

# Teaching with BlackWords

## *Best Practice for Teaching with Indigenous Stories*

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These learning resources were developed by Lindsay Williams for the Teaching with BlackWords Symposium held at The University of Queensland on 22 November 2017, and supported by the School of Communication and Arts.

Register your interest in attending other Professional Development events by emailing the AustLit and BlackWords team: [austlit@uq.edu.au](mailto:austlit@uq.edu.au)

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### *Challenging 'Terra Nullius of the Mind' - Lesson Plans*

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# USING TEXTS IN HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH TO CHALLENGE 'TERRA NULLIUS OF THE MIND'

Presented by Lindsay Williams

## *Objectives*

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During the course of this workshop, you will:

- evaluate representations of Indigenous Australians and the Australian landscape in a short story and play, with a focus on the encoding of Terra Nullius and the construction of First Nation voices
- discuss issues with using 'iconic' Australian texts in the English classroom
- consider the role of BlackWords in assisting English teachers to contribute to a more just Australian society.

## *Rationale, Disclaimer, and a Caution*

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Leah Purcell's play *The Drover's Wife* is rich in potential as a text to study in Senior English alongside more traditional stories of the Australian frontier. In particular, Purcell's work appropriates Lawson's iconic story, infusing it 'with First Nations and Women's history, calling into question the shameful treatment endured by both, at the hands of white men' (Leticia Cáceres in Purcell 2016: xii).

With regard to the new English syllabus, a comparison of these narratives would suit very well 'Unit 3: Textual Connections' (see ACARA 2017: 3) and contribute (amongst others) to the following general syllabus objectives (ibid: 4):

4. make use of and analyse the ways cultural assumptions, values and beliefs underpin texts and invite audiences to take up positions.
5. use aesthetic features and stylistic devices to achieve purposes and analyse their effects in texts.

With regard to the latter, this workshop will (briefly) focus on the use of imagery, representation, dialogue, motif, juxtaposition, approaches to characterization, and literary patterns and variations.

The aim of this workshop is not to provide exhaustive advice on how the two texts might be used in a unit; instead, the aim is to open conversations about how colonial texts (such as Lawson's short story) might be read afresh and how their underlying discourses might be critiqued. This is not to suggest that the original cannot be read and enjoyed still: Leah Purcell herself states that ' [...] I've grown up with this story and love it' (Purcell 2016: vii). However, as has been suggested, in contemporary Australia, tales such as Lawson's ' [...] sound thin and one dimensional, like music on a dusty vinyl record that's been played a few too many times. New versions might seek to add nuance and complexity [...] the first Australians are no longer prepared to be rendered invisible and silent' (Schultz 2017: 9). This short workshop is a modest attempt to help English teachers open up their practice and encourage them to make use of resources like BlackWords to help them do so.

Before finishing, a caution: The play does contain a rape scene, brief in terms of words on the page, but integral to the story. Also, there is in the second half of the play some high level bad language (although nothing that would not now be heard on free-to-air television after 8.30pm). Please take this into consideration within the context of your own school context when making text selections. Regardless, as this workshop demonstrates, extracts from the play can be used if desired and all the activities would transfer to the study of alternative texts.

## Texts

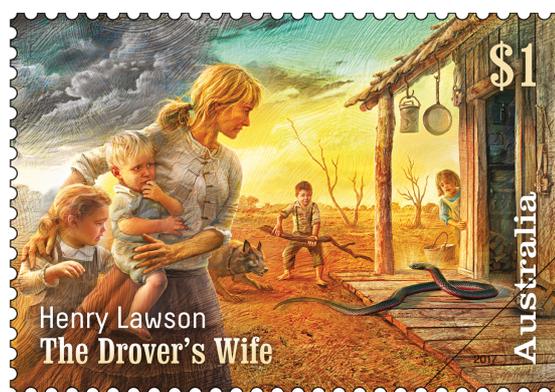
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### 1. From 'The Drover's Wife' by Henry Lawson

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THE TWO-ROOMED house is built of round timber, slabs, and stringy-bark, and floored with split slabs. A big bark kitchen standing at one end is larger than the house itself, verandah included.

