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Research Article

Challenging Euro-Centric and Colonial Geography via Decolonial and Indigenised Curriculum: An Australia Case Study

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Abstract: *People, Place, and Social Difference (PPSD)* is a first-year subject at Western Sydney University enrolling up to 1,200 students annually from across the social sciences. Most students are first in their family to attend university, and many are of refugee or migrant background. The subject introduces geographical learning through an examination of the interrelations between society, economy, culture, and place with an emphasis on diversity and social justice. Since 2020, the subject has undergone a curriculum transformation grounded in postcolonial critique and an acknowledgement of geography's entanglements with colonial knowledge production and practice. Through a decolonising and Indigenising approach, the curriculum embeds Indigenous perspectives, intersectional analysis and structured self-reflexivity. Using *PPSD* as a case study, this paper critically interrogates how teaching, fieldwork, and curriculum design can reproduce or disrupt colonial logics. It demonstrates how critical and decolonial pedagogies can equip multidisciplinary cohorts to engage with contemporary societal complexity and uncertainty. It outlines practical strategies for embedding Indigenous and postcolonial approaches in curriculum and fieldwork and highlights the transformative potential of such learning. In doing so, the paper offers practice-based insights into how geography education can respond meaningfully to global challenges and foster ethically engaged, future-oriented university graduates.

Keywords: curriculum, decolonising, postcolonial, geography teaching, fieldwork

Highlights:

- Geography is a discipline embedded in colonialism and geographers often perpetuate the discipline's colonial roots.
- Indigenising geography curriculum is paramount and urgent in the decolonial project.
- Decolonised and Indigenised curriculum has transformative potential for multidisciplinary undergraduate students.

1. Introduction

Since 2020 I have been the subject coordinator of *People, Place and Social Difference (PPSD)*, a first-year core subject in the School of Social Sciences, Western Sydney University. During that time, the subject has been completed by over 6,000 undergraduate students in policing, criminology, heritage and tourism, social work, humanitarian and development studies, geography, sociology, urban planning, education, and psychology. While delivered to a large multidisciplinary student cohort, *PPSD* is a geography subject. It examines the nexus between society, economy, culture and place with an emphasis on diversity and social justice. The subject is taught using geographical approaches that equip students to engage with societal complexity and uncertainty. The sharing and development of decolonised geo-

graphical knowledge fosters students understanding of social difference and disparity/privilege and how they are manifest spatially in Australia, particularly in Sydney – the nation’s oldest and most populous city. Social differences in relation to socio-economic opportunity, culture, sexuality and gender, age and ability, among other forms of diversity are examined geographically. They are also examined in relation to colonialism and what hooks (2013) terms the ‘interlocking systems of domination’ (racism, capitalism, heteronormativity, sexism, ableism, and ageism). I take the view that while these systems of domination (racism, patriarchy, ableism, sexism, heteronormativity, classism etc.) can operate outside colonial systems, colonialism cannot operate without them. These systems are essential for the functioning of colonialism as they establish hierarchies of humans to justify invasion, land theft, settlement, exploitation, apartheid, genocide, and other forms/tools of colonial control and oppression (Quijano, 2007; Glenn, 2015). I therefore prioritise an intersectional approach that seeks to uncover and destabilise the intersecting systems of power and oppression central to the colonial project. Students are therefore prompted to consider how these differences and systems of power are experienced in place and inform a complex interweaving of disparities and privileges relating to access to services and resources, social, economic and political participation, and human rights. In *PPSD*, students complete a series of weekly learning activities where they are exposed to theoretical and practical content via lecture ‘pods’, readings, and interactive activities; taught practical research skills that are put into practice via project work, workshop activities, and assessments; and provided space to discuss, debate and develop solutions within a supportive environment.

My coordination of *PPSD* coincides with my broader project to participate in the decolonisation of the discipline of geography. I am an Asian-European female academic living and working on Indigenous lands in the country we now call Australia¹. I have both privileged from and been marginalised by the ongoing processes of colonisation in Australia and across the globe. I am acutely aware that my livelihood is dependent on my employment in a sector/institution that sustains current forms of coloniality (see Enslin and Hedge 2024, Barker and Pickerill 2024, Crosas 2022) on colonised land (Australia). Additionally, I am a participant in a discipline rooted to processes of colonisation. The historical foundation of geography in European imperialism and continued colonial practices are under increasing scrutiny (Esson et al., 2017; Noxolo, 2017; Radcliffe, 2017; Clement, 2019; Barker & Pickerill, 2020). Practices such as mapping, the ‘discovery’ of new places and people, and the documentation and description of such discoveries, were (and are) practices central to European imperialist expansion and colonisation, and precursors to our discipline (Johnson, 2000, p.163). Modern geography of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century continued to serve the interests of European imperialism including territorial acquisition, economic exploitation, militarism and the practice of class and race domination (Hudson, 1977, p.12 as cited in Driver, 1992, p. 27; see also Wood, 1992; Duncan and Sharp, 1993; Duncan, 1993). In Australia, ‘geography, land use planning, and surveying (later spatial sciences) have been deeply implicated in Australian settler colonialism, the construction of terra nullius, territorial claims, Aboriginal dispossession, and technologies of conquest and genocide’ (Williams et al., 2022, p.103. see Howitt & Jackson, 1998; Anderson, 2005; Powell, 1997; and Porter, 2017).

