

# Connection to Country in Indigenous-authored texts

## GLOSSARY

**ancestral connection:** a connection to the people in your family who lived long ago; to your ancestors.

**civilise:** when one group seeks to make another more like their own.

**colonisation:** when one country takes over another, the period of time during the takeover is called colonisation.

**Europeans/British/convicts:** various terms used to describe Europeans who came to live in Australia.

**genre:** a style, category or grouping of texts that share a common theme.

**gold rush:** a time in Australia's history, starting in 1851, where many people arrived from overseas to search for gold in the ground.

**inferior:** to be thought of as lower quality or a lower status than others.

**landlord:** a person who owns a house, building, farm or other piece of land and rents it out to make money.

**pictographs:** are a form of symbols (like an icon) used to resemble a physical object. They are different to hieroglyphs, where pictures are used to represent an alphabet or set of sounds.

**Renaissance:** a period of time in Europe from the 1400s to the 1600s that had many new technologies and new approaches to art, science and exploration.

**squatters and selectors:** in the early colonial period of Australia, European farmers were able to claim land as squatters or receive free land as selectors.

**theories of evolution:** theories about how organisms, including plants, animals and people change over time depending on their environment.

**wariness:** a feeling of suspicion or mistrust.



## The Wound

When examining texts from the **genre** of Indigenous literature and film scripts, it's important to understand the history of the relationship between the First Peoples and the idea of writing and literacy.

In traditional Indigenous cultures, knowledge and stories are remembered ('recorded') and shared using word-of-mouth. This is called an oral tradition. When it's necessary to write or draw messages or stories, this is done using **pictographs**.

In Europe from the time of the **Renaissance**, the idea developed amongst scholars and experts that societies around the world who didn't have a system of writing or literacy were backwards or primitive, and at an earlier stage of development to them. This meant that these cultures could not be considered as sophisticated or intelligent as literate societies, particularly **European** societies.

When European scientists developed **theories of evolution** and began to order humans from superior to **inferior**, this further reinforced their belief that Europeans were the most advanced humans on the planet.

When the **British** landed in Australia, they brought with them these ideas. As they observed the Aboriginal communities around the Sydney area, they saw that they had systems for obtaining food, but they know about the oral systems of lore, culture and knowledge. They didn't understand the important relationship Indigenous societies had with Country.

The British believed that they needed to **civilise** Aboriginal Peoples, and later the Torres Strait Islander Peoples when they were colonised in the 1870s. Teaching First Nations people how to read and write was a central part of this 'civilising process'.

Children were taken in the early years to be 'educated', to learn to read and write. So, from the first years of **colonisation**, Aboriginal People began to author texts. Throughout the next century, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples used the English written language to campaign for control over their lives and for their Country. Their writings included the following:

- Hundreds of letters and petitions.
- Writing to each other and to European friends and supporters.
- Assisting with translations of the Bible.
- Community newspapers.
- Political documents.
- Reading and publishing views in newspapers (van Toorn 2006 pp. 2–3).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples didn't really have 'spare time' to read or write down novels and stories. The first known published Aboriginal author was David Unaipon in 1929, who's picture is celebrated on the Australian 50-dollar note.

Although Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People have had a living culture since before colonisation, and are the oldest storytellers in the world, they've been treated by Europeans as if they've no history of literature or storytelling. In the first years of colonisation, many First Nations communities developed a **wariness** towards books and writing. Some Indigenous cultures referred to Europeans in their own languages as 'paper people' or 'paper culture' (van Toorn 2006 p. 226).



## Our History

### How does a person's culture influence how they write about something?

Everyone has their own 'cultural baggage' – the cultural context they live in – which refers to the behaviours, values and assumptions that come from growing up in a particular family or culture. Another way of thinking about this are the customs, traditions and unwritten/unspoken rules that we all follow in our community. Often, we don't realise that our views and outlook on life is influenced by our culture. Mostly, we assume that they are logical and obvious.

### How does a person's culture influence how they read and interpret a text?

When we read, listen to or view a text, our cultural context can affect how we understand it. The more we're aware of the differences between cultures, the more likely we're to recognise how culture affects an author's perspective.

### How can we identify and interpret different cultural ideas about Country by Indigenous authors?

A good way of understanding the different cultural context that an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander author might have, when compared to a non-Indigenous author, is by understanding the idea of land and Country in each culture.

### A non-Indigenous view of land

When Europeans first arrived in Australia, they brought with them an idea about land that was completely different to the idea the First Nations people had of land.

In Europe, land was property that could be bought and sold for profit; if a person had money, they could buy land. When the British first came to Australia, only men who owned land were allowed to vote. However, most British men didn't own land. They had to rent their housing off **landlords**. The **convicts** and poor migrants who came to Australia were lured by the idea that they could own their own land; given their economic status in Europe, owning land was virtually impossible. Ownership of land by a family meant security and the freedom from landlords increasing the price of rents, and freedom to 'put down roots'. When the first **gold rush** started, land became even more valuable as it offered a new way to make money.

### European views of land in early colonial texts

When we read early colonial texts written by British migrants, we understand how important private land ownership was to them. There are stories of **squatters and selectors** who struggled to make a living as farmers and were terrified of losing their own piece of land if they couldn't turn a profit.

### An Indigenous view of land

An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person's view of land is completely different to the European view. Land cannot be bought and sold; even this idea is incomprehensible. People and their communities belong to a particular Country, and their cultural knowledge and lore is interlinked and interrelated with the specific landforms and features of it. The land is nurtured and managed sustainably to ensure that resources don't run out.

Indigenous communities have a strong **ancestral connection** to a particular Country. Country sustains and provides for people, and in return, people must care for the land sustainably. Ceremonies and rituals combine Country and culture together. Yolgnu Elder, Ms Djapirri Mununggirritj has said, "Without the land we are nothing" (Australians Together n.d.).

### Indigenous views of land in texts

As mentioned in The Wound section, the importance of land is evident in the earliest written texts by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors. Because of the history of displacement and removal of many First Nations people from their communities and Country, connections to Country can be complex. Writer Anita Heiss has discussed how non-Indigenous Australians often make assumptions that connections to Country are through traditional stories and significant sites (Heiss 2006). However, because many Aboriginal People now live in cities and large towns, connection to Country is often found through shared community and family groups.

In many contemporary texts, an understanding of Indigenous concepts of connection to Country helps the reader comprehend the ideas more deeply. When you examine Indigenous-authored texts, consider the following points:

- How do different knowledges, values and cultural approaches of the author become evident when the text is examined?
- How is the interconnectedness of Country, people, identity and culture in Indigenous society evident in this text?
- What do the words and vocabulary tell us about how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People feel about Country and land?
- If it's a film text, how's connection to Country evident through features such as music, landscape and non-verbal expressions?
- Is the relationship to land expressed in the text deeper than a straightforward idea of legal land ownership?
- How do aspects of culture in the text relate to ideas of Country and land?

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### References

Heiss 2015, 'BLACKWORDS: Writers on Country', in Kilner K and Worby G (eds), *BlackWords Essays*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, p.1, viewed 23 April 2020, <https://www.austlit.edu.au/static/new/files/text/pdf/4041167156809395146-Writers-On-Country.pdf>

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