

## **BLACKWORDS: Writers on Country**

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*This paper will look at the way country, land, place and space are addressed in Aboriginal Literature in poetry, memoir, community histories and so forth. It will show how these concepts are deeply connected to ideas of personal and collective identity discussed in Paper 1. It is a segue into the Paper 3 on the Stolen Generations and the disconnection to country that occurred through policies of removal. This paper also links to Paper 6 which considers children's literature that also focuses on place.*

When non-Aboriginal Australians talk of "stories of place" with an Aboriginal context in mind, many immediately think of traditional stories, stories used by our old people to pass on cultural information and knowledge, or the history of a specific geographic region, and the significant sites of such areas.

In contrast to such expectations, when contemporary Aboriginal authors talk of 'a sense of place' and 'connections to country', many do so in terms of the 21<sup>st</sup> century environments we live in with a focus on the reality that many are urban dwellers<sup>1</sup>. It is estimated that one-fifth of the Indigenous Australian population lives in greater Sydney.

While Aboriginal people live in cities, often away from our own traditional lands (many travel for work, education and relationships), it does not mean as individuals we are not aware of communal responsibilities for maintaining stories and knowledge of traditional areas and showing respect for custodians of country. It does not mean, either, that city-dwellers are ignorant of clan groups or language groups, or roles as owners and managers of country.

Rather, what it means is that Aboriginal authors today are considering connections to country not only through familial lines, but connections also through the long political, social and other cultural associations to particular places.

Stories of place for many Aboriginal writers, are also of those forgotten places; like Cape Barren Island where history and heritage remains strong for the Indigenous people of that country, or Fantome Island, which many living close by in Queensland, may not even know about.

For Aboriginal writers, stories of place include those where families in the past were removed to, once their traditional lands were taken. These 'created spaces' (for example missions and reserves) became places of significant meaning for many, while at the same time they were physically disconnecting them from their own country.

This essay then considers those urban places and those created spaces that now play a social, political and cultural role in the lives of Indigenous Australians today.

### **Big City Dreaming Stories**

Big city stories include the stories of those places that have developed around us thanks to the process of colonisation. Starting with the first point of invasion – Gadigal country, otherwise known as the City of Sydney – it is the home of Indigenous people from many different nations who have come to this place for politics, work, education, and family.

The Gadigal (or Cadigal) land stretches from the south side of Port Jackson, extending from South Head to Long Cove (Darling Harbour) to Petersham. It is land covered in tar and concrete, skyscrapers and crawling traffic, international landmarks including the world's greatest harbour. But the space itself is alive with the heritage of the oldest surviving people in this world. It is home to modern day sites like the Sydney Opera House, which was also the site of the first recorded corroboree back in 1790 (Heiss and Gibson n.p.).

Bennelong Point, named after Bennelong of the Wangal People, was the meeting place of the 29 clan groups that made up the Eora nation, who met for ceremonial and other business. Those clans included the Kayimai, Wangal, Gomerrigal and Bidjigal.

In 2001, Indigenous writers across genres joined forces to pay tribute to Gadigal Country, its ancestors and current caretakers. The resulting publication was *Life in Gadigal Country* (Gadigal Information Services, 2000). The contributors came from nations and clans other than the Gadigal (including Yorta Yorta, Muthi Muthi, Woromi, Wiradjuri, Kamilaroi, Yugembeh, Gurindji, Waanyi, Meriam and Wuthathi) but who lived in Sydney and felt a responsibility to acknowledge personal histories.

Within the covers that were designed by Khi-Lee Thorpe (Worimi) the now-deceased Bundjulong author Ruby Langford Ginibi wrote of the curfew at Redfern, Brenda Palma (Wiradjuri) talked about the story of the campaign to save Australian Hall, the site of the 1938 Aboriginal day of Mourning Conference and Protest, while John Lennis told the story about Cadi Jam Ora, a tribute by the Botanical Gardens to the Cadigal and their relationship with plants and the landscape of the area.