Today, geographers often continue to perpetuate the discipline’s colonial roots by ignoring or minimising issues of racism, ethnic difference and power structures (Esson et al., 2017). Or, by continuing to conceptualise and examine diversity and difference via White supremacist or Eurocentric lenses. Colonial methods, ideas, concepts and approaches are not only perpetuated within geography research, but also geography teaching which ‘is an important mechanism of cultural dominance’ (Howitt, 2001, p.147). The way we teach and the curriculum we use are pivotal to the way we build and share knowledge. As Laing (2021) argues, it is not only *what* we teach that matters, but *how*’ (p.6, original emphasis).

Decolonised geographical approaches therefore enrich students’ learning by expanding what counts as legitimate knowledge and whose perspectives are valued in understanding space, place, and society (Winter et al., 2024; Tarisayi 2023 Daigle & Sundburg 2017). By foregrounding Indigenous perspectives and epistemologies, and critically examining the colonial foundations of the discipline, students can develop more reflexive, ethically grounded forms of spatial and relational thinking (Yarisayi 2024; Long et al., 2019). This deepened awareness enables them to recognise how power operates through landscapes, borders, institutions, and everyday practices. This fosters a more nuanced engagement with diversity and inequality (Tarisayi 2024; Long et al. 2019). Beyond the classroom, such learning cultivates humility,

¹ The Australian nation, as part of the British Commonwealth, was declared at Federation in 1901. Australia is comprised of over 250 Aboriginal nations/language groups which have existed for over 60,000 years (AIATSIS 2025).

relational accountability, and the capacity to work across differences in ethical, meaningful, and socially just ways. These qualities are vital for professional practice and civic life in complex plural societies (Tarisayi 2024; Jarvis 2023).

Given my embeddedness in the colonial project, my academic career is driven by an imperative to decolonise my research and teaching practice, ‘calling attention to the reality of [my] accountability’ (hooks, 2013, p.37) to challenge and strive to dismantle the interrelated systems of colonial power (see also Barker and Pickerill 2024, de Leeuw and Hunt, 2018, Esson et al., 2017). I am hopeful that the changes we make can move us toward a decolonial future within and beyond the classroom (see also Laing, 2021 and Howitt, 2001). I take inspiration from Paradies (2020), Aboriginal-Asian-Anglo Australian of the Wakaya people who explains that ‘Decoloniality/decolonisation is about deep awareness of colonial pasts, cognisance of present colonial conditions and striving for “a future ... free from the colonial past”’ (p. 441 quoting Ming Dong Gu, 2020). There is no better place than the classroom, which ‘remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy’ (hooks, 1994, p.12) for its potential to facilitate transgression and freedom, to do this decolonial work.

In this paper I reflect on the practical steps I have taken to move towards a decolonised version of *PPSD*. This has included a combination of diversifying and Indigenising content and perspectives, revising pedagogy and ways of learning, raising students’ awareness of colonial systems in the past and present, facilitating their critical analysis of power structures, embedding reflexivity, and fostering relational and place-based learning. Within the confines of this paper, I focus my discussion on my efforts to Indigenise curriculum within this project. This is in acknowledgement that the ongoing impacts of colonisation on Indigenous people and re-centring of Indigenous lives, lands, perspectives and knowledges is paramount and urgent in the decolonial project—in geography and beyond (Williams et al., 2021; Barker and Pickerill, 2019). It is important to note, however, that I take an intersectional approach and acknowledge the many ways in which colonialism oppresses and marginalises. Therefore, my work decolonising my teaching practice does not conceptualise Indigenising curriculum as a standalone project, but one that is intrinsically linked to unsettling the multiple systems of colonial domination as I signpost throughout this paper.

I acknowledge that I am not the first or only geographer doing this work and there have been inspiring achievements in Australia and internationally. For example, Liang’s (2021) work at the University of Sussex and Williams et al.’s (2021) work at the University of Tasmania. In fact, there are now sessions at international geography conferences dedicated to decolonising curriculum. My own university strives for these achievements in geography and other disciplines via the embedding of Indigenous Graduate Attributes and School and University Level teaching awards for Indigenising curriculum. While there is still a long way to go to dismantle the colonial traditions of geography teaching, given such activity, I am optimistic that the communities of practice advocated by Williams et al. (2021) are gaining momentum.

