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University of Wollongong

Christine Howe and Jade Kennedy

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Abstract:

In the introduction to *Fire Front: First Nations Power and Poetry Today*, one of several anthologies dedicated to First Nations poets published in 2020, Alison Whittaker describes the gathering momentum of First Nations poetry as a ‘sovereign renaissance’ (p. x). This paper outlines the rationale for – and tells the story of – the collaborative development of a general first-year poetry subject whose pedagogical foundations lie in an Aboriginal epistemological framework, and that privileges the work of First Nations poets. The subject, designed on Dharawal Country and informed by the University of Wollongong’s Jindaola program, is based on a grounded Aboriginal framework of Country, Kinship, Culture, Journey and Connectedness. These five principles shape the students’ journey through the subject as they are prompted, through readings, lectures and writing exercises, to consider their own relationship with place, language, family, community and culture. Teaching poetry guided by this framework is one way of responding to Ali Cobby Eckermann’s call to not only listen to the work of First Nations poets, but also to act (2020, p. 147).

Biographical notes:

Christine Howe is a writer and academic who works across various genres – novels, poetry, microfictions and essays. Her first novel, *Song in the Dark*, was published by Penguin. Christine’s prose poetry has been included in a number of Spineless Wonders anthologies and her poetry, essays and scholarly works have been published in journals such as *Griffith Review*, *Island*, *Cordite*, *TEXT* and *Law, Text, Culture*.

Jade Kennedy is a Yuin man from the Illawarra and South Coast of NSW. He has been privileged with the intimate Knowledges of his people’s customs, culture and Country, and for the past 20 years, Jade has worked within various roles, both professional and academic, at the University of Wollongong. Through his experiences and learnings, Jade has worked consistently to bring together these two worlds by focusing on building knowledge-based relationships between Aboriginal Knowledges and perspectives and tertiary education curriculum.

Keywords: First Nations, poetry, pedagogy, online learning

When we understand our connection to each other, the land and all that exists upon it, then we understand our place in all things and our belonging. (Oliver, 2020, p. 116)

... the fire of poetry is fundamentally relational. (Whittaker, 2020, p. xi)

Introduction

Why does poetry matter? When Joy Harjo, current United States poet laureate and the first American First Nations poet to hold the position, was asked this question in mid-2019, she described the value of poetry in terms of what it can do that everyday language cannot, concluding with these words:

Poetry is a tool for disruption and creation and is necessary for generations of humans to know who they are and who they are becoming in the wave map of history. Without poetry, we lose our way. (para. 6)

Acclaimed Waanyi writer and scholar Alexis Wright (2020), in an article recently published in *The Monthly*, names poetry – specifically Aboriginal poetry – as a source of strength in an increasingly unpredictable world, especially given the challenges we are already experiencing in relation to climate change:

We are moving into a new and hard world, and we truly do not know how we will eventually respond to its challenges – changes as dramatic as the ice age and super droughts that our people survived. I am looking at the renaissance of poetry in Aboriginal literature. A poetry perhaps written as we are being sung into greater strength by songlines pushing into the spirit of all things, songlines whose spirits are within us, just as our spirit is in them. (para. 46)

The convergence of these two factors – the urgent question of how to find our way in these times, to know who we are and who we are becoming, and the current renaissance in Aboriginal poetry – shaped our decision to develop a first-year poetry subject underpinned and guided by a relational Aboriginal framework.

This article, and the poetry subject it describes, were both envisioned and developed on Dharawal Country [1], at the foot of Mt Keira. Although the subject was taught wholly online in 2020, due to Covid-19 restrictions, and while many students were living in other places as the subject unfolded, the epistemological and pedagogical framework that underpin it are particular to this place. Both the subject and this paper are the result of a collaboration between Jade Kennedy, Yuin knowledge holder and custodian, and Christine Howe, creative writing lecturer of Anglo-Celtic descent. We offer this story as an example of the possibilities that can emerge when Aboriginal knowledge holders guide the development of a creative writing

subject, not only as guest lecturers or featured writers, but at the level of subject design itself. This is not so much a map to follow, as every place will have its own particular landscape and set of relationships, but is rather the story of a relational journey: between Aboriginal and Western knowledge systems; between poets; between students and teachers; and between students and their own understandings of place, language, kinship and culture.