Bush is all around – bush with no horizon, for the country is flat. No ranges in the distance. The bush consists of stunted and rotten native apple trees. No undergrowth. Nothing to relieve the eye save the darker green of a few sheoaks which



[Click for the AustLit record for 'The Drover's Wife'](#)  
Courtesy of Australia Post

are sighing above the narrow, almost waterless creek. Nineteen miles to the nearest sign of civilization – a shanty town on the main road.

The drover, an ex-squatter, is away with sheep. His wife and children are left here alone.

*Later...*

The last two children were born in the bush – one while her husband was bringing a drunken doctor, by force to attend her. She was alone on this occasion, and very weak. She had been ill with a fever. She prayed to God to send her assistance. God sent Black Mary – the “whitest” gin in all the land. Or, at least, God sent “King Jimmy” first, and he sent Black Mary. He put his black face around the door-post, took in the situation at a glance, and said cheerfully: “All right, Missis – I bring my old woman, she down alonga creek.”

One of her children died while she was here alone. She rode nineteen miles for assistance, carrying the dead child.

*And later still...*

Yesterday she bargained with a stray blackfellow to bring her some wood, and while he was at work she went in search of a missing cow. She was absent an hour or so, and the native black made good use of his time. On her return she was so astonished to see a good heap of wood by the chimney, that she gave him an extra fig of tobacco, and praised him for not being lazy. He thanked her, and left with head erect and chest well out. He was the last of his tribe and a King; but he had built that wood-heap hollow.

## *2. From 'The Drover's Wife' by Leah Purcell*

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### SETTING

A two room shanty, in the dense scrubland of the Alpine country of the Snowy Mountains.

(This scene from pages 9 to 11 occurs the afternoon after the DROVER'S WIFE, 40, has lost a child while giving birth. Reluctantly, she had required the assistance of YADAKA, a 38-45 year old black man.)

*YADAKA goes to the water barrel to clean himself up with a rag.*

DROVER'S WIFE: It was an old gin that told me that. 'Don't be afraid to cry hard for ya dead.'

*Beat.*

Those blacks haven't come back through here in years.

YADAKA: Fences are up, harder to cross country, and white can shoot on sight.

DROVER'S WIFE: It is ya lucky day then.

Different story if my Joe was here.

YADAKA: Sure of it.

*Awkward silence.*

Same skin.

DROVER'S WIFE: Pardon?

YADAKA: That old woman you talk of, same mob. Same skin.

DROVER'S WIFE: I'd say she was darker than ya.

YADAKA: I mean, family way. I know whose country this is. Who can do business on it. My adopted clan, Ngambri Walgalu.

DROVER'S WIFE: Meanin'?

YADAKA: I'm not from here. I was adopted in. North. I'm heading home. Tryin' to. I was left in Melbourne.

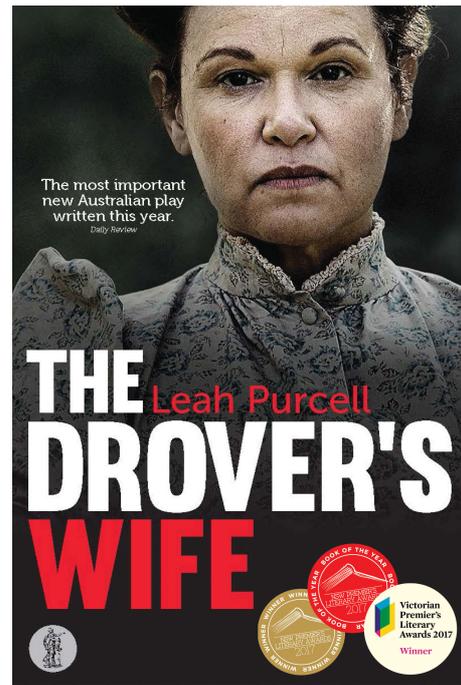
DROVER'S WIFE: Melbourne?

YADAKA: I ran away with a circus.

*She chuckles to herself.*

DROVER'S WIFE: Now you havin' a lend of me.

YADAKA: No, I did.



Click for the AustLit record for 'The Drover's Wife'  
Courtesy of NewSouth Books

South African circus, 'Fillis Circus'. I was good with the horses and bears.

They did their show, startin' in my homeland of the Guugu Yimithirr, rainforest and coloured sand country, missus. All the way down the coast.