This paper therefore builds upon and extends the existing body of literature on decolonising and Indigenising geography curriculum by reflecting on a unique case study which is *PPSD*. I aim to contribute to the conversation of ‘how to’ tackle colonial hegemony in the curriculum and thereby society by outlining my own process. I provide examples of how I, a non-Indigenous academic, have attempted to decolonise the curriculum and field work in *PPSD*, and suggest how I do this in engaging and meaningful ways for diverse multidisciplinary cohorts of students. The case study highlights curriculum innovation at scale within a multidisciplinary context, showing how postcolonial critique, reflexivity, and intersectional analysis can reshape teaching, fieldwork, and knowledge production. By foregrounding Indigenous perspectives and interrogating colonial legacies within the discipline, the paper advances transformative approaches that prepare students for ethically engaged and future-oriented professional and civic lives.

As any educator would know, there is no one-size-fits all approach to teaching and learning. To insist on a singular approach would, as hooks (1994) argued, ‘undermine the insistence that engaged pedagogy recognize each classroom as different, that strategies must constantly be changed, invented, reconceptualized to address each new teaching experience’ (p.10-11). So rather than provide an ‘authoritative’ guide, in this paper I provide practical steps that can be adapted in other geographical and institutional contexts to inspire other educators to start (or continue) their journey decolonising curriculum.

2. Teaching philosophy and Postcolonial Feminist approach

Given the large, multidisciplinary cohort of students in *PPSD* it has been essential to develop teaching material and activities that are accessible, engaging, meaningful and relevant across all fields of study: policing, criminology, heritage and tourism, social work, humanitarian and development studies, geography, sociology, urban planning, education, and psychology. This is obviously not an easy task. Luckily, geographical learning, knowledge and ways of understanding the

world are part of all our everyday lives (and careers), whether we are aware of it or not. As Cosgrove (1989) so aptly stated 'Geography is everywhere' (p.118). Students may not have encountered formal geography learning before enrolling into *PPSD* but complete the subject with deep geographical knowledge and skills, and hopefully a passion if not respect for the discipline.

It is also pertinent to point out that *PPSD* is not only a first-year subject of a large multidisciplinary undergraduate student cohort, but most students are first in their family to attend university, and a large proportion are of refugee or migrant (1st/2nd generation) background. Within the University, two-thirds of the students are the first in their family to go to university. The University also has the largest number of students from low socio-economic backgrounds and the largest number of students from non-English speaking backgrounds in Australia. In 2024, 802 Indigenous students were enrolled in degrees across the university (Western Sydney University, 2024). The student cohorts of *PPSD* reflect that diversity. As such, the content covered in *PPSD*— social difference in relation to socio-economic opportunity, culture, sexuality and gender, age and ability, among other forms of diversity examined geographically as well as in relation to colonialism, capitalism, racism, heteronormativity, sexism, ableism, and ageism—is deeply personal to many of the students. The content must therefore be approached with care. Classroom discussions and learning activities must be designed and re-designed with sensitivity and awareness of students' positionalities and personal contexts. This is not to say that students are not challenged, or that discomfort is avoided. In fact, as argued by Tuck and Yang (2012), Barker and Pickerill (2019), and Paradies (2020), decolonisation is and should be 'unsettling', 'in the sense of disturbing and upsetting, as well as in terms of the potential to shift us from our current places and positions' (Paradies, 2020, p.,448). The unsettling of students and educators is one of the profound achievements of the subject.

To achieve maximum engagement and learning opportunities across the diverse student cohort, in tandem with my decolonising agenda, my approach to teaching/learning prioritises the development of student curiosity, autonomy and independence. This includes the development of skills that students can apply in their academic studies and lives, that is, lifelong learning. While I have not managed to fully adopt Freire's 'problem posing' (1970/2005) method where 'the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist' (p.80) I have sought inspiration from the collective ethos of the method where:

the teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself [sic] taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow [...]. In this way, the problem-posing educator constantly re-forms his [sic] reflections in the reflection of the students. The students—no longer docile listeners—are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher. The teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration, and re-considers her [sic] earlier considerations as the students express their own. The role of the problem-posing educator is to create; together with the students (p.80).

Drawing on this teaching method, *PPSD* is student centred; prioritising engagement, participation, and students as critical consumers of research as well as active researchers as per the research-teaching nexus advocated by Clark (1997) as inspired by Humboldt (1970). This is exemplified via the embedding of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) in *PPSD*, for example, learning that involves students conducting their own self-led field-based research. Through field work, students develop skills to examine everyday life 'as a space of active learning through which students can make meaning and construct knowledge about the world for themselves' (Hovorka & Wolf, 2009, p.100). This is then shared with the teaching staff who are simultaneously positioned as active co-learners.

Given the social justice imperative of the subject, the centring of student voice and empowerment of students to apply their learning to advocate for themselves and their communities is also prioritised. It is my aim to not only provide a space in which students learn about social diversity and difference but are provided with a learning experience that empowers them to build skills that enables them to work with others to implement their vision of a socially-just future. This is rooted in the transformative and empowering potential of education (Boyd & Myers, 1988; Paul and Quiggan, 2020; hooks, 1994) which can only be achieved if I and the teaching team adapt the learning experience for the diversity of student needs. As Freire (1970/2005) may say – learning, reflecting, and teaching at the same time.