The first part of this article outlines the rationale behind designing this subject within an Aboriginal framework. The second part takes a narrative form and is told primarily from Christine's perspective, in consultation with Jade. This reflects the fact that Christine was responsible for teaching the subject, while Jade was responsible for the ontological and epistemological framework that underpins it. Relating aspects of our collaborative journey in narrative form serves two purposes: it provides space for us to acknowledge and honour the contributions of everyone involved in the development of the subject, and it foregrounds the importance of Country. In a recently published essay 'Gifts across space and time', Yuwaalaraay storyteller Nardi Simpson (2021) sets out the protocols for engaging with the work, which she describes as a 'speak/listen trade' (para. 3). The trade, or exchange, is based on the gift of Simpson's words and the respect the reader shows through the act of listening and paying attention. In this way, the essay is offered as a relational exchange. In a similar vein, our article is offered as a gift, a story of relationship-building specific to Dharawal Country. The knowledge exchange that takes place in the writing and reading of this article cannot be understood as separate from the Country this knowledge belongs to. As such, our article does not constitute a template or a set of principles that can be directly applied in other contexts and is instead a story we invite you to share with us. As Paul Collis and Jen Crawford (2018), another Indigenous/non-Indigenous teaching team, have noted, 'Through ... relationality stories connect people, and it is in connecting that knowledge and story grow' (Section 6, para. 2).

Why teach poetry within an Aboriginal framework?

In 2002, just prior to the post-9/11 invasion of Iraq, English poet, artist and critic John Berger wrote an essay titled 'Where Are We?' Nearly two decades later, much of this essay still rings true:

People everywhere – under very different conditions – are asking themselves – where are we? The question is historical not geographical. What are we living through? Where are we being taken? What have we lost? How to continue without a plausible vision of the future? Why have we lost any view of what is beyond a lifetime? (p. 42)

In the present context, as we experience extreme weather events influenced by climate change alongside the social and economic disruptions brought about by Covid-19, these questions carry an added sense of urgency. Where *are* we? Berger goes on to suggest that the power structure accompanying globalisation is tyrannical and all-pervasive, its ultimate aim being to 'delocalize the entire world' (2002, p. 43). One of our goals in the development of the poetry

subject discussed below is to resist this delocalisation. What happens if we reframe Berger's statement, and suggest that the question is both historical *and* geographical? What if some of the answers to these questions are found in *where* we are – not only temporally and metaphorically, but physically? How might these questions be influenced by an acknowledgement of the physical places that nourish and sustain us, as well as an understanding that these places have a history that both extends into deep time and will extend well beyond our lifetimes? This acknowledgement not only relates to place, but also to the relationships that exist within these places. In the essay 'Dear Ancestor', Munanjahli and South Sea Islander scholar Chelsea Bond (2020) writes, 'The latest living Ancestor, here, now, carries a responsibility not just of living, but to think deeply about what legacy will be left in that living' (p. 5). In thinking deeply about what legacy we will leave in our living, and in encouraging our students to do the same, we begin first with acknowledging and paying respect to the Country we are learning on and from.

The starting point for the poetry subject we designed together – the fire where this journey begins – is the understanding that everything comes from Country. Country is the foundation from which all else emerges; it provides the context and nourishment from within which we live and relate. As the Yolngu Gay'wu Group of Women (2019) write in *Song Spirals*,

To talk of Country means not just land, but also the waters, the people, the winds, animals, plants, stories, songs and feelings, everything that becomes together to make up place. Country is alive for us, it cares for us, communicates with us, and we are part of it. (p. ix)

If Country is the foundation, it follows that the first poetries to be sung in this place, and the first languages to be spoken, should be acknowledged and given respect. In the essay 'Too Little, Too Much' – included in *Fire Front: First Nations Power and Poetry Today*, one of several anthologies of First Nations poetry published in 2020 – Bundjalung poet and scholar Evelyn Araluen draws a clear link between Aboriginal poetics and Country:

Aboriginal poetics have always existed. Or, at least, they fulfil every sense of always that we have access to: yaburuhma, the kind of eternal that spirals out a constant across time and space; forever, the kind of promise we make to spread between every time. Since the land, since the land made us shape, since the land gave us voice, since we had learned enough to inscribe it back, since we took up tools tossed here by the uninvited. We sing it back as it is sung back to us in every bird song, every branch ache, every wave heave. The form has changed, as have we, but the songlines still hum in the soil while we read and write upon it. (p. 39)

Teaching poetry on Country that exists as a complex set of interconnected relationships – between land, waters, people, animals and stories – when these relationships have been fundamentally misunderstood, and treated with disrespect and violence through continuing acts of colonisation, requires care, courage, and a willingness to try new pedagogical approaches. Our approach has been to foreground relationality, to walk this journey together.

