

Teaching with BlackWords: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Writers and Storytellers

by Jeanine Leane

The *BlackWords: The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Writers and Storytellers project* contains a wealth of information on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers and storytellers alongside detailed information on titles from different states and territories across the Australian mainland and surrounding islands.



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Users are advised that AustLit contains information that may be culturally sensitive, including images of deceased persons.

This essay was originally written by Jeanine in 2007.

Incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Perspectives through BlackWords

BlackWords is essential for incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives across the humanities and social science curriculum. While it is obvious that BlackWords is an excellent resource for English classrooms, it is also a valuable resource for history, social studies, politics, art, media, performing arts and film studies. The material on BlackWords is most relevant to secondary and tertiary students. However, the site also has records of an impressive array of picture books and children's books, such as Bronwyn Bancroft's *Why I Love Australia* (Little Hare Books, 2010) and One Arm Point Remote Community School's *Our World: Bardi Jaawi: Life at Ardiyooloon* (Magabala Books, 2010). AustLit hosts a project, begun in 2011, called *Asian-Australian Children's Literature and Publishing (AACLAP)*, which provides primary and secondary sources for developing literature focussed educational programs in line with the Australian Curriculum. In addition to this, the *Children's Digital Literature Resource (CLDR)* contains educational trails of children's literature that explore some of the historical representations of Aboriginal Australians. Researchers from the CLDR have worked closely with members of the BlackWords team on trails depicting Aboriginal people.

Not only does BlackWords contain material relevant to all three over-arching priorities for the Australian Curriculum, but the [Australian Curriculum](#) also states that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives be embedded in all subjects, irrespective of whether there are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the classroom.

In terms of locating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature, educators can use many resources. For example, A. Heiss and P. Minter's *Anthology of Australian Aboriginal Literature* (2008) is a comprehensive resource for mainland literature. This collection spans the vast and varied ways in which Aboriginal people have used writing as a powerful tool for over two hundred years. From Bennelong's letter to Lord Sydney's steward in 1796 to contemporary new writing, the text provides excerpts of Aboriginal writing continuing into the twenty-first century. The Anthology presents a rich panorama of Aboriginal culture, history, and life in fiction and non-fiction in the genres of letters, journals, poetry, novels, journalism, petitions, biography, autobiography, and life writings by Australian Aboriginal authors, evidence of the diversity and resilience of Aboriginal culture despite ongoing dispossession. Accompanied by an online resource that contains further readings, additional key texts, discussion questions, a glossary, and a list of selected readings, the *Anthology of Australian Aboriginal Literature* is an excellent and invaluable teaching resource.

Some educators are reticent to attempt the incorporation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in their teaching units, because they are concerned that they may inadvertently expose some 'secret or sacred' material or that they will misrepresent Aboriginal and Torres Strait peoples and culture. The chances of this, however, are very low. There is very little chance that such material (not meant for public viewing/reading) will be available in teaching materials.

BlackWords adheres to strict cultural protocol when recording information about literature and stories by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Furthermore, the vast majority of works included in BlackWords are by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander writers, who communicate their experiences of being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander through literature and storytelling. Therefore, their writings and stories will replicate and communicate authentic experiences from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at different times in the colonial calendar and from different parts of the country. It should be noted that there are some works by non-Indigenous writers included in BlackWords, which have been identified as containing relevant and appropriate Indigenous themes. All BlackWords records relating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders authors and storytellers are identified by the placement of the BlackWords logo on their biography record. Non-indigenous writers do not have this logo even if their work appears in BlackWords.

Definition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

It is vital that educators familiarise themselves and in turn their students with the Australian definition of an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person.

This definition has been operational since the late 1960s and is generally accepted by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. There are three components to this definition. The first is that a person be of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent (some people, especially in Queensland, may be of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent). The second is that a person voluntarily identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. The final component is that the person be accepted by the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community in which they live. On this final point, many Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people may be accepted in more than one community: the community where they grew up and the community where they may currently reside for employment or educational purposes. A person must meet all three criteria to be considered Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Additionally, the rate of inter-marriage between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous Australians from many different ethnic backgrounds is high, and many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people acknowledge a dual heritage, such as Aboriginal/Irish, Aboriginal/Chinese, Torres Strait Islander/Indonesian, etc. This does not detract from a person's identity as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

Due to both oppressive and aggressive government policies of the past in terms of assimilation and the removal of children and to offensive terms such as 'half-caste', 'quartercaste', and 'octoroon', it is very inappropriate and insulting to refer to a person who identifies as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander as 'part Aboriginal' or 'half Torres Strait Islander', etc. or to comment that a person 'does not look Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander' because they may have fair skin or blue eyes or blonde hair. There is no mention in the official definition that anyone who identifies has to conform to a particular look or live in a particular area. People who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders may live in large capital cities, regional cities, small towns, or remote communities.