Developments in postcolonial feminism inform the way in which I interrogate both my teaching and research practice, helping me identify colonialist tendencies in my work. For example, postcolonial feminism facilitates an understanding that colonisation functions via multiple and intersecting power structures such as racism, patriarchy, heterosexism,

ableism, ageism, capitalism and other 'isms'. Through this lens I prioritise the constant interrogation of geography's colonising traditions and ongoing methods; my position as knowledge producer, researcher and educator; the position of the teaching team (tutors) and students in *PPSD*. I also interrogate how these positions challenge or reinforce existing colonial systems of power within and beyond the classroom such as in everyday life and careers. This is rooted in the understanding that 'everyone influences the classroom dynamics, that everyone contributes' (hooks 1994, p.8). Therefore, decolonising teaching involves *everyone* and *everyhow*. Equally important, postcolonial feminist approaches provide me with solutions or ways I can decolonise my work. In a teaching context, these pedagogical solutions include: 1) prioritising alternative knowledges and forms of knowledge making including experiential learning (Kolb, 1984; Barker and Pickerill, 2019), 'problem posing' (in the vein of Freire, 1970/2006), student voice, Indigenous and other marginalised knowledges; 2) challenging colonialist (including patriarchal, heteronormative, ableist, classist, androcentric and ethnocentric) methods and theoretical and conceptual lenses to understand social issues; and 3) acknowledging and filling the gaps and silences in curriculum.

Drawing upon this framework, one of the key approaches I use in *PPSD* is understanding intersectionality and privileging the experiences, voices, and perspectives of marginalised people/communities or those whose experiences are usually invisible in academic teaching and research. In the teaching space this means placing marginalised or previously invisible groups at the centre of teaching and providing a space for them to communicate their experiences in their own way. This is achieved by using non-traditional teaching methods that embrace collaboration and alternative forms of knowledge sharing, communicating and meaning making.

3. Decolonising *PPSD* - an ongoing process

Within these frameworks, decolonising and Indigenising *PPSD* has taken the form of an ongoing 3-stage process. I refer to them as 'ongoing' as working through the stages has not been a one-off event, but something I return to each year. These stages are:

1. reflection and critique
2. auditing the curriculum; and
3. making changes.

3.1. Reflection and critique

I began my journey decolonising *PPSD* in the leadup to the teaching session in 2020 by first considering how the discipline of Geography and my own teaching practice perpetuate and privilege colonial/Western structures of knowledge. I then focused on reflecting on the existing *PPSD* curriculum as presented in the university-approved subject guidelines. This includes Subject Learning Outcomes and content themes, assessment type (e.g., essay, report, presentation, exam), Handbook Summary, and the approved Student Learning Guide. I considered the way in which *PPSD* as communicated in these documents perpetuated colonial power structures. To guide my reflection, I asked myself the following (as described in Kamp, 2022):

- What broad issues or topics are covered in *PPSD*?
- What theoretical and conceptual lenses are they approached from?
- Whose voices, scholarship and perspectives are included and whose are not?
- What are the gaps and silences in the teaching content?
- What assumptions are being presented?
- What are students asked to do?
- What are teaching staff asked to do?

In some cases, I could not answer these questions by only looking at the 'top level' documentation and so I continued to the next stage of 'auditing the curriculum'.

3.2. Auditing the curriculum

Prior to semester starting, I then conducted a finer-grained audit of all aspects of the curriculum to identify where colonial content, methods, and theoretical and conceptual lenses needed to be challenged and alternative knowledge and forms of knowledge making could be embedded. This meant looking at lesson plans, reading lists, supplementary teaching material, details of assessment tasks, guest speakers, case studies, and field work. These curriculum details are

not documented in the 'top level' approved subject guidelines and are flexibly altered depending on the delegated Subject Coordinator. This fine-grained audit ensured that a 'checkbox' or tokenising approach was avoided. For example, rather than finding gaps and inserting one week or one topic area on 'Indigenous issues', Indigenous teaching/learning practices, topics, experiences and perspectives were planned to be embedded throughout the entire curriculum where appropriate. This stage also had a more strategic purpose. University-approved 'top level' documentation requires a lengthy administrative process to be altered. By making more detailed changes to teaching/learning content, activities, and approaches within the already approved subject guidelines allowed me to more quickly enact decolonising and Indigenising curriculum transformations.

3.3. Making changes

The next step was to make the curriculum changes ready for 2020 teaching. However, it must be noted that this is an ongoing process, so changes were and continue to be made over time. It is also a process that now occurs in tandem with continued interrogation and critique of my teaching practice and the curriculum. These stages are therefore not static, fixed or discrete. Rather, they are fluid, interrelated and now occur simultaneously five years after my initial decolonising efforts. The results of the curriculum audit and the subsequent curriculum changes are detailed in the following section.