The capacity for a new set of relationships to emerge based on respect, understanding and, ultimately, reciprocity is preceded by a commitment to listen to each other. Alison Whittaker (2020), in the introduction to *Fire Front*, suggests that

the fire of poetry is fundamentally relational. There is someone who is spoken to, and someone who is the speaker, sure – but there is also someone who is made responsible to the work and someone who is made responsible by the work, and an ecological sense that all this poetry relates to and enables the other. (p. xi)

Teaching poetry using a framework that privileges Country, and takes seriously the responsibility of both listening and speaking, has the potential to broaden students' understanding of their own relational and cultural positions. To return to Joy Harjo's earlier quote, this supports students to develop a deeper understanding of who they are and who they are becoming. Their learning takes place within the context of a writing community: a group of students who, through undertaking common writing tasks and small group workshopping, walk this path together. In this way, the subject situates all learning in a relational context. This aligns with American scholar and activist bell hooks's approach to what she terms 'education as the practice of freedom', which 'enables us to confront feelings of loss and restore our sense of connection. It teaches us how to create community' (2003, p. 51). It is also similar to Paul Collis and Jen Crawford's approach to subject development, described in their two-part article 'Six groundings for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander story in the Australian creative writing classroom' (2017; 2018).

Teaching poetry within an interconnected Aboriginal framework not only encourages connection and community among students but is also one way of acknowledging and celebrating the current renaissance in Aboriginal poetry. As Alexis Wright (2020) puts it,

There should be no more talking about Aboriginal literature as a small offshoot of Australian literature. There is no one basket that fits all in terms of creating from an imaginary shaped by the deep, rich, ancient legacy of this continent, and tempered through the cross-fertilisation with global literatures. (para. 28)

The broad range of First Nations poetry currently being written, spoken, published and performed has been widely noted (Leane, 2020; Whittaker, 2020; Wright, 2020;). Whittaker (2020) outlines the difficulty of selecting poems for publication in the *Fire Front* anthology, given the range of poetry to choose from:

Poetics are practised extensively by our communities – across oral storytelling, embedding storytelling insights into Language itself, music and song, conversational wordwork, published poetry with major publishing houses, small press poetry, self-published print poetry, slam poetry, protest poetry, performance poetry. (pp. ix-x)

Privileging the work of First Nations poets not only honours this current renaissance, it also places these poems in the context of the long history of poetics practised across the continent. This is one small step towards Wright's call for us 'to build a literary framework based on the ancient storytelling tradition that comes from this country' (2020, para. 42).

Developing a general poetry subject that both is underpinned by an Aboriginal epistemological framework and prioritises the work of First Nations poets also addresses an issue that poet and scholar Bonny Cassidy points out in the article 'Structural whiteness and the business of creative writing in Australia: developing reflexive pedagogy'. Cassidy suggests that although there are a number of non-Indigenous academics who have incorporated First Nations literature into existing creative writing courses, this work is often positioned as marginal, rather than central to the discipline (2020, pp. 5-6). The poetry subject outlined below addresses this in two ways. First, the epistemological framework for the subject, the way in which knowledge is constructed, is grounded in an Aboriginal knowledge system. Second, the subject is neither focused solely on First Nations poetry nor does it simply incorporate a few poems by First Nations poets into an existing subject. Rather, the work of First Nations poets provides a consistent point of reference that runs throughout the entire subject. These poems are then read alongside the work of other poets from around the world, which centralises First Nations poetry rather than isolating or exoticising it.

Taking our cue from Indigenous/non-Indigenous teaching teams such as Paul Collis and Jen Crawford (2017; 2018), Sandra Phillips and Clare Archer-Lean (2019), and Lilly Brown and Dave Collis (2019), this article is offered as an 'insight to Indigenous and non-Indigenous curricula collaboration' (Phillips & Archer-Lean, 2019, p. 27). As Phillips and Archer-Lean (2019) note in their article 'Decolonising the Reading of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Writing':

Conscious and informed pedagogy design, teaching practice, and strategic dissemination of those interrogations are necessary to build a knowledge base that takes learners and teachers beyond colonialist habit. (p. 27)

To build this knowledge base, as Lilly Brown and Dave Collis (2019) suggest, 'we need to make the crucial distinction between the superficial inclusion of Indigenous perspectives, and a deeper and more equitable engagement with Indigenous knowledge systems and practices' (p. 132). The journey we share here is one of collaboration. We discuss new possibilities that can emerge as different knowledges enter into conversation with each other, and what it might look like to provide safe places and spaces from within which to gently guide students – and teachers – beyond colonialist habit.