*Life in Gadigal Country* was published so that Australians, especially those living in the heart of Sydney, could better understand and recognise the ongoing living culture of that country: its history; the sites, both traditional and modern; and the lives of people living, working and socialising there in the past and today. Contributors to the anthology demonstrate that Gadigal country is a place of significance for Indigenous people from all over Australia.

Brenda Palma's poem from the anthology, "Sydney Real Estate For Sale", comments on the changes to the Sydney-city and suburban landscape and the difference in 'significance' between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians in relation to the *value* of land. She writes:

#### ***Bennelong:***

Vogue

Penthouse suite

World Address!

*Corroboree below*

***Kirribilli:***

High Rise

Harbour Views

Prestige

*shell middens*

*testify*

***Woolloomooloo:***

Townhouse

Walk to Work.

*The Gadigal yield*

*sacred way*

***Bondi***

Hot spot

Disco Life

One room

To Go!

*Initiation*

*ground*

***Waterloo***

Towers

Going Up

Inspect today!

*Wild eagle spirits*

*Soaring*

***Maroubra***

Lots

Prime virgin

Land

A Steal!

*Ancestors wailing*

***Coogee***

Classic

Studio

Close

Sporting Fields

*Bora rings  
circling round*

**Tamarama**

Cliff- top views

A must

Inspect!

*Shark Dreaming  
far below*

**Woollahra**

Mansion

Heritage

Location!

*Site contact*

*Massacres (Palma 85.)*

Poignantly, Palma writes about the wealthy suburbs of Sydney with Aboriginal names, but few Aboriginal residents. And the only non-Aboriginal named suburb, Waterloo, is largely made up of public housing and a very high Aboriginal population.

Within *Life in Gadigal Country*, artist and curator Brenda L. Croft of the Gurindji people writes about the permanent Cadigal tribute she was responsible for at *Waganmagulya* (otherwise known as Farm Cove). Croft writes:

*Sydney is a place of many histories, some acknowledged, others hidden. The multi-layered Indigenous histories of Warrang (today, Sydney) are seldom heard. As an artist, the incredible beauty of this magnificent city constantly amazed me, with its location, and its historical links with the oldest surviving culture in the world. As an Indigenous woman, I long held a vision of bringing an acknowledgment of this region's original caretakers to the fore. Waganmagulya, the original name for the site now known as Farm Cove in the Royal Botanic Gardens, is the result.*

*Waganmagulya (Farm Cove) is a sacred place, in the sense of sacred memories that are now being reclaimed. Appropriately, Waganmagulya is on land that was Reclaimed by the colonisers, for the area of the walkway was originally alluvial mud flats. The high tides still like to come up over the pathways at certain times, when the moon is full. A bit further up was once the site of Yulang Yirabadjang, a tooth evulsion/initiation ceremony for young boys, which had taken place for untold generations pre-1788. The last recorded ceremony was held in 1795, when hardly any people of the original clan were left, most having been wiped out by small pox and murders. The Cadigal band, which occupied territory close to the first white settlement, were reduced from about fifty in 1788 to three in 1790. (Croft 28-29)*

Another urban hub with a large Indigenous population is the city of Brisbane, which rests on the traditional lands of the Jaggera and Durribal peoples. The physical landscape is dissected and written about by Samuel Wagan Watson, of Birri Gubba, Munaldjali and Bundjalung heritage. In his collection of poetry and prose *Smoke Encrypted Whispers* (UQP, 2004).

Watson separates out the layers of the city landscape and the reader treks with him mentally and physically, searching for the perfect creative inspirational space for him as a writer. He finds it in Boundary Street, West End, and throughout Brisbane's suburbs and, while doing so, acknowledges the consequences of colonisation on his native tongue in "Jaded Olympic Moments":

*We're city people without a language  
And some of us have even less (126)*

Watson writes of "Abandoned Factories" and drag racing, and in "Deo Optimo Maximo" describes the:

*curvaceous segments of road  
like black smiles and frowns  
either gazing in the direction of the Pacific or the hinterlands,  
dark horses upon the clearing of the dreamtime tabernacles (104)*

He writes also of the desecration of significant spaces in cities, as demonstrated, for example, in his poem "Recipe for Metropolis Brisbane", whose ingredients include:

*1 utopian landscape with a blue river  
a mixture of European cultures seasoned with convicts  
200 years of conservative politics  
1 trillion tons of bitumen, steel, glass, concrete and treated timber  
garnish of exhaust (44)*

### **Modern-day fringe-dwellers**

In writing about the significance of space, sense of place and connection to country, many writers are also penning stories of life on the fringe. Aboriginal people in Australia live in a particular space, it is called the fringe – and it exists geographically, psychologically and socially - and it is from this very space that many often find the motivation to create.