Indigenous Languages

It is very important to remember and acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have always been diverse, both in pre-colonial times and in colonial times, such as the present. Linguists estimate that on the mainland there were at least 250 different languages spoken, along with dialects, and that each of the 17 islands in the Torres Strait spoke a different language as well as dialect. In addition to this, with the European incursion to the west and Tasmania and the subsequent British occupation came various types of 'Pidgin' and Creole/Kriol languages.

Dreaming Stories, Languages and Diversity

People from different parts of the country have different Dreaming stories (although there is always a common thread that relates to land,

water, animals, and other natural features).

Significant and sacred sites will vary depending on what part of the country and what people traditionally owned the land. In contemporary times, as in pre-contact times, there is no one single ‘right way’ to be Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Such identities will vary according to place, time, language group, and the socio-historical context of an author’s writing. For example, an author who is from the Wirradjuri people will have a completely different experience and identity to someone who writes from the perspective of a Tiwi Islander. And, while many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writing and stories revolve around revealing ‘silenced histories’ and address social justice platforms, these histories and platforms will be different depending upon the time in which the work is written and the location of the writer.

It is important for teachers to realise and communicate to their students that such varying accounts are not contradictory and that before the permanent arrival of the British in 1788, Australia was not one country but a network of many different countries, such as Wirradjuri, Gamileroy, Yorta-Yorta, Birri Gubba, Yugembeh, etc. ([Horton’s map of Aboriginal Australia](#), produced by Aboriginal Studies Press, is a valuable resource for teachers and students, as it clearly presents the diversity of pre-colonial Australia.).

In terms of spelling/s and locations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lands and language groups, it is recommended that educators refer to the thesaurus available through BlackWords and/or the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (www.aiatsis.gov.au). It is equally important to stress that in pre-colonial times, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were multi-lingual, as it was essential for different neighbouring language groups to be able to communicate with their neighbours for the purposes of negotiation, trade, the sharing of adjacent lands, celebrations and rituals, and inter-marriage between different groups.

Culture and Country

Contrary to popular belief, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were not nomads. Each language group lived on and was responsible for different parts of the country, defined by natural boundaries and borders such as mountains, rivers, and rock formations. Within these lands, people moved to and from different sites during different seasons as a means of conservation and sustainability. A very formal process of seeking permission from the custodial group had to be adhered to if another group wanted to enter their lands.

Emphasising diversity in both pre-colonial and colonial times is important for the meaningful incorporation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives across the curriculum. BlackWords is an excellent resource for illustrating the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and culture in the past and in

contemporary times.

However, there are a few commonalities that also need to be discussed in the classroom context. It was mentioned earlier that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander spirituality is intricately related to land, water, animals, and natural features of the environment. While many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were converted to Christianity during the mission period in the second half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, this did not negate the strong sense of place that is generally felt for homelands and community. Despite the fact that, as with the majority of the Australians, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are secular, this strong sense of place, ancestry, and connections to community has not diminished and continues in the majority of cases.

Invasion, Occupation, Continuing Colonisation

Most commonalities, however, are evident in the colonial period. A very important commonality that features strongly in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature is the belief that Australia was invaded, stolen, and subsequently occupied by the British and, shortly afterwards, other waves of European migrants. While this does not invalidate the experience of colonisers and immigrants who came here for a 'better' or more 'prosperous' life and this was definitely the case for many settlers, it is essential that this perspective, relating to invasion, theft, and occupation of lands, be acknowledged if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives are to be taught respectfully. This perspective does not have to be taught in a way that is oppositional or that requires students to choose between who was right and who was wrong. It can be done productively through literature by exposing and discussing the different beliefs, values, practices, and socio-cultural contexts of both Indigenous cultures and the other cultures involved.