Journeying together I: Developing the framework for CACW105 (Poetry Foundation)

The relationships that made the development of this subject possible were primarily formed through the University of Wollongong's Jindaola program (see Kennedy et al., 2019). Each

cohort of Jindaola participants takes part in a program that runs over an eighteen-month period. As part of the program, teaching staff from a number of interdisciplinary teams from across the university, academic developers and Aboriginal community members regularly meet in a series of formal and informal gatherings designed to share, exchange, and co-create knowledge (Kennedy et al., 2019, p. 155). The program is not only designed to embed Indigenous knowledges in the teaching curriculum, but to invite the participants into a particular relationship with Country and with each other:

For participants walking the journey of *Jindaola* it is a process of decolonising one's thinking ... a deconstruction and grounding in Country with relation to knowledge. It thereafter becomes a reconstruction through experiences, both individual and shared, around what it means to 'know' in an Aboriginal way, and to then bring that 'knowing' into an authentic and respectful relationship between the participants' disciplinary Knowledges and the relevant Aboriginal Knowledges. (Kennedy, 2019, p. 24)

The English/Creative Writing Jindaola team – which consisted of Evelyn Araluen, Michael Griffiths, Christine Howe, Luke Johnson and Ika Willis, with advice also being offered by Indigenous Studies lecturer David Kampers – saw this as an opportunity to discuss what it might mean to decolonise the English/Creative Writing curriculum. These conversations began in 2018 and are ongoing. A number of changes have been implemented at both subject and degree level in response to the team's participation in the Jindaola program, and another project specific to the English/Creative Writing team, Yaangarra, has also emerged as a result.

The Yaangarra project – based on a concept designed by Bundjalung poet, scholar, and current editor of *Overland*, Evelyn Araluen – involves the development of a database that allows students and teachers of Aboriginal literature to search for information about First Nations authors in a way that foregrounds the importance of Country and the principles of respect and reciprocity. As part of the development of the Yaangarra database, a symposium was held at the University of Wollongong in December 2019 to gather feedback about the project and discuss how Aboriginal literature could be taught at a tertiary level in more culturally appropriate ways. A key event included Araluen in conversation with Wiradjuri poet and scholar Jeanine Leane, and one of the insights that emerged from this conversation was that including numerous First Nations texts in the curriculum is a valuable way of ensuring the teaching of these texts is not tokenistic. This observation became one of the sparks that set us on the journey towards developing our new, first-year poetry subject: not only would we include more than one First Nations poet on the reading list, we would include work by First Nations poets every week.

The second spark occurred several months later, in the brief interlude between the end of the devastating 2019-2020 fire season and the first Covid lockdown. The Illawarra was flooding. A large gathering of Jindaola participants from a wide range of disciplines met together in a conference room on campus to share aspects of our personal and pedagogical journeys. Rain tumbled down the glass, umbrellas dripped on the carpet, we swapped stories of a summer of fire and grief, we were still allowed to hug each other. Listening to other participants outline

how their teaching practices had changed in response to the Jindaola program, I (Christine) realised that maybe there was scope here for doing something radically different with this subject – not only could the reading list prioritise First Nations poets, the entire framework for the subject could be rethought. At that stage, I had no idea that I would also be required to teach the subject entirely online, which would also influence it in unexpected ways.

When the Covid lockdown was well under way, I contacted Jade to ask if he would help me design a new poetry subject. At that point, all I had was a generic description for a first-year poetry subject that was to commence in Spring session 2020 (less than six months away), a commitment to include at least one First Nations poet every week, and a desire to do something different with the framework of the subject – something I knew I couldn't come up with on my own. Over the next month or so, Jade, myself, and Gamilaroi poet Luke Patterson, also involved with the Yaangarra project, met a number of times via Zoom. These meetings were characterised by a willingness to listen to each other, a respect for each other's areas of expertise, and an openness to experimentation: a willingness for something new to emerge that none of us had seen before. I had previously worked with Jade and Luke enough to trust that my initial ideas – no matter how inappropriate or unworkable – would be treated gently. For me, this collaboration was similar to the kind outlined by Phillips and Archer-Lean, who describe the 'richness of Indigenous/non-Indigenous respectful collaboration founded on non-Indigenous listening and Indigenous mentorship: of creating curriculum to embody professional relationships of empathy and respect' (2019, p. 31).

