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Colonial anxiety and the virtuous work of the Humanities and Social Sciences

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ABSTRACT

Curriculum, as a policy of the settler-state, is essential in carefully safeguarding learners and educators from encounters with the colonial project's inherent violence. In Australia, the effort to create an acceptable engagement with the past via curriculum is particularly important given the need to reproduce liberal views and discourses of inclusion that define the politics of the contemporary settler state. At its core, curriculum thus works to placate colonial anxiety and furnish learners with ideas about the nation-state that are intrinsically geared toward colonial legitimacy and preservation. In this article, I take up this condition, highlighting how the *Australian Curriculum* represents the context of Australia in such a way that minimises any potentially productive anxious encounters with the violence of colonisation. Drawing on Lisa Slater's idea of virtuous anxiety, I analyse and explore how the *Australian Curriculum*'s humanities and social sciences learning area represents the place and history of Australia as one that is fraught with violence all the while learners and educators are afforded space to learn about colonisation from a safe emotional and political distance.

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> HASS [Humanities and Social Sciences] F-6 aims to ensure that students develop: [. . .] an appreciation of the nature of both past and contemporary Australian society that values the contributions of the histories and cultures of First Nations Australians, Australia's Western and Christian heritage, and the diversity of other migrant cultures and groups to our prosperous, democratic nation. (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2022, p. 4)

At the very beginning of the Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS) learning area for primary students in the *Australian Curriculum* exists a set of aims. In addition to the focus on disciplinary skills, inquiry thinking and integration across the field's constituent disciplines sits an aim that echoes political and cultural concerns about fostering 'an appreciation of', in part, Indigenous peoples and their 'contributions' to the (settler) nation-state. This aim, while open for contestation and critical engagement, elides the violence that makes 'Australian society' possible by supporting the mythology that Indigenous peoples and migrants have been equals alongside 'Australia's Western and Christian heritage' in the creation of 'our' nation. While this curriculum aim might be

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easily discarded as yet more expected liberal readings of the past or a symbolic expression of what Watkins and Noble (2019) call 'lazy multiculturalism' – the effort to elide the meaningful ethical and intellectual labour required to question relations of power and problematic assumptions of the world – there is a key logic informing this aim that speaks to a broader issue with curriculum. As will be explored in this paper, the *Australian Curriculum* flattens investigations into the relationship that students build with settler-nationalism as one that necessarily needs to be filtered through a language of 'appreciation' and other vocabularies that provide an escape from the difficult work required of decolonisation. This is not surprising; expecting a curriculum to facilitate efforts to contend the moral authority or legitimacy of the state is naïve and fails to appreciate that a curriculum's purpose is to re-constitute the settler-nation as benevolent and natural.

The aim here represents a compromise between competing visions of historical and civil society, a compromise that reflects what Lisa Slater (2019) calls 'virtuous anxiety', a retreat to safety from which settlers can feel ethically comforted about their efforts at listening and 'valuing' (as per the curriculum aim) all the while remaining divorced from the critical work required of demands for sovereignty and politically just action. As I argue through this paper, the Humanities and Social Sciences learning area of the *Australian Curriculum* is designed to distance learners from the necessary work of anti-colonial thought by way of reinforcing the politically guarded right to disengage from action through an appreciative approach to knowing. In this respect, the aim above is not an exception but one of many expressions of a problem endemic to settler-national curricula broadly: the marshalling into service of an expedient form of virtue that shields learners from any meaningful political and pedagogical work against settler-colonisation. In what follows, I draw on Slater's work and notions of 'virtuous anxiety' to highlight how the *Australian Curriculum* allows educators and students to bear witness to Indigenous knowledge and histories while also furnishing them with the space to exist at arm's length from the political obligations that settlers need to take on to do meaningful critical work.

To contextualise my work, I begin by asking two questions that Weuffen (2024) contends are essential starting points: '*Who am I?* and *Where do I come from?*' (p. 76). 'These questions' they contend, '"invoke" a critical self-review of how we introduce, describe, and understand ourselves based on our views of the world, the values and beliefs we hold, and the ways in which we understand and value knowledge' (p. 76). While I take these questions as necessary ethical starting points, I answer these as well as part of an invitation for readers to critiquing the limits of my thinking. I am a racialised white, settler male who has migrated to the lands often called 'Australia'. These intersecting identities allow the 'who' of my subject-position to read easily into the white Australian mythology despite my ever-true existence as a migrant to these lands. I arrived here from Canada, and as such, I come from a place also deeply shaped by settler-colonial logics that are nonetheless uniquely shaped by similar and dissimilar nation-state building projects and localised practices of colonial violence. In this way, while I am not a product of Australian settler-colonial epistemic investments, I am nonetheless a product of settler-colonial thinking that makes witnessing the exclusions, violence, and displacement central to settler-colonial dominion challenging at times.