Many consider Tasmania to be the fringe-dweller of Australia. If that is the case, then imagine what Cape Barren Island to the northeast of Tasmania is, and indeed what that makes its Aboriginal population. Part of the Furneaux group of Islands, Cape Barren became the first white settlement south of Sydney in the late 18th century. It was a seal-hunting colony where Aboriginal women were taken by convicts and sealers for their food gathering skills and watercraft, as well as sex.

This, among other facts, makes the late Molly Mallett's *My Past - Their Future: Stories from Cape Barren Island* (Blubber Head Press Riawunna, Centre for Aboriginal Education, 2001) a significant story of country for Tasmanian Aboriginal people. This is not just a history book or the personal memoirs of one skilled storyteller and Palawa Elder known to most as Aunty Molly. Rather, it is a book that documents the living culture of the peoples from Cape Barren, like mutton-birding and shell-making. It's testament that history and heritage has been preserved, while identity has constantly been questioned, rights to land have been denied, and language for the most part has been completely lost.

The Chapter "Stories of My People" is a collection of photographs with brief biographies based on memories of the author and her connection to each person and, in turn, their connection to the land of Cape Barren Island. She writes:

*There doesn't have to be any research done into our history today. Let us as Aboriginal Elders tell our own stories of the years we spent on the Island, coming away and mixing with the Tasmanian mainland, instead of others making up stories about us. It is time for our perspective, for our stories to be written in answer to all the past white interpretations.<sup>ii</sup>*

Still in Tasmania, Palawa Kani writer Krystal Anne Lynch writes in the poem "Wybalenna" (located on Flinders Island where hundreds of Aboriginal people were removed to by force and most died):

*Wybalenna the place  
where devastation started*

*Slavery commanded  
under the white man's law*

*Our race, our people  
still live this hell... (151)*

### **Writing the Kimberley and Pilbara**

The Kimberley and Pilbara regions of Western Australia provide a rich foundation for literature being produced by Indigenous writers and storytellers. *This is My Word* (Magabala Books, 1999) is the story of the late Magdalene Williams, edited and illustrated by Pat Mamanyjun Torres. It tells of the Nyulnyul people of the Kimberley raised on the confines of the Beagle Bay mission, which was established in 1890 by the Trappist monks. Williams recounts the creation stories and special places of the area, her family history, the coming of the missionaries, and the resultant destruction of Law and culture. In writing of the "Important Places" of the area, Williams says:

*The sea was an  
Important place  
For the Nyulnyul  
People  
For their food and  
Water,  
And these places were  
Protected and respected,  
Especially sacred sites  
And the life supporting  
Waterholes.  
My family had special places  
That were very important to them  
And the places of great  
Importance to my forefathers  
Were Goorooloogoon*

*Or Murphy Creek,  
And along the beaches...(53)*

*There are many places in and around  
The Beagle Bay area that have sites that are very important  
to our history and culture. (55)*

This book is an attempt to, not only document, but also share the dying language of the Nyulnyul people. The author says in her opening, “I want to leave my stories and the list of language words and phrases behind for my family, so that they will benefit from my teachings and retain some aspects of the Nyulnyul identity” (5). It is that Nyulnyul identity that *is* connection to country.

