to teaching online, I was extremely anxious that an already complex classroom dynamic in a regional contact zone, and at the cultural interface, would be intensified. Yet, the way students . . . engaged with the material and one another was more rich and complex than I have ever experienced in any environment. In the last class of the semester, the students spontaneously took over. They facilitated a discussion circle about how much they had authentically learned: not just about literature or the complex aftermath of colonialism, but about themselves and each other, and our shared and divergent cultures and histories. I'm humbled that they have agreed to help analyse how and why we experienced this together, and I was shocked that the online environment fostered this transformation in ways that were more exceptional than I had witnessed previously, in other incarnations of the class where we did some similar things but met in person.*

If teaching and learning at the cultural interface requires careful navigation, the requirement to shift these dynamics into an online learning environment adds a further interface that brings another set of challenges. But it also brings another set of opportunities. While it is established that "cultural dimensions influence online activity" (Westbrook 288), translating a complex cultural classroom into the digital sphere, respectfully and effectively, is less well understood. While the focus on "cultural safety" can be salient, it was the experience of unsettlement and of unpacking existing, invisible structures behind our differing standpoints that was so productively transformative in this class. Alexandra Sousa notes that class tension does not automatically equate to being adversarial and can be an indicator of an authentic classroom (230). But the challenge is fostering inclusivity "that does not shy away from conversations about complexity of identity, difference, and power" in an online space, where the shelter of anonymity can sometimes foster bullying, promote passive responses, or prevent people from actively engaging and thus allow a retreat into entrenched positions (231). Besides this scaffolding of texts and themes, then, what allowed us to go on this transformative journey together, through the digital interface?

This class of thirty-five students from across North Queensland was conducted in a mixed asynchronous and synchronous online mode, in the immediate aftermath of COVID-19. Lectures were delivered asynchronously as podcasts, inviting students to listen at their convenience. Synchronous tutorials were held over Zoom with clearly articulated expectations that, where possible, cameras would be turned on to encourage face-to-face engagement in class conversation because of the need to face each other over these difficult texts and the potentially difficult conversations that might arise.

> **Tracey Hough, student**: *Having a clearly established protocol to have our cameras switched on during the online tutorial helped me feel more connected to my fellow learners. I could see their body language, which helps as I rely on body language for*

> *communication due to industrial deafness. I believe that being seen held us to account for our conversations and conduct, facilitating respectful and authentic communication with our fellow students and the lecturer, who was also on this journey, not just feeding us information.*

We took sociability seriously. This meant including social rituals of student co-facilitation, which were explained in terms of the importance of student input in building a respectful community. What we learnt together, as co-investigators of literature and culture, is that sociability allowed us to build the needed trust and transparency to face each other and the texts they are studying.

> **Tracey Hough, student:** *The structure of this class provided me with a safe place to explore the complexity of my lived experience as an Aboriginal/Chinese woman of my generation. I have learned so much from the other students and their experience of colonialism, and its significance on the wider community. I felt the freedom of expression was refreshing and a great tool of learning.*

Student co-facilitation also helped invert the teaching and learning dynamic, and meant we were all learners, even the lecturer. As Freire reminds us, dialogue cannot exist "between those who deny others the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied them" (88).

> **Jade Croft, student:** *I loved the student facilitation. Each class was co-facilitated by a student who monitored the online chat and helped the lecturer. The student co-facilitator also opened the class with a question they posed to each of the students. Most students asked icebreaker questions, like 'What was the last movie you watched?' but in the last class of semester, I seized this opportunity to ask my classmates to reflect on the subject and its content. I had found the material and delivery empowering from Week 1 onwards, always looking forward to the Zoom tutorials. So, in the last week of semester, I asked students what they appreciated about the subject and what they felt they were taking away from it. I asked them if they had faced discomfort or biases of their own.*

What students shared in their reflections in the final class was revelatory: self-reflexive, raw, culturally informed, and intelligent. This kind of dynamic is not only a testament to the importance of "strong interpersonal relationships" in digital learning spaces, but also of how imperative and transformative relationship-building is in complex classrooms (Sousa 232).

The online environment also allowed for a suite of other tools to enhance these relationships and deepen learning. Asynchronous enhancements helped prepare students for synchronous face-to-face discussion to deepen their knowledge of socio-historical backgrounds of texts and expand understanding of major issues and complex theories. These enhancements included online lesson plans enriched with hyperlinks and interactive material that guided our synchronous online tutorials.