4. Decolonising PPSD - results and curriculum changes

Prior to my revisions, there was no mention or inclusion of Indigenous experiences or perspectives in the subject. Without this, students' holistic understanding of social difference in the broader colonial Australian context, including their own position within it, could not be adequately supported. Similarly, there were minimal engagements with the intersecting systems of power within and beyond colonialism and minimal opportunities for students to self-reflect on their positionality within these systems. Additionally, in its prior iteration, the fieldwork component of the subject asked students to examine the concentration of 'Indochinese' migrant groups in the Western Sydney suburb of Cabramatta. This was a problematic field exercise as it 'Othered' so-called 'Indochinese' migrants who are among a plethora of migrant groups resident in Cabramatta. It is also important to note that the term 'Indochina' has fallen out of favour and deemed inappropriate due to its ties to Western Imperialism. 'Indochina' was coined in the nineteenth century to refer to the colonial region of French Indochina – Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, but later also including Thailand and Myanmar (Burma) (Brocheux & Hémeury, 2011). The learning materials in the lead up to the field work were also previously presented from a colonial perspective that 'Othered' the residents of Cabramatta, ignored Indigenous presence, contribution, and experience (in the past and present), and characterised the suburb as outside the norm.

Decolonising revisions to PPSD in 2020 included four key components that were informed by my reflexive process, results of the curriculum audit, and my teaching philosophy and postcolonial feminist approach. The four components were: 1) the introduction of key content on the historic and ongoing processes of colonisation that have shaped and continue to shape the relationship between people, place and social difference/disparity in Australia; 2) the introduction of Indigenous experiences and perspectives into all primary aspects of the curriculum (lecture pods, readings, workshop activities, field work, and assessments); 3) the introduction of other marginalised experiences and perspectives into all primary aspects of the curriculum; and 4) revising activities and assessments to prioritise student agency, reflexivity, and self-directed learning. In this paper, I focus on components 1, 2 and 4 although component 3 is touched upon given the interweaving of all content areas and teaching activities.

4.1. Weekly learning content

In the first module of the subject, the guest lecture-pods (presented by Emma Power, WSU) begins by asking students to locate their geographical position using an Indigenous Map of Australia (AIATSIS n.d.). Then, by utilising the interactive Dyarrubin Map of Aboriginal history, culture and stories of the Hawksbury River region and Leanne Mulgo Watsons' accompanying Darug Statement from the Heart (DCS Spatial Services & UNSW, n.d), Emma Power prompts students to consider the ways in which Australia's economic prosperity (and socio-economic disparities) have, and continue to be, rooted in Indigenous dispossession. This provides a foundation for students continued learning.

Following Emma Power's guest lectures is a learning module titled 'Colonial Spaces', which provides explicit grounding to learning about social difference and diversity within Australia's historical and ongoing colonial context.

Central to this learning are the experiences and perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia. As a settler Australian, it is not appropriate for me to speak on behalf of Indigenous Australians. Therefore, the content includes a carefully developed and curated series of learning materials that prioritise Indigenous voices and content. These work together to facilitate student engagement and understanding of Indigenous perspectives/experience. For example, six lecture pods/videos presented by Indigenous Australians covering the topics of Australia Day, systematic oppression and institutionalised racism, the Australian Dream, and the importance of understanding Aboriginal kinship in our work/careers are core to the week's learning. The set readings are either written by Indigenous academics (e.g., Brand et al., 2016), include the voices of Aboriginal people in Australia (e.g., Andersen et al., 2018), or engage in post-colonial perspectives (e.g., Porter, 2018). Together, they provide students with deeper understanding and knowledge of socio-spatial Indigenous inequality in Australia. Additional online resources are also made available to students to help them further apply their learning of Indigenous experience in the Sydney context in meaningful and engaging ways. These include the Sydney Barani Website (n.d), the Gambay – First Languages Map (First Languages Australia, n.d), and the Barani Barabugu Walking Tour (City of Sydney, 2017).

Alongside this collection of learning material are lecture pods informed by my own research specialisation as a historical, postcolonial and feminist geographer. These pods aim to 1) prompt students to think about diversity and social difference through case studies of race and Indigeneity; 2) place the contemporary context of Australian cultural diversity in its historical geographical context of colonisation and marginalisation; 3) explain how race is a key socially constructed identity implicated in relations between people, place and social difference; and 4) show how race-based oppression is materialised in place-making and needs to be addressed with spatial justice perspectives.