Understanding (settler-)curriculum

At its core, a curriculum is a nation-state's vision for a preferred idea of knowledge that governs both what knowledge is privileged and, to an extent, how it is framed in practice. As a result, curriculum represents explicit claims about what is required for students to know and sets the scope for an official form of knowledge (Apple, 2014). In a context such as Australia, where settlement by Europeans looking to build a homeland made and makes for a nationalising flavoured settler-colonisation (Moran, 2002), this official knowledge is historically indebted to and politically obligated to (re)produce 'Australia' and 'Australian' as an ostensibly 'natural' nation(al identity) in this place. As Tout et al. (2024) put it, settler-nationalism's force in constructing the nation-state as a permanent and inevitable reality can be either conservative (evidenced in a need to preserve the nation-state integrity and its perceived unity) or liberal (evidenced in a desire to include and embrace Indigenous peoples within a state formation that is nonetheless colonial). Both approaches to nation building here, despite their divergent ideological views, render the settler-state as unimpeachable and righteous. The official knowledge of curriculum in Australia, while influenced by conservative settler-nationalism, is nonetheless oriented towards the representation of a liberal settler-national future.

The pervasive reach of settler-national logics, where the (re)creation of the nation is the inevitable endpoint of history, powerfully mediates how curriculum is crafted, negotiated and bounded. While the agency of curriculum workers and subjects can and does allow for agentive and critical readings, as Martin et al. (2020) argue, curriculum is a particular and powerful technology for schooling 'that [nonetheless] enframes knowledge for use in the schooling practices of pedagogy and assessment' (p. 314) to narrow the scope of knowing to a particular domain of knowledge that accords, in the case of Australia, with settler-national ideas of legitimate knowledge. The 'enframing' of knowledge in the curriculum is particular in settler-national contexts whereby meaningful critical encounters with the 'Australian' project are made difficult. Consider, for instance, the investigation of violence and injustice. Speaking to the work of curriculum in representing colonial injustice, Keynes (2024) highlights how curriculum can work to contain colonial injustice via subtle strategies designed to legitimate the liberal project of the Australian nation-state while serving to insulate encounters with colonial violence from the structural backdrop of settler-colonialism. Even in the face of contest, curriculum can be rather resilient in reaffirming the settler-national story as one of liberal progress (Keynes & Marsden, 2021). More broadly, and connected to the idea of liberal settler-national enframing of knowledge work, comes an equally potent and necessary enframing of Indigenous knowledge. As Lowe et al. (2021) argue, curriculum can offer a vision of society rooted in peace (reaffirming liberal myths of perpetual progress) all the while the representation of Indigenous content remains 'part of the settler-colonial strategy of excluding Indigenous ways of knowing, doing, and being from the schooling system' (p. 73). The enframing work of curriculum thus normalises liberal tendencies to remediate the abhorrent past in service of more prosperous and just presents and futures all the while curriculum can co-opt Indigenous knowledge in such a way that it becomes a gesture of just will and a conceptual support for the narrative of progress.

In addition to content knowledge, it is necessary to consider how curriculum represents the skills needed to construct knowledge as well. Increasingly common

as the preferred method of knowledge construction in the Humanities and Social Sciences is disciplinary thinking. Such an approach to knowledge construction enframes the methods of creating meaning that normalise settler-colonial ideas of what counts as verifiable and transmissible knowledge of value. Subjecting knowledge work to the parameters (enframing) of Western and disciplined approaches to knowledge renders Indigenous knowing as only intelligible via Western disciplinary framings (see Nakata (2007)) and risks conveying to students that the only worthy way of knowing is through a specific colonial method of thinking. Keynes (2019) argues a similar point elsewhere, noting that Western approaches to history specifically often goes without contest. They argue that there is an 'assumed universal suitability of disciplinary history education, with western models becoming prevalent in history curricula and textbooks across the globe' (p. 123). As they suggest, there is an underevaluated look at 'the foundational disciplinary character of history education, including its particularly Eurocentric framework and the implications of this for different types of societies' (p. 123). Elsewhere, I have argued something similar, noting that there is an often tacitly unquestioned acceptance of disciplinary thinking that ignores the subject positions from which said thinking emanates, invisibilising the Western and largely colonial bodies from which disciplinary thinking generates authority (Smith, 2020b).

A final point warrants consideration here about agency in the face of an enframing curriculum. Like any policy, curriculum makes representations informed by the contexts of their development; rather than objective renderings of problems in need of solving (see Bacchi (2012) for more on how policy creates and 'solves' problems), curriculum policy speaks not just for Indigenous people but also to non-Indigenous peoples about what they ought to know about Indigenous peoples and knowledge. This is not to suggest that learners, however, are passive agents in the representational work of curriculum. Equally so, this is not to suggest that resistance doesn't emanate from Indigenous peoples as Indigenous communities agitate against misunderstandings and warped views of Indigenous peoples not just in schools but in more public pedagogical contexts as well (Rudolph, 2021). Herein lies a necessary recognition: curriculum is not a static text but rather is mediated by critical encounters and individual imperatives. Learners, educators, and all curriculum workers can and do exercise critical agency in the face of challenging and myopically rendered ideas of land, culture, and history. Such resistance takes place, however, against the backdrop of a curriculum and a political milieu that is wary of substantial change. In the face of state authority and reticence to engage in meaningful ways, resistance makes admirable efforts to dislodge what Donald (2009) calls the colonial frontier logics, the framing of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples as 'inhabit[ing] separate realities' (p. 4), a logic that is both a target for critical work and a logic that can serve to distance curriculum from any meaningful work that may induce a productive anxiety.