During one of our discussions, Jade suggested a guiding framework for the subject, utilised in part within the Jindaola program, based on five key principles: Country, Kinship, Culture, Journey and Connectedness. This resonated with me. I could see that what I wanted the students to learn could be taught in the context of these principles, so I began drawing up a map of what the subject might look like. After further consultation and workshopping with Jade and Luke, the framework was shaped into three interconnected modules: Country; Kinship; and Culture, Journey and Connectedness. The first module, Country, provides the foundation for the entire subject. The second module, Kinship, builds on the first and introduces the idea of human and non-human kinship. The final module encourages students to think about their own cultural context, who has influenced them, and what they would like to contribute. Within this structure, each module is comprised of a number of different weekly topics that cover a specific poetic technique and include questions to help students navigate their way through the module. The table below shows the three modules, the weekly topics that make up each module, and the key questions relevant to each weekly topic.

MODULE ONE: COUNTRY	
Weekly Topic	Key Questions
Developing Observation Skills: Sensory Detail	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Where do you live?</i> • <i>What connections/disconnections do you have with this place?</i>
Research and Poetry: Using Archival Material	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What places have shaped you?</i> • <i>What has shaped those places?</i>
Celebrating Words: Texture and Rhythm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What language/s do you speak?</i> • <i>Where did this language originate, and how has it changed over time?</i> • <i>What do you love about your language/s?</i>
MODULE TWO: KINSHIP	
Project: Interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Who are the members of your family, or who do you think of as family?</i> • <i>What are their stories?</i>
Imagery and Metaphor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Who are you intimately connected to?</i> • <i>Who is important to you? Include non-human kinship: animals, birds, rocks, trees etc.</i>
Poetic Conversations: Found Poetry, Collage, Epistles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Who belongs to your community?</i> • <i>Who do you interact with regularly?</i> • <i>Who inhabits the same spaces as you (virtual, physical or both)?</i>
MODULE THREE: CULTURE, JOURNEY, CONNECTEDNESS	
Rhythm and Repetition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What do you do regularly?</i> • <i>What routines shape your days/weeks/years?</i> • <i>What celebrations/rituals do you value?</i>
Identifying and Experimenting with Poetic Techniques	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What poets 'speak' to you?</i> • <i>Whose work do you find meaningful?</i>
The Role of the Poet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What would you like to offer?</i> • <i>Where might your own writing 'fit' in a global context?</i>
Introductions, Poetic Statements, Manifestos!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What have you learnt this session?</i> • <i>What key images/ideas/experiences have shaped your poetry (and you)?</i>

Table 1: CACW105 (Poetry Foundation) modules

This approach provides a safe structure by which to guide students towards a deeper understanding of themselves, and their place within their own communities, in the context of developing their capacity for writing, reading and workshopping poetry. Structuring the subject in this way also places the knowledge and skills that students would have learned regardless of how the subject was organised into a relational context. In this framework, the students' own relationships to place, family, community and culture are acknowledged and valued. This acknowledgement provides the foundation from which their own writing can develop over the session. As was highlighted earlier, underpinning the entire subject is the ongoing foregrounding of Country: it is taken as a given that we are learning on Aboriginal land and that knowledge is held within Country. The structure of the subject itself encourages students to pay attention to, and to develop a greater understanding of, the places they inhabit or are intimately connected to. As a result, we skirt the quagmire of culture wars, guilt and shame, with the view to providing all students with a safe place from which to acknowledge the validity of relationships to place in an Aboriginal way, and to take responsibility for their personal and collective journeys. Beginning with Country, and situating all knowledge learned in the subject in relation to Country, provides students with a basic understanding that they are living on storied land, that this land has been sung for many thousands of years, and that their own writing takes place in the context of this living history.

