

Language & Terminology

For Referencing Aboriginal Culture
and Heritage in Design of the Built
Environment

Djinjama

Cultural Design
& Research

Danièle Hromek

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This publication aims to work respectfully with all peoples and protect the rights of Country and all entities of Country.

A note about this writing:

This document is written from an Aboriginal perspective regarding terminology for those working in spatial disciplines. This document is partly drawn from Danièle Hromek’s PhD, titled ‘The (Re) Indigenisation of Space: Weaving narratives of resistance to embed Nura [Country] in design’ (2019)

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I acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and abroad, and their continuing connection to culture, community, land, sea and sky. I pay my respects to Elders past and present, and give thanks for their continued sharing of culture. I acknowledge all First Peoples who have strived to retain and reclaim their cultures, languages, identities, and connections to Country despite colonisation. I recognise the valuable contribution made by Indigenous peoples to community, narratives, spaces and places.

Contents

06 ——— Introduction

08 Recommended Language and Terminology

- 08 Aboriginal Australians, First Australians, Indigenous Australians
- 08 Aboriginal Peoples, Aboriginal Person, Aborigines
- 08 Ancestors, Old People
- 09 Assimilation, Protection
- 09 Castes, Bloods, Percentages, Parts
- 10 Clan, Community, Mob, Nation, Tribe
- 10 Colonisation, Colonised, Post-Colonial
- 11 Colonists, Invaders, Settlers
- 11 Country, On Country
- 12 Cultural Heritage, Culture, Heritage
- 12 Cultural Practice
- 12 Decolonisation
- 13 Dreaming
- 13 Elders, Knowledge Holders
- 13 First Nations, First Nations Peoples, First Peoples
- 13 Histories, Knowledges, Learnings, Teachings
- 13 Indigenous Architecture, Indigenous Design
- 14 Indigenous, Indigenous Person, Indigenous People, ATSI
- 15 Land Rights, Native Title
- 15 Koori, Goori, Murri, Palawa, Nunga, Nyoongar, Anangu, Yolgnu, Bining
- 15 Law, Lore
- 16 Mission, Reserve
- 16 Movement, Travelling
- 17 Protocols
- 17 Sacred/Secret
- 17 Saltwater, Desert, Freshwater, Rainforest, Spinifex
- 17 Self-Determination, Sovereignty
- 18 Stories, Oral Traditions, Oral Histories
- 18 Traditional Owners, Custodians
- 18 Truthtelling
- 18 Worldview

20 Bibliography



Banksia and South Head overlooking the harbour.

Introduction

Using correct language is an important part of truth telling, which is vital to true reconciliation and conciliation.

Therefore, this guide has been established to support more respectful and appropriate engagement with Aboriginal culture and heritage in the design of the built environment. Furthermore, while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures have their own First Languages, most speak English with words drawn into the English language from their cultures. Using language that reflects those adopted English words ensures that First Peoples know you are including them.

It is acknowledged that certain terminology has colonial origins and significances, and Aboriginal researchers and writers—and designers—bear some responsibility in rebuffing the use of those terms. This writing locates and associates itself with the colonised peoples of this land, whose languages were forcibly expunged and replaced with English. English is deficient as a language to express the truth for First Peoples and for Country, and the experiences they/we have on Country. As knowledges are passed along orally, using a written form limits the ability to make story their/our own. This writing is situated in the context in which most Australians can recall more American states than they can Aboriginal nations. So, while there is incongruity in the use of some colonial language, it is out of necessity to be best understood and in an effort to reclaim or claim certain ways of speaking.

In Aboriginal knowledge systems and worldviews there are many ways of knowing, many truths and diverse perspectives. Likewise there are many truths about places and spaces containing diversity in the knowledges, stories, histories and understandings of that place. All are respected and acknowledged within this document.

These guidelines endeavour to guide and support the better use of language in relation to Aboriginal peoples. However, as an overarching guideline in relation to identity, it is always better to ask how someone prefers to be identified rather than to make assumptions.



Eastern Suburbs Banksia Scrub

Recommended Language and Terminology

Aboriginal Australians, First Australians, Indigenous Australians

The terms ‘**Indigenous Australians**’ and ‘**Aboriginal Australians**’ are inconsiderate of the preference of many First Peoples to be called by their nation, language or clan group names that have been part of their identity for generations. The term ‘**First Australians**’ is, in a literal sense, inaccurate; the land that came to be known as Australia was given this unifying designation by Europeans; however, prior to that time this land was inhabited by more than 500 individual nations all with their own cultures, beliefs, languages and names. Indigenous peoples were also not recognised in the Australian Constitution until 1967, so Indigenous people were the last Australians and the first Australians were Europeans, not Indigenous peoples. The adoption of these terms could be perceived to be a re-colonising practice that attempts to disguise non-Indigenous occupation of Indigenous land by removing the signifiers preferred by the First Peoples of the land (Hromek 2019).

Aboriginal Peoples, Aboriginal Person, Aborigines

Prior to colonisation there were no ‘**Aborigines**’ in this country. Aborigines is a Latin word meaning ‘original inhabitants’, assigned by colonisers to the peoples living in Australia to describe those whose lands they were appropriating. According to Anita Heiss (Wiradjuri woman, author and presenter), prior to invasion ‘there just were people who were identified and known by their relationships to each other through familial connections, through connections to Country and through language group’ (Heiss 2012, pp. 3-4). The word ‘Aborigine’ is outdated, somewhat derogatory, and lacking in recognition of the many and diverse nations, cultures and languages that this land is made up of. Instead, should a unifying term be required ‘**Aboriginal peoples**’ or ‘**Aboriginal person**’ is preferred to describe the First Peoples of the land who were born of the land and have maintained their relationships with it for countless generations. This being said, it is always the preference to use the names of the nation or language groups where known (Hromek 2019).