Understanding virtue and anxiety as mediators of (settler-)curriculum

While the curriculum has, by necessity, responded to shifts in public sentiment and political resistance, the history of the relationship between curriculum design and the critical politics aimed at contesting settler-colonial logics has yielded very little in terms

of meaningful curriculum shift. As Keynes et al. (2023) note, various strategies have been deployed across time to contain and regulate any possible influence of resistance and assertions against ongoing settler violence on curriculum development. Here, I turn to Slater's (2019) idea of virtuous anxiety to more fully realise why and how curriculum can contain meaningful encounters with Indigenous history and politics as a means of validating colonising knowledge and skills just as it creates space for, in particular, liberal settler-nationalism's concern for including Indigenous peoples in the settler-national formation.

First, it is necessary to see how virtue can be what Nicoll (2019) identifies as an obstacle to more meaningful work and how the erected conceptual and ethical barriers made possible by claims of virtue allow for an escape from the discomforts of anxiety. The escape here is necessary for, 'many settlers find Indigenous political autonomy so disturbing and estranging that they avoid it by fleeing into anxiety, the concern, guilt and pity, which reaffirms one's sense of ethical belonging and white authority' (Slater, 2019, p. 23). What makes this virtuous is the insertion of practices of goodwill or inclusion that are perpetually doomed to exist at arm's length from critical confrontations with the centre of power. White settlers, Slater contends, seek security and comfort, a means of pacifying their own implication in the colonial project because implication becomes an unbearable anxious burden. Put simply, 'for all the good intentions, "we" cannot hear the hopes and demands of Indigenous people should it risk disturbing an emotional territory, where settlers are safe, at home' (p. 23). The 'good intentions' is a key ingredient here; settler-national existence, in the eyes of its beneficiaries, can present itself as innocent and even well intentioned when the settler-national condition becomes a foundation upon which to build palatable interventions into and against injustice. As Slater argues:

> Good white people desire to belong in a reconciled nation, a place where we have confronted the past and are self-consciously forging a just, equitable Australia. Freed from the burden of wrongdoing, our compassion towards another's suffering provides a sense of proximity to what we desire: Indigenous people, and an ethical self and belonging. (p. 22)

The escape from emotional and ethical burdens here speaks to the operations of settler-nationalism as a racial project of insulating its largely white beneficiaries from any responsibility. In such a space, the deployment of such a liberal settler-national approach to innocence is carefully constructed, informed by ignorance, and committed to a sense of ease with the project of colonial violence (Slater, 2020). The efforts expended are tremendous, yet self-evident in their value, for the sustenance of efforts to quell anxiety is easily justified by way of the rewards reaped through being virtuous and innocent. White settlers, in such a space, are 'good' people doing 'good' work which allows them to elude the trappings of attendance at the critical spot of contemplating justice, sovereignty, and a historically informed relationality.

Curriculum is a constituent component of the pedagogical normalisation of virtuous anxiety. Given that 'white settlers cannot be "made to feel" uncertain' (Slater, 2020, p. 819), curricular investments need to be made to provide some semblance of certainty about the colonial project or what Slater identifies as an 'ease'. A threat to the ease of settler-national thought is avoided as much as possible; as Slater puts it, 'settler uncertainty – a form of dis-ease – is recalibrated into security' (p. 821). This security appears as

efforts to make white settlers into 'good white people' who can elect to extract themselves from the ethical responsibilities called for implicitly by way of anxious confrontations with the material and symbolic violence of colonisation (Slater, 2017). Such an escape might be quite attractive for some invested in settler-nationalism who may feel this to be an appropriate response to their well-established discomforts with reflectively considering their Western epistemic foundations and the doing of difficult anti-colonial work at all (Baynes, 2015; Bishop & Durksen, 2020; Lowe & Galstaun, 2020). It is for this reason that the Australian settler-nation's curricular logic will often follow a familiar template: striking a careful balance between critical thinking on the one hand and a re-securing of the white settler nation on the other. This balance serves to facilitate the blossoming of virtuous anxiety whereby settlers are afforded the opportunity to be worried (anxious) which reaffirms their ethical standing (i.e. their virtue) as a 'good' settler-national learning about Indigenous peoples from an emotional and political distance.

To explore how this virtuous anxiety works and shapes the *Australian Curriculum*, particularly by way of a focus on content about Indigenous peoples and practices, I look to the Humanities and Social Sciences learning area for one simple reason: while certainly not the only area where Indigenous knowledge can exist in curriculum policy and practice, the Humanities and Social Sciences is the learning area where the very focus on the social, geographic, historic and political narratives of life on these lands is teased out and expressed to their fullest potential. More specifically, I look to the primary years – Foundation to Year 6 – for reasons of familiarity and because these years serve as foundations for how settler students learn to adopt a virtuous relationship with the past that allows for an escape from any form of settler anxiety that might result in action. Moreover, as Millei (2019b) contends, 'children have knowledge about, re/produce, identify with and have emotions for the nation, their own national community and the Other' (p. 86) and in a settler-national context, considerations of curriculum necessarily must consider how the representations at work feed into the reproduction of affective and racialised commitments to the settler-national project from early exposures to officially sanctioned ideas of the world.