To avoid tokenising Indigenous experience and relegating discussion of Indigenous perspectives to a single module or two of learning, Week 4 provides the grounding for successive weeks' broader examinations of social difference and diversity in Australia. For example, in the week 'The Journey of Multicultural Australia' (Week 5), the unique experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the White Australia Policy era and the Multicultural era are covered alongside the experiences of settler Australians of diverse backgrounds. They are positioned as unique experiences occurring simultaneously. This is similarly the case in the content areas of 'The spatialisation of cultural diversity in Sydney' (Week 6), and 'Reading cultural diversity on the landscape' (Week 6). In these content areas, contemporary questions such as how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are incorporated into Multicultural policies and strategies, injustices such as Indigenous deaths in custody, and debates regarding the Voice to Parliament and colonial monuments/statues are examined alongside the settler Australian experiences. The curriculum also draws upon contemporary Indigenous artwork as a 'way into' discussing these topics and debates. Artworks such as *We Call Them Pirates Our Here* (Daniel Boyd 2006), *Target* (Christopher Pease 2005), and *Close Contact* (Vincent Namatjira) are used as educative prompts that further incorporate Indigenous perspectives. The use of these works also challenges traditional Euro-centric and colonial pedagogies.

4.2. Decolonising student fieldwork

Fieldwork is a key activity in PPSD and informs students' major assessment – a Photographic Essay. During their fieldwork students are tasked with documenting the benefits and challenges of multiculturalism as read on the urban landscape. It must be noted that during their coursework, students are presented with learning activities that facilitate their understanding and critical engagement with 'Multiculturalism' (policy) versus 'multiculturalism' (lived reality) in the Australian context. That is 'Multiculturalism' as a guiding national policy that has included 'the pursuit of social justice, the recognition of identities and appreciation of diversity, the integration of migrants, nation-building, and attempts to achieve and maintain social cohesion' (Koleth 2010: 2). Students learn that the goals of Australian Multiculturalism shift and change depending on which government is leading the country. For example, conservative governments in Australia 'tend to stress social integration into the pre-existing social order, aspirational core values, and signing on to "Team Australia", while more progressive aspects of such policies tend to stress social, economic and political participation, social justice, and access to education' (Jakubowicz 2017). What tends to remain the same is a core principle that cultural diversity (and the freedom to express culture via language, religion etc.) must exist within the broader framework of national unity, community harmony and maintenance of Australia's liberal-democratic values and laws (Koleth 2010). Discussions are had within the learning activities regarding how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are included within Australian Multicultural discourse and policy, and how multiculturalism is lived and experienced. In their learning, students become aware that the 'benefits' and 'challenges' of multiculturalism/Multiculturalism

are nuanced, complex and debated. It is this complexity, investigated through a geographical lens, that the students are tasked to investigate and critique via their field work and photographic essay.

As mentioned previously, prior to 2020 student fieldwork was conducted in the Western Sydney suburb of Cabramatta and students were asked to focus on evidence of 'ethnic concentration' of 'Indochinese' in that landscape. In 2020 I revised the activity so that students could choose any suburb in Sydney to do their field work. This gives students agency, encourages their curiosity and independent learning, and accommodates students' differing accessibility requirements. The field and essay question were also changed to move away from the Chicago School of Sociology's colonial and assimilationist conceptualisation of 'ethnic concentration' as a problem to be overcome through dispersal and integration into a dominant norm (Korver-Glenn, Dantzler, Howell 2021). Instead, students are encouraged to investigate the complex ways that the array of settler/migrant communities and Indigenous people shape Sydney's landscape and everyday multiculturalism. This includes how Indigenous presence and contributions are highlighted, celebrated and/or erased on the landscape in the form of street signs, suburb/location names, street art, statues/monuments, and use of Indigenous languages. In the learning leading up to the field work, students learn about strategies for 'reading landscapes' drawing on the work of Lynch (1960), Lewis (1979), and Winchester, Kong & Dunn (2013).

The fieldwork process now first involves student participation in a preparation workshop in which they discuss the aims of the self-guided field trip. These aims include: 1) to collect evidence in the form of photographs and field notes of the impacts of multiculturalism/Multiculturalism on the landscapes of Sydney; 2) to critically reflect upon the field methods used and their advantages and disadvantages compared to secondary data; and 3) draw upon the data they collect (photographs) in their photographic essay to discuss the question *What are the benefits and challenges of multiculturalism/Multiculturalism in Sydney?* In the workshop, students are shown a 'working safely in the field' video and participate in activities exploring ethics and politics of field work.

Intersectional approaches to understanding the multiple structures of power and multiple identities and subjectivities that shape our individual, unique and multifaceted experiences and positions in the world are prioritised in PPSD. Students are encouraged to re-read traditional sources of information such as census data and use postcolonial feminist lenses to look for silences, patriarchal and androcentric assumptions/perspectives and ask: *who is representing who and why?* Students are also prompted to learn and reflect on their positions in the world and asked: *what privileges and subjectivities do we have? How do they influence our learning and research?* In the fieldwork workshop, students are specifically tasked with discussing ethical concerns in the fieldwork process such as informed consent, invasion of privacy, trespass, photographing people and confidentiality. They are also tasked with discussing issues of power. For example, how knowledge (power) is often taken in research from the 'power-less' to the 'power-full' to make the latter more knowledgeable/more powerful. Other prompts include reflection on how the field data will be used, who gets to decide this, whose interest will it serve, and whether anyone will be harmed or suffer from the results. Students discuss the validity of their field work/data, answering the following questions: Does observation rely too much on subjective understandings and generalisations, and can it be culturally biased? Is it prone to generating socially elitist results / data? How can they counteract this? Students also discuss potential researcher discomfort such as feelings of guilt, anxiety, shame and fear.