Another significant point of agreement is that until very recently, the public and official history of Australia excluded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' histories and experiences. Many national beliefs, such as 'Australia is a nation founded in peace', 'Australia is the country of "the fair go"', 'Australia is the land of opportunity' and 'Australia is a workers' paradise', just to name a few, do not hold true for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and our communities. Such themes are strongly reflected in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature and storytelling that has emerged in colonial times. While it is true for many immigrants who have arrived in Australia over the past 223 years that it is a land of peace, equality, and opportunity, and these experiences are valid and hold true for certain socio-cultural groups, it is important to deconstruct such public, national beliefs with students, to guide them in gaining an understanding that there are multiple truths associated with Australian history and contemporary life, that the experiences of all groups are valid and real, and that one socio-cultural groups' experiences do not negate or invalidate those of another.

Texts and Contexts

Essential to the success of meaningfully incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives through the literature available and referred to in BlackWords is that teachers discuss in detail with students the socio-cultural and historical period that gave rise to a particular text. For example, if a work is set in the early 1960s, it is vital that teachers explain to students that at this time Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people did not enjoy the same citizenship rights as other Australians and that institutionalised discrimination against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people existed during this and earlier times.

Similarly, if a text is set during the late 1980s or early 1990s, it is important to familiarise students with the historical context of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1987) and the High Court's decision on the Mabo case (1992). While these events may not feature directly in the text, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers, like all writers, are influenced by the historical landscape in which they write. It is also important to look at the cultural affiliation of the particular writer. For example, are they Palawa of Tasmania or are they a Thursday Islander from the Torres Strait? This too will have significant bearing on how and what they are writing about. It is crucial that educators familiarise themselves with the history of these regions and bring this to their students' attention before reading the text. Simply launching into a text without an informed and detailed discussion of the sociohistorical context that gave rise to it may cause non-Indigenous students to, at the least, disengage from the text and, at the worst, feel hostile towards it because it is presenting some aspect of Australian history, culture, or contemporary life differently from the ways that they have experienced this particular phenomenon.

Within the vast array of literature listed in BlackWords, non-Indigenous students can be expected to encounter Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language from various regions, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander English, Creole/Kriol, and Pidgin, or what is sometimes described as 'broken English'. This style of communication takes on as many different forms as those Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities who use it. For too long, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature was rejected in educational settings because it was seen to use an 'inferior form of English'. However, more recently, many linguists have agreed that Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander English (which is usually a mixture of Standard English interspersed with Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander words and/ or phrases) is a valid dialect in the Australian context and should be recognised as such. In relation to the use of Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander English, educators need to emphasise that the point of writing is to communicate a particular place and/or position in time, not to be judgemental about the form of communication used, and that all communities have their own preferred means and methods of communication that are accepted and condoned by the particular community using them (see, for example, Lisa Delpit (1988) *The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children*).

A Relevant Perspective across All Subjects

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives should not be taught in a vacuum. It is important that an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander perspective is included in any and every thematic unit being taught and that these perspectives

are incorporated within the unit itself, rather than studied in isolation. For example, if the thematic unit is 'Australia during the 1960s', it is important to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices within this. Or, alternatively, if the topic is 'Australia during the Second World War', it is essential to look at the position of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples during this timeframe and to emphasise the important contributions made by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in defending the country. If a topic/unit being taught appears not to have any Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people directly involved (for example, 'Australia during the Gold Rushes') it is essential to look within this period at the position of Aboriginal and Torres Strait people in Australian society at this time. On which Aboriginal lands did the many Australian goldfields lie? Who were the traditional custodians before the lands were mined for profit from which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people never benefitted? For example, searching BlackWords for the subject of 'mining' returns a number of relevant texts that can be explored for the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander perspective.

From the 1820s until well into the twentieth century, a significant proportion of Aboriginal people on the mainland were living in missions set up by churches and state governments and dispossessed of their traditional lands, and it is vital to make this clear and discuss with students what was happening to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people during the period being studied. Those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who were not living on missions during this period did not enjoy the same rights as non-Indigenous Australians; many were wards of the state and were subject to the control of the Aboriginal Protection Acts instigated by all Australian states. Furthermore, a topic such as the gold rushes is an excellent opportunity to discuss the different cultural and spiritual values of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and the British colonisers in relation to the sacredness of land for the nation's first people and the use of land for profit by British and European immigrants.