Journeying together II: Developing the reading list

Once the framework for the subject was in place, the next step was to compile the reading list, which was developed in consultation with Luke Patterson and Sydney-based poet Kate Middleton. We began by prioritising the work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers, both established and emerging, and the reading list now includes work by First Nations poets Evelyn Araluen, Tony Birch, Chelsea Bond, Ali Cobby Eckermann, Charmaine Papertalk Green, Natalie Harkin, Yvette Holt, Lorna Munro, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Luke Patterson, Kirli Saunders, Jared Thomas and Alison Whittaker. The poems were chosen specifically to assist students in engaging with the weekly topics and, as such, demonstrate the use of particular poetic techniques while also providing an insight into how these poets express their own relationships to Country, Kinship, Culture, Journey and Connectedness. For example, Luke Patterson's 'Darkinjung Burning' (2019) appears during the first module, in the weekly topic Developing Observation Skills: Sensory Detail. This poem is read in the context of developing students' understanding of Country. Leading on from this is a writing exercise that invites students to describe, as precisely as they can, particular aspects of the place where they currently live: for example, any bodies of water (the ocean, a dam, a creek, a storm-water drain, a puddle); the people, plants and animals they come into contact with each day; the particular sound of the wind; and their own feelings about this place. In this way, the students develop their capacity for attention, in the context of a deepening understanding and recognition of Country. American poet and scholar Lucy Alford (2020) describes attention as 'poetry's most essential "raw material"', and goes on to suggest that 'the way we attend to the world changes the world we perceive, and the world we perceive changes the way we attend' (pp. 2-3).

Through this exercise, students are encouraged to attend to the places they live in, with ‘Darkinjung Burning’ providing an example of the poetic possibilities that can emerge through paying close attention to Country.

As we continued to gather readings, Kate suggested also including the work of First Nations poets from other continents, particularly North America [2]. As a result, the following poets were added to the reading list: Joy Harjo, current US poet laureate and a member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation; Inupiaq-Inuit poet dg nanouk okpik; Mojave poet Natalie Diaz; Elise Paschen, a member of the Osage Nation; Craig Santos Perez, a native Chamorro (Chamorro) from the Pacific Island of Guåhan/Guam; Carter Revard, who is of Osage, Ponca, Irish and Scotch-Irish heritage; and Layli Long Soldier, a citizen of the Oglala Lakota Nation. Again, the poems themselves were chosen to highlight specific poetic techniques within the context of each module. For example, dg nanouk okpik’s poem ‘Necklaced Whalebone’ (2018) is included in the ‘Kinship’ module, under the weekly topic ‘Imagery and Metaphor’. The poem is read in the context of more-than-human kinship, and okpik’s innovations in the use of metaphor are discussed through this lens.

The next step was to add a wide range of poems shaped by the techniques discussed in the weekly topics, always in the context of how these works fit within the broader themes of Country, Kinship, Culture, Journey and Connectedness. Due to Kate’s experience in curriculum development, and her extensive knowledge of the field, her contribution at this stage was invaluable. We aimed to include one pre-20th century poem most weeks, and to also include a diversity of contemporary poets, both Australian and international. For example, the Kinship module begins with a week focused on students exploring their own relationships with family members, or people they see as family. The reading list for this week includes a range of poems focused on family relationships. Two poems about mother-daughter relationships – American poet Sharon Olds’s ‘The Month of June: 13 ½’ (2004), which offers a mother’s perspective, and Yankunytjatjara poet Ali Cobby Eckermann’s ‘Dip’ (2015), written from a daughter’s perspective – are read alongside two poems about father-son relationships: Irish poet Seamus Heaney’s ‘Digging’ (1966) and Indonesian-born American poet Li-Young Lee’s ‘Eating Alone’ (1986). Gomeri poet Alison Whittaker’s prose poem ‘begat beddeath’ (2018), which explores generational family relationships, is also included, as is Mojave poet Natalie Diaz’s ‘My Brother at 3AM’ (2012) and Nukunu poet Jared Thomas’s ‘Nanna’s beanies’ (2005). In their writing exercise for this particular week, students are encouraged to interview a family member and write a poem based on this experience. The reading list provides examples to assist students in developing their own work but, more importantly, within the grounded Aboriginal framework that forms the foundation for the subject, the poems provide the *context from within which* the students consider their own family relationships. In this way, the work of poets like Cobby Eckermann, Thomas and Whittaker are read in relation to the students’ own experiences, which resists the marginalisation or exoticisation of these texts.