To best explore this topic, I look to what are called the content descriptions – the statements of learning that dictate what content and skills students are to learn – in addition to what are called the elaborations, the non-mandatory extensions on the content descriptions that elaborate on what could be included in the specific teaching of the content description. Further, I concern myself with the 'Knowledge and Understanding' strand of the curriculum as this is both where knowledge development is laid out and where, given its organisation around disciplines such as history which are themselves rooted in colonial methods and ways of categorising knowledge (Smith, 2020b; Marker, 2004; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999), colonial logics about both what to know and how to categorise such knowing will be concentrated. With these limits in place, I analysed the curriculum representations and 'preferred meanings' – the meanings meant to be privileged via carefully crafted representational intent (Hall, 1997) – with the following question as a guide:

> How does the Humanities and Social Sciences learning area of the *Australian Curriculum* make for a virtuous reading of the world that insulates curriculum workers and students from the potential unproductive anxiety that comes with meaningful and ethically oriented thinking?

It should be noted here before continuing that students and educators will come to the curriculum from different, convergent and intersecting subjectivities. In that light, some may find great purchase in the insulating work that curriculum does as a strategy of avoidance while others may find such virtuous anxiety a frustrating impedance to necessary political and ethical work. I refrain here from suggesting that the curriculum experience is easily characterised as settlers finding solace in virtue and Indigenous peoples being passive recipients of a curriculum invested in normalising 'good white people'. To do so is to flatten the agency of complex peoples down to simple categorisations and to ignore the efforts to agitate, speak back to, and disrupt widely accepted preferences for virtuous investment in the settler-national project.

The Australian Curriculum as virtuously anxious colonising policy

In light of the note above about the inclusion of Indigenous focused content as the primary focus, I look at explicit mentions of 'First Nations Australians', the current official term for the Indigenous peoples of these lands, to explore how content about Indigenous peoples is included but also concurrently circumscribed to help manage any possible anxiety that can help with 'an evasion of the political' (Slater, 2019, p. 3). I do so with a focus on the representation of Indigenous peoples as a discrete racialised group and their relationship to an ambiguously defined non-Indigenous subject-position. While settler-colonisation is an intersectional project and shaped by the collisions of varied forces that requires contention (Cooms et al., 2024), my focus here is on the means through which the curriculum represents Indigenous peoples and (the often unnamed) settlers as mutually distinct racialised groups.

Across the 7 years covered in the primary portion of the *Australian Curriculum* (F-6), the term 'First Nations Australians' and its cognates appear across all years with a greater concentration in years Foundation through Year 3. There is a heavy concentration of mentions of First Nations Australians in Geography and History, with only four mentions in Civics and Citizenship across Years 4 and 5 and none in Economics and Business.

Geography

Geographically, discussions of First Nations Australians becomes a vector for talking about epistemologies of place, specifically notions of Country and the use of such a term in Indigenous communities to identify place. In addition to this, mentions of First Nations Australians is frequently done to support an exploration of how Indigenous peoples care for place, that is, to develop an appreciation of such thinking about place. A lot of content descriptions focus on developing content knowledge about Indigenous ideas of Country and place without a consideration of either why this is important or how such epistemic ideas exist in relation to invasive epistemologies of place. Consider the following content descriptions found in the geography work that students are doing:

> Foundation: 'the importance of Country/Place to First Nations Australians and the Country/Place on which the school is located.' (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023, AC9HSFK04)
>
> Year 2: 'the interconnections of First Nations Australians to a local Country/Place.' (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023, AC9HS2K04)
>
> Year 3: 'the ways First Nations Australians in different parts of Australia are interconnected with Country/Place.' (Curriculum, Australian, Assessment, Authority, Reporting, 2023, AC9HS3K04)
>
> Year 5: 'the influence of people, including First Nations Australians and people in other countries, on the characteristics of a place.' (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023, AC9HS5K04)

In each of these instances, there is a rather inert exploration of Indigenous peoples and broadly rendered ideas of interconnections, Country/place, and what makes these important not just for disciplinary thinking (as interconnections is a key conceptual idea in geographic thought) but also for understanding place generally for Indigenous peoples. Absent here, however, is any critical exploration of the taken-for-granted settler conception of place that sees land as something to covet for economic exploitation and, as Mar (2010) puts it, can actually help 'to appropriate a depth of time that settler history does not have' (p. 88). Via such semantic work, the curriculum expects, but cannot guarantee, students (to) 'appreciate' Indigenous ideas of Country/place and identify it all the while eliding the settler logics and politics that demand 'appreciation'. While a critique of this point might be that the early years are too early to grapple with settler historical practice of place-making and theft, it is important to recognise that young children negotiate, early on, how to adopt and negotiate logics of race and (settler-) nationalism (Husband, 2012; Lingras, 2021; Millei, 2019a, 2019b; Millei & Imre, 2021), key logics in normalising the dispossessive and invasive realities of the settler project. In light of that, the distancing from the political here services a virtuous approach to knowing that suggests a concern about knowing is sufficient.