When in the field, students complete an undetermined walk/travel of their chosen suburb. While travelling they observe the landscape and features that are present. The walk might be as short as a single street, or several streets. It is recommended that students explore several streets to ensure that they understand the suburb more fully and not just the main street. The fluidity and organic nature of the undetermined walking (rather than pre-determined 'transect' walks) are prioritised as they foreground emergence, relationality, and situated knowledge. Students respond to what they encounter rather than confirming what has already been pre-determined for them. This encourages attentiveness, curiosity, and interpretive spatial thinking. Similarly, undetermined walks allow students to notice contradictions, silences or unexpected spatial practices which may be missed in structured observation methods. This facilitates student reflexivity, attentive modes of being in place (rather than structured observation) and students' production of knowledge as they follow affect, memory, encounter, and/or community narratives in the field. This aligns more closely to decolonial approaches that emphasise engagement with place rather than extraction of data from it. It also decentres the authority of the educator to determine what is important for students to see and experience.

During the fieldwork, students take photographs of key locations or landscape features that demonstrate impacts of multiculturalism/Multiculturalism on the landscape. Students must record the location of the photograph, the date and time of day that they took it and the direction they were facing in the provided Fieldwork Manual. In the manual,

there is dedicate space for students to take field notes about the landscapes they observe. Students carry an Assignment Information Sheet at all times when in the field in case someone queries their activity. For those students with limited accessibility or those who are learning remotely, fieldwork can be done virtually using Google Maps Street View. In a subsequent workshop, students are taught how to use their field data (photographs and field notes) to develop their photographic essays.

5. Reflections on learning ‘success’

This curriculum transformation has facilitated decolonised learning experiences for students, providing them with knowledge and understanding that they have taken into their future careers and everyday lives. I have taught thousands of university students in the past five years who have entered careers in urban planning, criminology and policing, social work and community welfare, heritage and tourism, law, psychology and teaching. For many, *PPSD* was the first time they had been presented with these ideas and perspectives. This has been communicated in formal and informal feedback and group discussions.² Online discussion boards are often abuzz with students voluntarily reflecting on their learning regarding colonisation, their place within the colonial system(s), and their continued (voluntary) follow-up research for their own interest.

Students’ fieldwork, communicated in their Photographic Essays, consistently demonstrate a nuanced and keen interest and interrogation of the ways in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous people have both privileged from, and been marginalised by, so-called ‘multicultural’ principles and policies. What is particularly inspiring, is the way that students challenge deficit approaches in their interrogations of multiculturalism and Indigenous experience/place-making. Instead, they have taught the teaching team about Aboriginal Employment Services in Campbelltown, Aboriginal Health Services in Mount Druitt, the NAIDOC Burramatta Festival in Parramatta, Indigenous pride murals such as the ‘Deadly’ mural of Greg Inglis (local Rugby League player) in Redfern and the ‘I have a dream’ mural in Newtown (among a plethora of other manifestations of Indigenous and multicultural placemaking). These celebrations of Aboriginal achievement, culture and self-determination evident in the Sydney landscape are often juxtaposed against commemorative monuments to colonial ‘forefathers’ (e.g., the Captain Cook statue in Sydney’s Hyde Park). Students are eager to discuss the ways in which such monuments continue colonial placemaking, ignore/erase Indigenous experience, and continue to neglect calls for truth telling.³

In the final assessment, students are also asked to reflect on why learning about social difference and how it is manifest spatially is important, and how they will apply their learning in their everyday life and future careers. This is an open question where students can reflect on any aspect of their learning. Overwhelmingly students indicate the profound impact and transformational change that the Indigenous content has inspired as well as their new understanding of interrelated systems of colonial power, their position within those systems, and their accountability to dismantle them in their everyday lives and future careers. Some students have reflected on the ‘unsettling’ experiences of their learning such as feelings of shame and embarrassment for unknowingly being privileged by the colonial system but then using this as impetus to create meaningful change. This includes social work students striving to use culturally appropriate dispute resolution practices and understanding different kinship and family structures; urban planning students striving to ensure socially just access to housing, transport, and greenspace; teaching students utilising culturally responsive teaching approaches in their own classrooms; and policing students motivated to understand the cultural and place-based nuances of the communities in which they will serve. Some students have subsequently acted upon this new knowledge with immediacy, taking up volunteer work in community-led organisations as allies and advocates for social justice.

These types of learning – and impacts of learning – demonstrate what Paul and Quiggan (2020) term ‘an individual conceptual revolution’ (p.651) where epistemic transformation evolves into personal transformation. Some of the students in *PPSD* via the beginnings of a decolonised curriculum have changed ‘in some deep and personally fundamental way’ (Paul and Quiggan, 2020, p.562). This includes significant changes in their ‘values, beliefs and preferences’ (Paul

² Due to lack of ethics approval, I am unable to present this feedback here.