I calmed a bear in rough seas. I was good with the children that came to watch.

DROVER'S WIFE: Closest thing to a circus we get is Market Day in town. Big fanfare durin' the day and the drunken clowns come out at night!

*They share the moment.*

YADAKA: I was with the circus for, two years. They left me then, des...des-tit –

DROVER'S WIFE: Destitute.

YADAKA: That was my first arrest. Destitute.

In prison, dead for; cold, no clothes and a man of God, Father Matthews, helped me.

Got me out, clothed me, gave me a white name, I don't use it.

He took me to a mission, west...taught me to read, write and play the tuba.

*DROVER'S WIFE impressed on hearing about the tuba.*

But bein' there listen' to Father Matthew's stories about his God wasn't gettin' me closer to my homeland though.

I went then. Slipped away into the shadows, missus.

Went on my own walkabout. Followin' the range; The Great Dividin'. It goes right up into my homelands in Queensland.

DROVER'S WIFE: Long way. My Joe done some drovin' up there.

YADAKA: Takin' the mountain range, I ran into other mobs, see. I came to the Snowy Mountains with them for the big Bogong moth, Uriarra...to eat and...dance and...

DROVER'S WIFE: Like a celebration.

YADAKA: Yes. Then one night I saw this beautiful woman...her skin oiled with the Bogong moth fat, shining like a full moon...and when she danced...smooth like a shallow runnin' water over river rocks...

*DROVER'S WIFE* becomes a little uncomfortable with his talk. He sees this but continues on:

I had to be adopted to be the right skin for her. To join with her. So, I was adopted into the Ngambri Walgalu. Settled in with them.

## Activities

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### 1. Exploring Terra Nullius: Close Study through a Detailed Reading

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(Detailed Reading: one strategy from David Rose's *Learning to Read* approach.)

**Instructions:** *You will require a highlighter for this activity. As the text is read aloud, highlight key words and phrases guided by the teacher.*

THE TWO-ROOMED house is built of round timber, slabs, and stringy-bark, and floored with split slabs. A big bark kitchen standing at one end is larger than the house itself, verandah included. Bush is all around – bush with no horizon, for the country is flat. No ranges in the distance. The bush consists of stunted and rotten native apple trees. No undergrowth. Nothing to relieve the eye save the darker green of a few sheoaks which are sighing above the narrow, almost waterless creek. Nineteen miles to the nearest sign of civilization – a shanty town on the main road.

The drover, an ex-squatter, is away with sheep. His wife and children are left here alone.

**Discussion Question:** How is the reader positioned to consider the 'bush'?

### 2. Exploring Terra Nullius: Comparing Texts

**Instructions:** Now, read the excerpt from Leah Purcell’s version of *The Drover’s Wife*, highlighting key words and phrases that Yodanis uses about the Australian landscape. (Hint: at least two of the descriptions occur as similes used to describe a woman.)

Using the double map below, record how ‘the bush’ is represented in the two texts. Some interpretation may be required for the sake of brevity. (Click in the top left-hand corner of the map for a larger image.)

Distinctive Elements		Shared Elements		Distinctive Elements
Naming of Landscape				Naming of Landscape
Human Habitation				Human Habitation
	Henry Lawson		Leah Purcell	
Creatures				Creatures
Descriptions (words & phrases)				Descriptions (words & phrases)
Figurative uses of Landscape				Figurative uses of Landscape

**Discussion Questions:** How is the Australian landscape treated differently in the two texts? What evidence is there to suggest that Lawson ‘encodes’ (probably unconsciously) the notion of Terra Nullius?

### 3. The Voices of the First Nations: Comparing Character Representations

**Instructions:** Using the table below, compare the construction of Black characters from the Lawson and Purcell versions of the story. (Click in the top left-hand corner of the table for a larger image.)

	The Drover's Wife (Henry Lawson)	'a stray blackfellow' (Henry Lawson)	Yadaka (Leah Purcell)
<b>Naming</b>	she		
<b>What the character does</b> (look for action verbs, adverbs & similes/metaphors)	bargained went (in search of cow) gave (extra tobacco)		
<b>How the character is described</b> (look for noun groups, use of adjectives in Attributes etc)			
<b>What the character says</b> (look for saying verbs)	Praised		
<b>What the character thinks &amp; feels</b> (look for thinking and feeling verbs)	astonished		

**Discussion Questions:** What (mini)patterns do you notice? How do the representations in the Lawson and Purcell versions differ, e.g. with regard to voice and agency?