Elsewhere, the geography curriculum asks learners to consider how Indigenous peoples care for place, doing so in a way that identifies Indigenous communities specifically while tacitly suggesting a special responsibility for taking care of place:

> Year 1: 'how places change and how they can be cared for by different groups including First Nations Australians.' (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023, AC9HS1K04)
>
> Year 4: 'sustainable use and management of renewable and non-renewable resources, including the custodial responsibility First Nations Australians have for Country/Place.' (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023, AC9HS4K06)

While seemingly innocuous at first glance, it is important to read this alongside considerations of Indigenous relationships to considering place that focus on the natural world, conveying to learners the colonial trope of Indigenous peoples as uniquely invested in the natural landscape and not also as people negotiating the constructed environment that rests atop Country. In Year 1, for instance, in learning the difference between constructed, managed and natural features of place, the curriculum offers the following as an elaboration:

> listening to and viewing Dreaming and Creation stories of First Nations Australians that identify the natural features of a place. (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023, AC9HS1K03)

And in Year 4:

> investigating how First Nations Australians adapted ways using knowledge and practices linked to the sustainable use of resources and environments (for example, rotational use and harvesting of resources; mutton-bird harvesting in Tasmania; the use of fire; the use of vegetation endemic in the local area for food, shelter, medicine, tools and weapons; and the collection of bush food from semi-arid rangelands), and how this knowledge can be taught through stories and songs, reflecting their inherent, custodial responsibilities. (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023, AC9HS4K06)

> exploring the connection of First Nations Australians to the land and water and how they manage these resources. (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023, AC9HS4K01)[1]

In the elaborations above, a fair preferred meaning of the representational work here would lead a curriculum worker to emphasise the natural world, particularly true given the curriculum's suggestion that Indigenous peoples have an 'inherent' responsibility for caring for place. Such work becomes a signal of virtuous inclusion whereby curriculum policy makers can point to the production of (simplified) Indigenous knowledge while keeping more detailed and critical considerations absent from the work students are doing. For example, students are not asked to consider how invasion inaugurated a process of epistemic displacement and denial around taking care of land and the people that give it social and cultural meaning (i.e. place). While students and educators may take this up themselves and contend the historical premises at work, the preference for visions of Indigenous knowledges and practice independent of more critical investigations facilitates the production of virtuous learning and a logic to abscond oneself from a consideration of how place has been ravaged by settler-colonial economic ambitions. While perhaps not surprising given that curriculum policy cannot be expected to unsettle that which it is tasked with securing (its own constructed legitimacy and the sanctity of the virtuous racial state (Moreton-Robinson, 2011)), a specific effort to explicitly signal the inclusion of Indigenous ideas of place are front and centre, the result of which is the construction of a virtuous course of learning that stops short of entering an unsettling terrain of thinking about how place is not innocently conceived and regulated by settlers. While educators may contend the ease at work here, a concern about Indigenous lands can be reaffirmed over the years here, one that allows for a worry about knowing Indigenous people that allows for an escape route from meaningful political and ethical work.

History

In history, the focus is on a past that often fails to connect through to the present and onwards to the future. Such temporal disconnection is manifest in how the curriculum affords an allowable form of violence to inform historical considerations but only to

a point, one located at a time mutually exclusive to the present. Consider the following content descriptions:

> Year 4: 'the effects of contact with other people on First Nations Australians and their Countries/Places following the arrival of the First Fleet and how this was viewed by First Nations Australians as an invasion.' (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023, AC9HS4K04)

> Year 5: 'the impact of the development of British colonies in Australia on the lives of First Nations Australians, the colonists and convicts, and on the natural environment.' (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023, AC9HS5K02)

> Year 5: 'the role of a significant individual or group, including First Nations Australians and those who migrated to Australia, in the development of events in an Australian colony.' (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023, AC9HS5K03)

> Year 6: 'changes in Australia's political system and to Australian citizenship after Federation and throughout the 20th century that impacted First Nations Australians, migrants, women and children.' (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023, AC9HS6K02)

The history of invader Australia, beginning in Year 4, represents a rather predictable narrative format: the First Fleet arrived, the colonies developed and impacted Indigenous peoples, all culminating in a normalised rendition of Australia as a stable, progressive, and cemented political formation that has transcended the trappings of violence. What is absent here is a consideration of the weaving of violence into this history, one where Indigenous peoples never ceded sovereignty. The 'effects' in Year 4, the 'impacts' in Year 5, and the 'changes' in Year 6 are all signifiers of shifts and movements and do create space for students and educators to critically assert their agency and refusals of settler logic but these entry points remain without qualification, opening them up for a generous interpretation that is amenable to preferential and virtuous operationalisation. The myth of the liberal nation-state as inclusive and sufficiently open for all while extinguishing any possibility of curricular challenge is evident here, even in the ways in which past-tense language is used to contain contestation to a time away from the present. Any effort to elaborate on these ideas reinforces the safety of a possible denial and allows for 'change' or 'impact' to be presented as undeniably progressive. This plays out in curriculum work; an elaboration for the Year 6 content description above reads like so:

> describing the significance of the 1962 right to vote federally and the importance of the 1967 referendum for First Nations Australians. (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023, AC9HS6K02)

The significance of the vote is left open for interpretation and while this is unexpected given that evaluating significance is a key part of historical thinking (Lévesque, 2008; Seixas, 2017), it does ask educators and curriculum workers to draw on the mythology around the 1967 referendum and less the actual implications (Goot & Rowse, 2023) along with a distilled idea of the franchise for Indigenous peoples that focuses on 1962 when the timeline is considerably more murky (Cooper, 2018). More so, such a focus on the political system as a given and the granting of rights without an explicit recognition of how these rights were denied and suppressed originally orients historical understanding in such a way that the past is seen as something overcome, not something whose fraught

contours shape the liberal settler-national present. Such a focus on significance as supporting a potential equivalency with ideas of improvement can allow for a historically virtuous reading of the civic domain. The result of this is the creation of a workable curriculum escape route from the political work needed to overcome the trappings of the feelings of concern and worry that come with virtuous liberal anxiety.

The liberal settler-national project further depends on the construction of distance, whether spatial or temporal. Speaking to the spatial, Byrne (2003) argues that 'racial anxiety arguably becomes most intense and acute when the separating space reduces to zero – when black and white bodies actually touch' (p. 170). Applying such thinking temporally, we might imagine history curriculum doing similar work to pacify the lingering anxieties by not allowing the past to 'touch' the present for fear of a confrontation with the racialised logics of settlement/invasion. Noted earlier, the curriculum portrays the arrival of Europeans as something that 'was' an invasion and no longer continues to be one. This is not the only moment where past tense language operates to distance the past from the present, further divorcing the violence of the past from the ongoing violence of the present. For instance:

> Year 2 elaboration: 'identifying the technologies used by local First Nations Australians for aspects of daily life such as providing food, shelter and transportation.' (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023, AC9HS2K02)

> Year 4 elaboration: 'examining paintings and accounts by individuals involved in exploration and colonisation to explore the impact that British colonisation had on the lives of First Nations Australians; for example, dispossession, dislocation and the loss of lives through frontier conflict, disease, and loss of food sources and medicines, the embrace of some colonial technologies, the practice of colonial religion, and intermarriage between colonists and Australian First Nations Peoples.' (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023, AC9HS4K04)

While subtle, there is a consideration to make about the language seen here: the language denies the continuity of the impacts of colonisation (for instance, the continuing impacts of dispossession and dislocation) or the continued use of technologies to support life by Indigenous peoples by using language that allows curriculum workers to position something as exclusively contained to the past. The curriculum virtuously includes Indigenous knowledge (or, at the very least, concern about it) while not supporting the use of such thinking to make sense of the present. A retort might be made that this does not preclude drawing in more contemporary examples and discussions or a response from critically minded educators who refuse the allure of temporal distancing. Indeed, the curriculum does use the language of continuity elsewhere in a Year 4 elaboration to highlight the ongoing connections to the past in the present:

> investigating archaeological sites (for example, Nauwalabila, Devil's Lair, Lake Mungo) that show the continuous connection of early First Peoples of Australia to Country/Place and the early lifestyles of First Nations Australians. (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023, AC9HS4K01)

While the place of 'continuous' does allow for some threading of a narrative from the past to the present, the role of past tense language elsewhere makes for a preferred meaning of the past whereby the past can be read as divorced from the present. The result of this is the representation of a concern and worry about knowing about Indigenous peoples but

a worry that has temporal limits, thereby reaffirming a political distancing from Indigenous peoples in the present.

Civics and citizenship

The last discipline that makes mention of Indigenous peoples is civics and citizenship. In Year 4, students are asked to learn about diverse identities and as an elaboration tied to a content description about the diversity of various groups and their role in identity, the curriculum notes the following as an area of inquiry:

> recognising that the identity of First Nations Australians is shaped by Country/Place, language and knowledge traditions. (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023, AC9HS4K09)

While this is true, the simplicity of this curriculum statement not only elides the complex place of Country in Indigenous communities and epistemologies (Bishop, 2022; Terare & Rawsthorne, 2020) but it also denies space to consider how, as Watson (2009) puts it, 'the rawness of Aboriginal song cycles and kinship relationships to country did not fit Western ideas of progress' (p. 41). Developing knowledge here becomes the easy engagement with Country by asking students to 'recognise' something about Indigenous identity (broadly) all the while the ways in which colonial commodification of land and the denial of Indigenous relationships with place via state crafted policies of dispossession are excised from consideration as meaningful fingerprints on the present. Recognition becomes a means of placating any possible anxiety by allowing an escape from any civic (i.e. political) work.