³ As explained by Reconciliation Australia (2025): ‘Truth-telling covers a range of activities that engage with a fuller account of Australia’s history and its ongoing impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The term is used to acknowledge the historic silencing of First Nations voices and perspectives which have been persistently excluded or misrepresented in official historical accounts. The truth-telling process aims to shift our understanding of our shared past and is fundamental to advancing reconciliation.’

and Quiggan, 2020, p.562). It is my hope that *PPSD* is just the beginning of students' journeys, that is, that their decolonised learning/experience extends over many years and within/across the communities in which they live and work.

6. Concluding thoughts

Although grounded in the Australian context, the design principles underpinning this decolonised geography curriculum are transferable beyond it. The approach is not dependent on a specific national context or content, but on pedagogical commitments to critical examination of the discipline's historical entanglements with colonialism, the centering of Indigenous and marginalised knowledges, the embedding of reflexivity (of teachers and students), and the fostering of relational and place-based learning. In other contexts, disciplines, and educational systems, these principles can be adapted by engaging with local Indigenous communities, minority perspectives, and contested histories and geographies, while remaining attentive to distinct institutional and curricular constraints, and context-specific politics and social relations (see also Tarisayi 2023).

Rather than prescribing a universal model, the framework presented in this paper offers a flexible set of strategies that include curriculum auditing, critical fieldwork design, dialogic assessment, and intersectional analysis. These can be adapted to different geographical settings. In this way, the Australian case provides a situated example of how geography education can be reoriented toward epistemic plurality and ethical spatial practice, with conceptual and pedagogical relevance across diverse global contexts.

The way we teach and the curriculum we use are pivotal to the way in which we build and share knowledge. The concern is that we may perpetuate colonialist methods, approaches, and understandings via our teaching if we are not constantly interrogating and reflecting. Therefore, when considering decolonising and Indigenising curriculums I prompt you to start by looking at the way your discipline has perpetuated colonial power structures in the past and continues to do so in the present. And perhaps even more confronting, is to interrogate how you perpetuate and privilege Western/colonial structures of knowledge and power in your teaching. I believe it is only once we have identified and acknowledged those colonialist assumptions and practices that we are able to meaningfully challenge and revise them. To do this, it is imperative to Indigenise our curriculums, but it is also important to simultaneously consider the patriarchal, racialised, heteronormative and other power structures intrinsic to colonial processes that are embedded in universities and our society.

As I complete this paper, I reflect on my recent participation at The Australian Sociological Association annual conference in Naarm/Melbourne. At this conference, a keynote session was dedicated to a yarning circle⁴ on 'Indigenising Sociology'. While I am not ignorant of the fact that Geography is not the only discipline grappling with its colonial past, participating in the yarning circle has brought into stark visibility that the challenges of decolonising continue to be shared across disciplines. Decolonising within the academy is not just about undoing the colonial traditions of our individual disciplines but is a shared challenge that operates within the continued colonial structures of university institutions. Therefore, in line with a true decolonial/relational/collaborative ethic, we must prioritise working across disciplines to learn from one another.

As a final thought, I also believe it is important to remember that decolonising teaching (and research) is not a one-off event. In true postcolonial fashion, our practice as geographers demands constant interrogation and self-reflexivity. There is much more I can do in *PPSD* to further decolonise and Indigenise. This is where the community of practice is essential for my continued learning and transformation.

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⁴ As described by Yedding Mura (2025) 'Yarning Circles are deeply rooted in Indigenous Australian culture, serving as a traditional practice for storytelling, knowledge sharing, and community connection. Participants sit in a circle, symbolising equality and promoting open, honest, and respectful communication. This format encourages active listening, mutual respect, and shared understanding. Facilitators ensure clear intentions, maintain equality, promote active listening, and allow uninterrupted speaking opportunities. Yarning Circles strengthen community bonds by offering a safe space to share experiences, build support networks, and reinforce cultural identity. They also serve as therapeutic spaces, enabling individuals to express personal stories, traumas, or emotions in a non-judgemental setting, fostering emotional healing and well-being. For conflict resolution, these circles provide a structured yet informal environment to encourage dialogue and mutual understanding. By upholding this tradition, Indigenous knowledge, stories, customs, and language are preserved and passed down, supporting cultural resilience.'

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Teaching Geography
for a World in Transition

Contribution to the Special Issue Topics: This paper demonstrates how decolonising and Indigenising geography curricula can support critical and transformative pedagogies in tertiary education. Through an Australian case study, it shows how geographical knowledge can be reoriented for multi-disciplinary student cohorts to address complexity, inequality, and postcolonial critique. The paper advances curriculum innovation and interdisciplinary teaching, offering practice-based insights into how geography education can prepare students to navigate uncertainty and engage with contemporary global challenges.

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