Other interesting intersections allowed for the works of canonical English poets to be re-contextualised alongside contemporary First Nations poets. For example, in the final week of the Country module, Celebrating Words: Texture and Rhythm, students read Evelyn Araluen’s

‘Learning Bundjalung on Tharawal’ (2016) and view Lorna Munro’s performance of ‘Yilaalu – Bu-Gadi (Once Upon a Time in the Bay of Gadi)’ (2013) alongside William Wordsworth’s ‘Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey’ (1798). Exposing students, even briefly, to First Nations languages with grammatical structures different to English allows for a deepening of their understanding of the connections between language and Country. For example, as Evelyn Araluen articulated in an interview given specifically for students in this subject:

In Bundjalung language, and in many Aboriginal languages, the ‘I’ is actually the least important part of any sentence, and so the way that you grammatically should structure your lines should be to put the land first ... instead of saying ... ‘I’m a Bundjalung woman,’ you would say: ‘Bundjalung Country, woman, I’. (E. Araluen, personal communication, August 13, 2020)

Introducing poetry students to an ontological system that many of them may not have previously been aware of, through demonstrating how this ontology is expressed in grammatical structures, opens a window into another way of being and suggests new opportunities for language experimentation. This approach recognises the complexities inherent in the fact that English is both the language of colonisation on this continent and the language we are teaching our students to write in, while also recognising that Aboriginal languages embody a particular relationship to Country – embedded in their very grammar – that English does not.

Journeying together III: Teaching (online, in a pandemic)

The next stage of the journey involved inviting the students to walk with us. This was complicated by the fact that the class needed to be taught online, which meant we were unable to share the same Country at the same point in time, and local knowledge holders were not able to meet with the students in person. However, these limitations also presented us with other possibilities. For example, instead of Jade giving an in-person lecture to contextualise the students’ learning on Dharawal Country, and to introduce the epistemological framework that shapes the subject, in the first week of classes, we recorded a Zoom interview instead. Following on from this, recorded Zoom interviews with a number of poets were also provided to the students as the session progressed, some of whom, given their geographical location at the time, would not have been able to give face-to-face lectures, including Luke Patterson, Evelyn Araluen, Yvette Holt, and non-Indigenous poets Kate Middleton and Jennifer Saunders. These interviews allowed students to hear from a range of poets about their writing process, again within the context of how their work relates to Country, Kinship, Culture, Journey and Connectedness.

Had we been able to meet in person, yarning circles would have been used as a key pedagogical tool to help build a sense of community among the students, and to develop clear protocols for relating respectfully to each other during class discussions and in the workshop setting. In the

online space, developing a sense of community among the students in other ways was a priority. To facilitate this, each Zoom tutorial began with students sharing their personal response to the poem from the weekly readings that had resonated most with them. They were then placed into small groups to workshop the poems they had written the week before, in break-out rooms. The tutorials ended with the introduction of an open-ended writing exercise that linked together the readings, weekly topic and module and shaped the poems the students worked on over the following week (see above example of the writing exercise based on ‘Darkinjung Burning’). Placing students in the same workshopping groups each week built a sense of camaraderie between them, which, anecdotally, also helped to counter some of the pandemic-induced isolation many students were experiencing [3].

The importance of care and connection in an online learning environment is highlighted by Katie Burke and Stephen Larmar in their recent paper ‘Acknowledging another face in the virtual crowd: Reimagining the online experience in higher education through an online pedagogy of care’ (2021), particularly given the growing evidence that ‘online students are less likely to experience a sense of identity and personal engagement with their learning, their peers and their instructor’ than students who study face-to-face (p. 602). The ‘online pedagogy of care’ described by Burke and Larmar has some resonances with the way in which the Country-Kinship-Culture-Journey-Connectedness framework shaped our online learning environment. Two principles are particularly relevant in our context: modelling care through intentionally person-centred online interaction, and dialogical orientation (Burke & Larmar, 2021, pp. 606, 608).

Burke and Larmar suggest that pedagogical care can be modelled to students studying online ‘through a personable learning environment, founded on genuine, warm interactions (synchronous and asynchronous) where students can gain a sense of the educator’s personality’ (2021, p. 606). The recorded Zoom interviews described above not only gave students a sense of my own personality, as the lecturer, but also those of the poets and knowledge holders who were interviewed, all of whom shared personal stories about landscapes, events and relationships that have shaped them and their poetry. Towards the end of the session, I shared a poem I had written about my grandmother in response to one of the same exercises the students had completed earlier in the session, in the Kinship module. Sharing my own work was a considered decision, and was contextualised as a reciprocal gift for the students, who had all shared work explicitly linked to their families and the places they felt connected to throughout the session.