Elsewhere, the Year 5 curriculum (via an elaboration) presents a rather expected redemptive historical narrative about Australian democracy, presenting the conferral of voting rights as part of a broader discussion of 'key features' of democracy:

> discussing key features of Australia's voting system, such as who has the right to vote and stand for election in Australia, including when women and First Nations Australians were first allowed to vote. (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023, AC9HS5K06)

Rather than providing explicit reference to how the Commonwealth and the states denied Indigenous peoples the right to vote, the curriculum focuses on the elements of progress, a key ingredient in constructing virtue. What is included serves to exclude more meaningful considerations of how and why Indigenous peoples (along with women) were granted the franchise after others and indeed, the elaboration fails to mention those who had the franchise before (white settler men), furthering the obscurity of the beneficiaries and/or agents of colonisation.

Pedagogical response

A careful reading of anxiety is needed here, particularly if we take Slater's argument seriously that this form of anxiety reveals, 'the embodiment of colonialism but also its potential to disturb and rupture, which in turn might provide an opportunity for the creation of anti-colonial relationality' (Slater, 2013, p. 4). The possibilities of anti-colonial

thought as a response to virtuous anxiety requires an attuned and aware critical hope (Russell, 2022). Such openings are allowed for when space is made to confront both the violence of the past and its continuity into the present alongside a meaningful confrontation with the techniques and allure of virtuous engagements with the past, present, and future that allow for concerns around inclusion that service a masking of the realities of symbolic and corporeal violence.

Crucial here is a recognition that adding more content about Indigenous peoples and communities is necessary but not sufficient. While the absence of content is problematic, the anxious effort to ensure the inclusion of material can also be problematic. For instance, the inclusion of voluminous content can be presented through language that requires only low level cognitive demand (Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2013). In a consideration of how the *Australian Curriculum* frames and presents Indigenous content and learning, Lowe et al. (2021) argue that the presence of Indigenous content can serve to secure settler futures. As they argue, 'greater knowledge of Indigenous histories and cultures, and an appreciation of the idea of reconciliation (howsoever conceived), does not change the basic social formation of settler colonialism' (p. 77). Moreover they warrant, 'the issue of simply including something Indigenous and increasing the number of times that "Indigenous issues" are mentioned in the *Australian Curriculum* comes to replace the principle of equity of outcomes for Indigenous students' (p. 79). Such practice is guided by an effort at reconciliatory praxis and an anxious worry about inclusion; speaking to the 'functional atomisation' in the *Australian Curriculum* of Indigenous content, Lowe et al. argue that, "the idea of 'reconciliation' does heavy lifting, recognising and ameliorating settler teachers' anxieties about historical violence and offering a narrative of peaceful resolution" (p. 76). Of import here is the idea that the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge or content in the curriculum, however voluminous, serves a strategic purpose by reinforcing the legitimacy of the liberal settler-nation all the while such work ameliorates the anxieties of settler teachers and politicians by refusing to make space for necessary and difficult politics. Above in the analysis, we see how the continued inclusion of content can service the simple presentation of virtuous intent and desire by way of foreclosing on any critical possibility in favour of simplistic ideas of inclusion that can address the affective dimensions (e.g. guilt) of virtuous anxiety.

If the inclusion of content is necessary but not sufficient, what is the way forward? The response here necessarily must be about a politically motivated and agentive reading of the curriculum that captures moments where critical engagement can be avoided. While some such as Bishop (2022) rightly contend that schools themselves are sites of colonial harm (thus pointing to a challenging difficulty with doing or even starting such work), the pressing need for political and ethical action now requires working within the confines of policy and institutional constraints that exist already as an essential starting but not finishing point. In that light, curriculum workers and students need to probe how curricular directives and materials create space of intellectual and ethical safety and the impossible learning that this results in. Here, educators and students need to be supported to develop a more critical relationship to what Slater (2020) identifies as the 'disease' of settler politics and privilege. Rather than retreat and resist the discomfort, Slater rightly argues that we need to be committed to uncertainty and 'a mode of unsettlement' that repudiates the comforts of innocence or the safety of colonial logics (p. 825). As they argue,

> To my mind, decolonization requires imagining a politics in which good white people don't know what they want: don't reach for readily available hurt feelings and the knowingness of settler logic. Importantly it also requires not using Indigenous people and country to secure a sense of self and belonging. (p. 825)

With respect to curriculum, this can be understood as not wanting a guaranteed reading of curriculum (that might be provided by, for instance, state provided resources that map on to curriculum) and/or the unquestioned adding of more 'Indigenous content' that secures 'our' sense of comfortable belonging 'here'. Rather, any consideration of a shared future necessarily must be relational and shaped by a centring of a critical reading of what is known and the limits of that knowing.