> **Desiree Jeffcoat, student:** *The open, interactive lesson plan allowed students to anticipate where there were spaces for open discussion and provided a place to refer to if conversation drifted or was being overly dominated by one person. The fact that we could see where the class was headed each week, in terms of what was on the agenda for discussion and exploration, meant we knew where we could talk and where it was*

> *time to learn. It also meant that the interactive lesson plan could contain hyperlinks we were directed to watch and explore while the class discussion was paused—these were the synchronous enhancements.*

Students accessed YouTube videos, historical material, and Google images throughout the synchronous classes to deepen the cultural contexts of texts, and to clarify concepts, develop focus, engage with academic theories and ideas, or respond to prompts that deepened our engagement with our texts. Offline, students created private, multimodal reading journals to reflect upon their discoveries, and individually explored themes and concepts to bring to online interactions.

> **Desiree Jeffcoat, student:** *For somebody hoping to inspire positive change in their classroom, I experienced the benefit of an environment which is understanding and encouraging of the learning process. In Postcolonial Narratives, I did not feel the expectation that we 'conquer' colonialism in a semester to receive a high grade. Rather, it was acknowledged that the history and effects of colonisation are ongoing and complex, and we were marked on our engagement throughout the learning process. This unpressured environment inspired students to engage in conversations with themselves and others in a process that allowed for exploration and largely minimised polarisation.*

In our shift to the digital interface, these various digital tools enhanced our face-to-face meetings held synchronously online by layering our discussions of texts and cultures. Simultaneously, these forms of engagement invited deep learning and participation beyond the classroom—an essential shift for both a postcolonial praxis and a biophilic one. Outside the classroom, we began to discover that conversations we were having inside the online class were bubbling over into friendship groups and onto social media.

> **Jade Croft, student:** *The knowledge and confidence I gained during our class made me feel more connected to and aware of other cultures and experiences. I took the themes we learnt and participated in discussions around postcolonialism online, like the social media platform TikTok. I even took to reading out my favourite quotes from our textbook online to my followers and joining others in remixing viral trends to suit our activist messages. I have been instilled with tools and values that make me better able to acquire and pass on knowledge, both in the classroom and outside of it.*

This is the point where pedagogy becomes effective praxis; where a transformative experience in the classroom allows learning to spill beyond it.

While the key elements of learning design may have facilitated this transformational experience, it was the student responses to each other and the texts that was particularly revealing in this environment. Consequently, we argue that the project of teaching literature needs to shift beyond debates over texts into modes of teaching and learning as well as ways of considering texts that are life-affirming. This is especially the case in tricky learning environments such as Pratt's "contact zone" and Nakata's "cultural interface," where colonisation and its aftermath is a lived reality that can polarise a classroom or alienate students. But while complex classrooms may indeed provide challenges to navigate, we tentatively conclude that they can also be places where the ongoing effects of colonialism can be more authentically unveiled, priming students to make connections between texts and their worlds. As classrooms become increasingly complex globalised spaces online and offline, with mixed demographics of Indigenous learners alongside

settlers, migrants, and refugees, more consideration needs to be given to student-centred pedagogies and classroom dynamics. In our case, we found that a carefully scaffolded curriculum and learning design opened dialogue with ourselves, our texts, and each other. We also found that online tools could enhance rather than detract from a deeply authentic learning journey, enriching the potential for a participatory community that facilitates respectful engagement with the texts, one other, and our world. While the contact zone and the cultural interface may be the legacy of a colonial frontier, we reflect that its demands for a hospitable and authentic educational environment may in fact model new frontiers for teaching literary texts in our increasingly complex world, and for making connections—not just in the text and in the classroom, but beyond.

NOTES

[1] For a comprehensive explanation of Indigenous Standpoint Theory and Feminist Standpoint Theory, see Allan Ardill.
[2] *The Industrial and Reformatory Schools Act 1865* allowed Indigenous children to be forcibly removed from their families and placed into 'state care' with the aim of assimilation into settler society. This was superseded in 1897 by *The Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act*, and again in 1939 by *The Aboriginals Preservation and Protection Act* and *The Torres Strait Islanders Act*.

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