The value of ongoing, respectful dialogue between myself, Jade, the poets who were interviewed and the students themselves was embedded in the subject design, and informed my interactions with students in Zoom tutorials. As noted by Burke and Larmar (2021),

The cultivation of a learning environment designed to foster an interactive community of caring learners will explicitly value multiple perspectives, and therefore intentionally provide opportunities for open-ended dialogue, in which individual learners understand

that their diverse perspectives are valued, and where they can express something of their unique self in the context of their learning. (p. 608)

Open-ended dialogue was encouraged throughout the session, from introducing each tutorial with student responses to the readings through to encouraging every student to contribute to small-group workshopping in break-out rooms. Encouraging a classroom culture that valued each student's contribution resulted in dialogue characterised by respect and a willingness to share. For example, towards the end of the session, in the Culture, Journey, Connectedness module, students were asked to choose their own readings from a range of online resources – websites such as the Poetry Foundation, and online literary journals such as *Cordite* and *Plumwood Mountain* – and to bring one of these poems to class to perform. This exercise was linked explicitly to the 'Journey' principle and served two main purposes: to encourage students to understand how their own writing journey relates to and is informed by the work of other writers; and to provide a safe place for them to share their personal responses to poems that resonated with them. The dialogue that arose – both verbally and in the chat – as students explained what they appreciated about their chosen poem demonstrated the care and respect these students had developed for each other over the session.

There were some frustrations and limitations arising from the online learning environment, despite our efforts to develop a strong sense of connection and dialogue. While the break-out rooms provided a useful way for students to engage with each other's work in small groups, at times some students struggled with how to deliver useful feedback, despite specific questions provided to guide the workshopping process. It was also disappointing not to be able to offer students the experience of place-based learning as a cohort, or to be able to engage in more spontaneous discussions related to how each student's understanding and interpretation of the principles of Country, Kinship, Culture, Journey and Connectedness changed and deepened as the subject progressed.

Walking forward, looking back

We're at a place where we don't know ourselves anymore. People must question their connectedness to all that was, all that is and all that is going to be ... Our isolation is destroying where we are, where we are to go and obliterates where we have come from. We're running forward so fast that when we need to find our way back to our beginning, we won't know from where we came, from darkness. (Oliver, 2020, p. 111)

We have laid this journey out, hoping it might provide another step towards further collaboration between Aboriginal knowledge holders and teachers of literature and writing. Here, on Dharawal Country, the interconnected Aboriginal framework of Country, Kinship, Culture, Journey and Connectedness has assisted students to map their own connections, their own relationships and cultural context, which has the potential to not only inform their poetry, but also their understanding of the world and their place in it. The inner lives of our students deserve to be treated with the utmost care and compassion. As our world continues to change,

they will need all the resilience, creativity and energy they can muster to fight for, sustain and thrive in a habitable world. Knowing where they come from, and how they would like to contribute in their own social context, is crucial. What could be more fitting than learning about their own place in our current world, and how to express themselves through their poetry, from within the context of the world's oldest living culture?

Notes

[1] Dharawal is the northern dialect of the Yuin peoples, and therefore the reference to Dharawal Country throughout this paper relates specifically to the northern areas of the Yuin Nation, which includes the lands, waters, peoples that span from the Hawkesbury River in the north to the Murrumbidgee Entrance in the south to the dividing range along the Snowy Mountains and escarpments to Sydney in the west and bound by the Pacific Ocean in the East.

[2] The inclusion of more First Nations poets from other regions is planned for the next iteration of the subject. For example, two of Aotearoa's past poets laureate, Māori poet Hone Tuwhare; and Selina Tusitala Marsh, Auckland-based Pasifika poet of Samoan, Tuvaluan, English, Scottish and French descent, will be included; as will Sámi poet Niillas Holmberg, from Sámiland, Finland.

[3] Given various time constraints resulting from the upheaval across the university sector in 2020, we were unable to secure ethics approval to use specific student responses for this particular article. However, anecdotally, a number of students commented that they particularly appreciated the interviews, and that the writing exercises had given them a new perspective on their own family relationships and on their perception of Country.

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