The calls above require a consideration of the idea of justice as a key endpoint. Moving forward, justice cannot be understood as supporting settler national ends, whether conservative or liberal, that both 'offer alternative pathways to the same endpoint of national unity, coherence, and *legitimacy* [emphasis added]' (Tout et al., 2024, p. 11). Such an approach to justice is inescapably unjust in rendering avenues forward as those that serve the 'good white person' and preference simplistic inclusions as adequate means of reconciliation. In light of this, we necessarily need curriculum work to ask questions *of the subjects* of the past and place not just questions about the past and place. Borrowing from Keynes (2021), 'to support just societal transformation', curriculum work needs to, 'provoke students and teachers to ask: "who am I by virtue of my past?" For settler subjects, this means an encounter with the difficult and contemporaneous knowledge of authorised wrongdoing and a reckoning with settler-occupier knowing and being' (p. 429). While this might be read as nudging curriculum workers to the comforts of solipsistic introspection that is more about the settler than justice, curriculum work necessarily needs to prompt questions of not just knowing (where virtue can be reproduced and cultivated) but also 'being' in relation to Indigenous assertions of agency and sovereignty. Here, learners and educators come to confront how their virtuous knowing can and does facilitate a 'being' that is safeguarded against the unjust ongoing patterning of injustice into material and symbolic life. Here, anxiety can be embraced as a powerful force; as Slater (2020) puts it, 'anxiety also interrupts and disturbs the self-evident, the given, and thus can be politically potent if it is harnessed to question how my feelings, reactions and attachments reflect and replicate colonial dynamics' (pp. 103–104). In light of that, there needs to be a recalibrating of a relationship with anxious responses whereby educators come to see anxiety as mobilising action and not a justification for retreating into disconnection and concern about and not with Indigenous peoples.

Conclusion

In speaking to what makes virtuous anxiety work, Slater (2019) argues that, 'for all the good intentions, "we" cannot hear the hopes and demands of Indigenous people should it risk disturbing an emotional territory, where settlers are safe, at home' (p. 23). The Humanities and Social Sciences learning area of the *Australian Curriculum* functions, simply, as a policy designed to create a safe emotional territory that makes largely white settler students feel 'at home' where they do not have to engage the demands of Indigenous peoples because learning about them is occurring. The making of a safe home for students comes at the expense of difficult conversations that can validate the experiences of Indigenous communities. The

result of this is a curriculum contribution to the sustained and ongoing rendering of Indigenous peoples ontologically homeless which requires us to witness and critically engage this violence (Moreton-Robinson (2003); Smith 2020a; Watson (2009). This is uncomfortable work but anti-colonial work necessitates discomfort; to make for a comfortable curriculum is to make for a comfortable existence for settler-nationalism as normative and safe. Here, then, we need to make it so that,

> good white people's everyday existence is interrupted, and they are thrown back upon themselves, questioning who they are, their style of inhabitation, the processes of reconciliation and recognition, and their understanding of ethical, anti-colonial future, and what it demands of them. (Slater, 2019, p. 23)

It ought to be acknowledged here that such a call might be read as implying that students need to be made to feel bad. Discomfort and interruption of virtuous existence and the consideration of settler anxiety is uncomfortable but the goal of this work is not rooted in making young people disturbed to the extent that there is a 'deep concern about Indigenous well-being, but [it is] coupled with an inability to negotiate Indigenous political agency' (Slater, 2019, p. 3). Put differently, I am not calling for a pedagogy grounded in making young settler students traumatised by the world that they inherit to the extent that they respond by clamouring for the safety of easily produced virtuous thinking and the intellectual and affective comforts of displacing the political. Rather, the goal is to interrupt the establishment of virtue before it settles in as the intractable epistemic lens for making sense of the world that forecloses on meaningful considerations of necessary questions of sovereignty, politics, and Indigenous agency. Taking no intellectual end as a given or immune to challenge is an important first step. Consider the language of 'place', a key geographic idea woven through the Humanities and Social Sciences. Place is hardly a new term and requires a careful consideration of how people and space converge to produce situated meaning that is both cultural and spatially anchored. Place is thus not just a location in the material world but is, rather, pregnant with cultural and historical meaning. Like many other concepts, we need to be cognisant of how curriculum work and the preferred meanings of something like 'place' can lend themselves to exclusions that pacify white anxieties via the marshalling of virtue. Here, rendering place as either simply synonymous with space and/or focusing largely on how all people are welcome, including an understanding simply of what Country is as a form of thinking about place, robs curriculum work of the critical dimension required to disrupt the settler desire to speak of history and geography as the accomplishments of 'good white people' in and of this place.

The task, moving forward for curriculum work (broadly conceived), is to identify those moments where virtuous intent is inserted into curriculum efforts to reassert and validate the retreat into anxiety. Curriculum thought inside a learning space can and needs to be anchored in challenging the almost natural desire for an innocent curriculum that codes a future through language that is more virtuous than it is critical. This is work that must take place at the level of curriculum policy translation, one where teachers and students can be asked to think through whose interests are advanced via simple and habitable notions of place, people and the past. Put differently, if a curriculum translation seems easy, feels 'good' and allows us to be concerned in a way that remains apolitical, how can we make it harder so that we can confront the necessary difficulty of living in colonial contexts?

Note

1. It is important to acknowledge that this is an elaboration for a historically focused content description. However, the geographic focus and the attention paid to the natural features here reinforces the geographic focus on natural environs.

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