Writer, artist and storyteller Pat Mamanyjun Torres from the Jugun and Julbayi clans of Yawuru, and the Jabirr-Jabirr and Nyul-Nyul groups of the West Kimberley region, also writes about the old people and their role in controlling the weather in the poem “Rain-making at Beagle Bay”:

*Back in my old gran’s day,  
At Beagle Bay,  
The old people had a way,  
Of making rain, they say.*

*The people would sit with folded arms and  
head held high,  
Then a few fluffy clouds would slowly pass by,  
All would think of lightning and rain and stare  
to the sky,  
But run and scatter when the lightning flashed  
and the rain fell, stinging into the eye.(71)*

Perth born Noongar poet Alf Taylor shares his love of the Kimberley in the poem of the same name:

*In my flat  
looking  
out of  
my window*

*Thinking  
of the  
Kimberley*

*Where  
my heart  
longs  
to be (101)*

It’s hard to ignore the amount of literature being produced by those from and/or living in the Kimberley. Although Magabala Books is a national publishing house - having published many authors geographically spread out across the country, including Philip

McLarenLorraine McGee-Sippel (NSW) Bruce Pascoe (Victoria), Stephen Hagan (Qld) it still maintains an extensive list of titles telling stories of life in the Kimberley region. These include but are not limited to:

- *Emerarra: a Man of Merarra* by Morndi Munro (life story, 1996)
- *Jandamarra and the Bunuba Resistance* by Howard Pedersen and Banjo Woorunmurra (biography, 1995)
- *The Man from the Sunrise Side* by Ambrose Chalarimeri (autobiography, 2001)
- *When You Grow Up* by Connie Mungalla McDonald (autobiography, 1996)
- *Wyndham Yella Fella* by Reginald Birch (autobiography, 2003)
- *Yorro Yorro: Everything Standing up Alive* by David Mowwljarlai and Jutta Malnic (biography, 1993)

Approximately 750 kilometres south of Beagle Bay is the Pilbara region. From here, readers can *Listen to the Old People: Aboriginal Oral Histories of the Pilbara Region of Western Australia* (Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre, 2000) through a book born out of a Local Symbols of Reconciliation Project documenting the memories of local elders. The aim of the project was to use oral histories of elderly Aboriginal people of the region to tell the Indigenous stories of Port Hedland and the Pilbara. These elders spoke on a range of matters which covered key issues including: Understanding Country (the importance of land and sea); Improving Relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians; Valuing Cultures (cultural identity and diversity); Sharing History; Addressing Disadvantage; Custody Levels, Destiny (self-determination and control); and a Formal Document of Reconciliation.

The work provides the necessary information for visitors to acknowledge the traditional owners of the Port Hedland area - the Kariyarra People and their neighbouring language groups Ngarla, Nyamal and Yindjibarndi.

From page one, the book provides a lesson in the history of Port Hedland as a gold mining town, tin prospecting and pearl diving region. It was these early commercial activities that increased the contact between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the region.

The stories in *Listen to the Old People* give an introduction to fundamental information about the area including kinship laws, skin groups and local terminology. For example, the term “whitefellas” has been incorporated into some Aboriginal languages, and is sometimes pronounced *walpala*. The stories of this place matter, not only for those in the Pilbara, but those of us living thousands of kilometres away, wanting to understand the foundations of the communities that still exist and thrive there.

Western Australia, while the largest state in geographic size, does not represent the highest population of Aboriginal people. It does, however, showcase some of the country’s best-known and prolific writers such as Kim Scott (Noongar); Sally Morgan; Jack Davis (Noongar); Graeme Dixon (Noongar); Stephen Kinnane (Miriwoong); Charmaine Papertalk-Green (Wajarri / Bardimaya); and Pat Torres. And an increasing number of published writers come from the State. It’s not surprising then to find anthologies dedicated specifically to writers from there, including *From Our Hearts: an anthology of new Aboriginal writing from southwest Western Australia* (Kadadjiny Mia Walyalup Writers, 2000) that covers many themes including a focus on the land and country with Kay Walley's “The Rock” and “The

Gorge”, Ivy Dodd's “My Country” and “Mother, My Country”, Sam Isaac's “Bushland Becomes a Poem” and Noel Morrison's “Coral Bay”.