There is no unit that relates to Australian history, culture, or Australia in the present from which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences should be omitted, and such experiences should always be taught in parallel to the unit at hand and always using an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander voice. There may be some situations where it is important and necessary in order to elicit colonial attitudes to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at a particular time to use and/or quote from colonial sources about or relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, but it is always important to counter-balance this with what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people thought at the time, both about themselves and the colonisers. Teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in isolation can make them seem secondary to what was happening at the time. The literature indexed in BlackWords is time specific, making it easy for educators to look at the site and choose appropriate works in relation to the particular times and events being studied. The Learning Trails will also provide relevant lists of works that will assist in identifying works by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders for specific circumstances.

The Legacy of Past Practices

Some students may experience difficulty in understanding why, in the twenty-first century, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people generally experience lower levels of education and health and higher mortality rates than non-Indigenous people when, theoretically, there is no longer formal discrimination and access to health services and education appear to be equal. However, it is important for educators to emphasise that this has not always been the case, that it has only been since the late 1960s that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have had the same citizenship rights as non-Indigenous

Australians, and that it takes more than a few generations to recover from previous oppressive and discriminatory government policies. In all this, it is vital to emphasise to students that the definition of equality is not treating everyone the same but treating everyone according to their needs, and that in the past, schools, hospitals, and other institutions that have long been trusted by nonIndigenous people have been very oppressive and dangerous places for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. A focus here on the relativity of the way that certain institutions and organisations have treated different socio-cultural groups is essential, and it is paramount that students realise that not all institutions and organisations are universally 'good' and 'fair'. Concepts of 'fairness', 'equality', and 'equal opportunity' need to be interrogated and deconstructed in this way to avoid giving rise to the view that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be able to achieve the same standards in terms of education and health and/or that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are responsible for their own disadvantage in contemporary Australia.

In all this, the most overarching and important point is that non-Indigenous teachers are not being asked to teach Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander 'culture', as this can be a vast, nebulous, and unfamiliar concept. What teachers are being asked and, in fact, mandated to do through the implementation of the Australian Curriculum is to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, literature, and perspectives in all areas of the curriculum in all topics covered. Towards this end, the information contained within BlackWords is an invaluable and essential resource.

Suggested Further Reading and Resources

William Arthur and Frances Morphy (eds.) *Macquarie Atlas of Indigenous Australia*, 2005.

Faith Bandler, *Turning the Tides: A personal history of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders*, 1989.

Jack Davis and Bob Hodge (eds.) *Aboriginal Writing Today: Papers from the first national conference of Aboriginal writers*, 1985.

Kevin Gilbert, *Inside Black Australia: An anthology of Aboriginal poetry*, 1988.

Michele Grossman et al. *Blacklines: Contemporary critical writing by Indigenous Australians*, 2003.

Anita Heiss, *Dhuulu Yala (Talk Straight) Publishing Indigenous Literature*, 2003.

Anita Heiss and Peter Minter, *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature*, 2008.

Jack Horner, *Seeking Racial Justice: An insider perspective of the movement for Aboriginal advancement 1938-1978*, 2004.

John Maynard, *Fight for Liberty and Freedom: The origins of Aboriginal activism*, 2007.

Peter Minter Meanjin (special issue). *Blak Times: Indigenous Australia*, vol.60 no. 1, 2006.

Aileen Moreton-Robinson (ed.) *Whitening Race: Essays in social and social and cultural criticism*, 2004.

Mudrooroo, *The Indigenous Literature of Australia: Milli Milli Wangka*, 1997.

Mudrooroo, *Writing from the Fringe: A study of modern Aboriginal Literature*, 1990.

Martin Nakata, *Disciplining the Savages: Savaging the disciplines*, 2007.

Bruce Pascoe, *Convincing Ground: Learning to fall in love with your country*, 2007.

Bruce Pascoe, *Dark Emu: Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident*, 2014

Hetti Perkins, *One Sun One Moon: Aboriginal Art in Australia*, 2007.

John Ramsland, *Remembering Aboriginal Heroes: Struggle, identity and the media*, 2006.

Henry Reynolds, *The Law of the Land*, 1987. and other works including: *The Other Side of the Frontier: Aboriginal resistance to the European invasion of Australia*, 2006.

Jennifer Sabbiono, Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith (eds.), *Indigenous Australian Voices: A reader*, 1998.

Alexis Wright (ed.), *Take Power Like This Old Man Here: An anthology of writings celebrating twenty years of land rights in Central Australia 1977-1997*, 1998.

Online resources:

Reconciliation Australia - <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/>

Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies - <https://aiatsis.gov.au/>

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Read more about Jeanine

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