#### 4. Giving Voice to the Voiceless



## Conclusion

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As stated earlier, the purpose of this workshop is to open conversations, and point to a couple of fruitful areas that could be explored using these two versions of *The Drover's Wife*. To finish, let me briefly suggest five other ideas that might add richness to an exploration of the texts.

### 1. Visualisation of the Character, the Drover's Wife

Using a visual analysis framework, analyse two or more different images of the wife, e.g., Russell Drysdale's painting, photographs of Leah Purcell performing on stage, and perhaps sketches of the wife illustrating printed versions of the Lawson story.

Consider: How are the representations similar and different? How do these representations position viewers (and readers) variously? In particular, discuss the choice in the Belvoir stage production for Leah Purcell, 'a proud Goa-Gunggari-Wakka Wakka Murri woman' (see author bio at beginning of Purcell 2016) to perform the role of the Drover's Wife, who remains a white woman in the play.

Extension: compare the visual representation of Danny (the son) and Yadaka in the Belvoir production.

### 2. Character Construction and Agency

Compare the construction of key characters in the Lawson and Purcell versions. In particular, it is important to examine the Wife and Black characters in the two versions. With the latter, a key difference to consider is Lawson's portrayal of the 'stray blackfellow' as the antagonist (he is the one who makes the woodpile hollow, providing a home for the snake and thereby setting in train the Wife's terrifying night) as opposed to Purcell turning Yadaka into 'the hero' (Purcell 2016: viii).

Discuss what a difference it makes that all the characters are 'activated', to use Purcell's word.

### 3. Comparing Plots

Summarise (e.g., on a timeline) the plots of the original Lawson story and Purcell's play. Discuss the different uses of structure and story development, and their contribution to the overall messages of the stories. In addition, remember that an effective, emotionally engaging narrative contains both a plot line and relationship line, i.e., 'stuff happens' (the plot), but as it does, characters' relationships develop and they undertake their own emotional journey. The relationship line(s) could be mapped alongside the plot line.

Extension: using the tableaux drama strategy (e.g. <https://dramaresource.com/tableaux/>), have students work in group to depict dramatically key scenes from the story, giving consideration to mood and emotion in the journeys of the characters.

#### 4. An Australian Western

Purcell states that she thinks of this play ‘as an Australian Western for the stage’ (Purcell 2016: viii). Ask students to research the genre of ‘western’ and consider the links between this genre and Purcell’s play, e.g., how are the various conventions (including setting, language, archetypes, symbols, etc.) of the genre activated in the play and what is the possible significance of this for our interpretation of the play? What connection is there between Purcell’s construction of Yadaka and the ‘red injuns’ of the American western? Are conventions of the western genre subverted by Purcell?

#### 5. Culminating Activities

Have students complete an extended response to the play. Here are a couple of suggestions (including one that meets the syllabus requirement of a written response for a public audience). Use AustLit’s BlackWords resources to help you prepare students for these tasks in informed, sensitive, culturally appropriate ways.

- a. Interpretation (expository essay) genre: Leah Purcell’s *The Drover’s Wife* has been called ‘dangerous’ and ‘subversive’. How does Purcell’s construction of Indigenous characters contribute to this reading? In answering this question, compare Purcell’s characters to those in Henry Lawson’s original story, and include, if relevant, reference to other texts (including feature films) to support your interpretations.
- b. Narrative (play): Find another colonial story featuring Indigenous characters. Write your own play script (or selected scenes) that subverts the original, infusing it with First Nations history. Your information can draw on existing, publically available accounts of Australian history and, with the appropriate permissions, local family and community histories. AustLit can be a very helpful place to start.

#### References

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Lawson, H. 1985/1892, ‘The Drover’s Wife’, *My Country: Australian Poetry and Short Stories Two Hundred Years*, ed L. Kramer, Landsdowne Press, Sydney, pp. 198-204.

Purcell, L. 2016, *The Drover’s Wife*, Currency Press, Sydney.

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**BLACK WORDS**

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Writers and Story Tellers**

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