Charmaine Papertalk-Green of the Wajarri and Bardimia peoples of Western Australia is a visual artist and poet who paid tribute to the Pilbara in her poem “Yamatji Rich”

*Uncle often said, ‘Yamatjis are rich people’  
Some probably laugh – but I knew what he meant.*

*The land has strong, rich stories  
Imprinted all over its face.  
Stories handed down for thousands of years  
(Sure this is something to boast about). (14)*

### **The true story of Kupa Piti**

Jessie Lennon’s story in *I’m the One that Know this Country* (Aboriginal Studies Press, 2000) is about Coober Pedy in northern South Australia (Kupa Piti is an Anangu phrase for white man's hole in the ground) and the history of the area that spans Wilgena, Kingoonya, North Well, Ooldea, Tarcoola, Lake Phillipson, Finnis Springs and beyond.

Lennon, a Matutjara woman, is a natural storyteller from whom the reader learns about life of the Anangu from their traditional eating patterns to their whitefella work with cattle. Lennon writes of how she used to noodle (fossick) for opal as a child, how camels were for a long time the only form of transportation, and where the name Coober Pedy came from; it was given to the area by Old George Turner.

Lennon’s book provides background information with black and white photographs from the Coober Pedy Historical Society among other sources. And the story includes everything about the area from the 2225 km long dingo fence across South Australia, to the amount of water the Roxby Downs used daily.

As for mining – especially opal mining – which is what anyone would expect to read about in a book on Coober Pedy, one reads about everything from hand mining to the use of dynamite. But the greatest explosion discussed focuses on the British nuclear testing between 1956 and 1963, that saw Jessie Lennon and others get sick and die in their sacred country. The author's vivid memories of bomb blasts at Emu and Maralinga are quite disturbing and place the reader at the point of explosion and fall-out.

The time-line, notes on the Aboriginal languages used in the book, and the pronunciation guide provide a greater understanding of Jessie Lennon’s country. Her story was told to and recorded by Michele Madigan – as was her first book *And I Always Been Moving!* (self-published, 1995).

### **Created spaces that become important country**

In terms of those ‘other’ spaces written by Aboriginal peoples in Australia, there are church run missions and government run reserves, and the institutions used as holding areas for Aboriginal people rounded up like cattle under policies of ‘protection’, creating fringe camps for fringe dwellers, and removing people from what they defined as home.

Albert Holt's *Forcibly Removed* (Magabala, 2001 and reprinted by the author in 2012) takes the reader on a journey that is neither sanitised nor at all censored. The story of this Pitjara/Bidjara man also looks at the inequities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal lives and the harsh realities of simply trying to survive once removed to the Cherbourg-Barambah Mission. This was a place where the white families had decent homes and the Murrus were only allowed into town to work; where water would be carted from a tap a kilometre from their home; where the Murrus were limited to fourth grade education; where freedom was restricted by a permit system; where segregation meant that even toilet facilities were signposted with "Not for the convenience of Natives"; where the one thing the Murrus had in common was poverty. Cherbourg-Barambah was like many other government run reserves and church run missions set up as part of the Acts of Protection and Assimilation to move Aboriginal people on to pockets of land, in order to free up fertile land for grants to new settlers or to be owned by the Crown. These places often disconnected those there from their own traditional lands while imposing a prison-like lifestyle and rules. It's no wonder then that Holt writes of this place, as being "dark and miserable". But the fact that he writes about it at all highlights the significance Cherbourg-Barambah has in the current lives of many Aboriginal people today.

Likewise, *Aunty Rita* (Aboriginal Studies Press, 1994) by Rita (Pitjara/Bidjara) and Jackie Huggins (Pitjara/Bidjara and Birri-Gubba Juru) considers life on Cherbourg Mission, once Rita was taken as a prisoner under the Aborigines Protection Act. She says:

*It was Barambah Reserve (renamed Cherbourg in 1932) that we'd been brought to, just outside Murgon on the Barambah River. Here we were separated from each other into rough houses... Each family was fenced off from the others into their own two little rooms where you ate and slept. The houses were little cells, all next to each other in rows. A prison. No wonder that, along with 'mission', 'reserve', 'settlement', 'Muddy Flats' and 'Guna Valley', Cherbourg has been named 'prison' and 'concentration camp' by Aboriginal people... No one had the right to remove us from our traditional lands and to do what they did to us. We were once the proud custodians of our land and now our way of life became controlled by insensitive people... They even chose [hoe?] and where we could live "We had to stay in one place now, while the Whiteman roam free." (12)*

Cherbourg has also been the topic of many poems including those by Lionel Fogarty and Cec Fisher. Fogarty, who was born on Wakka Wakka land at Barambah near Murgon, writes in "Yumba":

*Cherbourg is our home  
Where the fight is strong  
and the love is right  
Barambah is our home  
Free, as black as my people  
up here it's bush  
Yet we reserve blacks like it that way...*

*All us know is Cherbourg is my home  
home, home, home  
Can't take it away...  
Can't take it away. (33)*

Cec Fisher also born at the Cherbourg Aboriginal Community in 1933, was a recognised Elder in the south-east region of Queensland and wrote of his memories of life there in the poems “Aboriginal Mission Bell” and “Golden Wattle Tree” published in the collection *Flag of Unity* (self-published, 1993).

Then a creative writing student Dorothy Kemp, also from Cherbourg, compares bush and city life in her poem “Life in the Bush”:

*Horses and cattle just stroll on by  
Looking for a quiet spot under a shady tree  
Or heading to the nearest waterhole for a drink  
Oh how I love this life in the bush*

*The life in the city is too fast  
Cars are racing and people are rushing  
Buses and trains are stopping and going  
So people can get to work on time*

*But this life in the bush  
There is no hustle and bustle. (50)*

Another area where Aboriginal people were removed to under government policy is Fantome Island, one of the Great Palm Island Group located sixty kilometres north of Townsville. It was the reserve for people who were removed from mainland Australia in 1918, and was maintained by the Queensland Government as a village for lepers. Catholic priests and nuns of the Sacred Heart and Franciscan orders worked with patients until the reserve was closed down in the 1970s.

In a short book titled *Fantome Island* (Black Ink Press, 2010), Kathy Gibson, a Palm Island Elder, writes of her life and experiences upon arrival at the settlement of Great Palm Island having been removed with her family from their traditional Gumbi-gumbi land near Ingham in the 1940s. She never realised that there were people who were staying on a neighbouring island called Fantome Island.

When she had completed her schooling Gibson became the nurse who was sent to Fantome Island to bring back babies as soon as they were born. The author equates the removal of the children from their mothers on Fantome – due to health regulations and the fear of them contracting Hansen’s Disease – as a similar process to the way she had been removed from her homeland to Palm Island as a child.

Photographs from Gibson’s personal albums, and drawings by Jack Bell (who was born at Aurukun and was moved to Palm Island with his Wik Mungkan family about 60 years ago), give readers a visual insight into the island landscapes as well as the lives, lifestyle and celebrations (sporting, Christmas etc) of those who were kept and worked on Fantome Island.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this essay has been to not only break down stereotypes around what it means to have a relationship with the land, but to also showcase the wealth of literature being penned across the nation by writers expressing the diversity of their experiences of ‘country’.

Whether living on their own traditional lands, those they have chosen to relocate to, or those they or their families were removed to, the places people call home, the places they are connected to, are those that embrace a physical landscape but also an historical, social and political space rendering them specifically and culturally significant to individuals, families and communities.

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<sup>i</sup> “In absolute terms, Indigenous Australians are a predominantly urban population. Around 43 per cent of the Indigenous population live in the 28 urban centres that have both an Indigenous and non-Indigenous population count greater than 2,000. Location and segregation: The distribution of the Indigenous population across Australia’s urban centres.” Working Paper 53 / 2009. By [Nicholas Biddle](http://caepi.anu.edu.au/Publications/WP/2009WP53.php). <http://caepi.anu.edu.au/Publications/WP/2009WP53.php> cited: 8.10.2012

<sup>ii</sup> Mallett, Molly, *My Past - Their Future: Stories from Cape Barren Island*, Blubber Head Press.