Ancestors, Old People

For First Peoples, our **ancestors** or **Old People** are not considered as part of the past or myths; they are ever present as those who

have gone before. Our ancestors are respected and honoured, and guide through sending messages. They may appear in Dreaming stories as heroes, or be personal remembered ancestors.

Assimilation, Protection

From 1883 the Aborigines' Protection Board in NSW started developing a policy enabling the removal of children of mixed descent from their families in order to assimilate them into the white population. This policy was incorporated into the *Aborigines Protection Act* of 1909, which was amended in 1915. In 1937 the Commonwealth Government, with the states, officially agreed that Aboriginal people who were not 'full-blood' should be absorbed or assimilated into the wider population. This policy, referred to as **assimilation**, had the aim that Aboriginal peoples would lose their identity and culture. Resultant from the policy thousands of Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their families causing immense trauma and harm. These children became known as the Stolen Generations. It is worth noting that according to figures released by the Productivity Commission (2018), the number of Indigenous children in out-of-home care has doubled since the 2008 apology to the Stolen Generations.

From the 1880s until the 1960s the New South Wales Government adopted a policy of '**protection**' towards Aboriginal peoples. This system of 'protection' enabled the government to control almost all aspects of Aboriginal peoples' lives. It restricted movement, dictated where they could live and work, constrained finances and controlled how they raised their children. To avoid these oppressive conditions and in fear of child removals, in order to keep their families together and safe, many Aboriginal peoples chose to hide their identities and their children from—and at times within—white society. These people are known as the Hidden Generations. While the traumas are different to those experienced by the Stolen Generations, the Hidden Generations have also been immensely impacted by their removal from Country, kin and culture.

Castes, Bloods, Percentages, Parts

In the past, governments have classified Aboriginal peoples according to their parentage and skin colour, using inappropriate terms that differentiated by **caste** or **blood** such as half-caste, quarter-caste, mixed blood, full-blood, or terms relating to **percentages**, such as octeroon, 25% or 50%. This was due to the assumption that Indigenous peoples with European heritage were more intelligent and capable of fitting into white society. Likewise, the term **part** Aboriginal should not be used as it can be a challenge to the identity of someone who is choosing to identify as Aboriginal. These terms are highly offensive and deny the impacts of governmental policies on the lives of Aboriginal peoples. People of

mixed or blended heritages have the right to identify in accordance with their personal preferences.

Clan, Community, Mob, Nation, Tribe

A **clan** is a group who have common ancestry, usually larger than a family, connected by extended kin networks from a local area. A clan is part of a nation group. A **tribe** likewise relates to groups that come from a specific location associated with a particular nation group. A **nation** refers to a group of people who are culturally, socially and linguistically distinct and are associated with a defined area of land or Country. **Mob** is used by Aboriginal people to identify the clan, language or nations groups with whom they identify. A **community** relates to a geographically located group of people, it may involve both Traditional Owners and those who now live in an area due to colonial movements. Aboriginal people might belong to a number of communities, for instance, the community of their traditional Country groupings, as well as the community/ies in which they now live.

Colonisation, Colonised, Post-Colonial

Colonisation is the action of foreign people invading, settling among and establishing control over the Indigenous peoples of an area, and of appropriating a place or territory for their own use. In the process political, social, intellectual, economic and spiritual domination is asserted over the peoples and the territories. This process asserts a system which includes appropriation of not only the territories but also the resources of the land and the loss of sovereignty of the colonised. Within the act of colonisation is a set of beliefs used to legitimise and promote the system, including the belief that the colonisers are superior to those who are colonised (Yellow Bird 2008). Colonising is a dehumanising activity that affects humans at a deep soul level (Duran 2006, p. 16), thus it is not only lands which are colonised, but peoples also, physically, mentally and psychologically.

While colonisation of Australia tangibly commenced in 1788 with the landing of Captain Arthur Philip at Sydney Cove, intangibly and symbolically it began in 1770 when Captain James Cook planted a British flag on Possession Island, before which he renamed many coastal landmarks as he sailed up the east coast of the continent. While it took 18 years for the British to return, reports by Cook and others on that voyage made it clear they held inappropriate colonial mindsets about Aboriginal peoples, describing them as being only slightly superior to monkeys (Banks 2005, chapter August 1770, para 15), living a 'mere animal existence' (Matra 1783, p. 36). Therefore, for Aboriginal peoples Cook metaphorically represents the commencement of the invasion, supported by the mistaken premise of *terra nullius*, an empty land.

Following non-Indigenous appropriation of Indigenous lands, non-Indigenous ‘settlement’ was gradual and fragmented, with each Aboriginal group experiencing colonial processes differently. The forced appropriation and removal of Aboriginal peoples from their homelands, including the destruction of land through unsuitable management and agricultural techniques, caused a disruption in Aboriginal peoples’ means of caring for Country and ensuring their cultural health and sustainability.

Colonisation is not an event of the past, it still occurs now, Australia is even now undergoing a colonising process. Therefore we are not in a **post-colonial** period and Indigenous peoples actively continue to be colonised (Hromek 2019).

Colonists, Invaders, Settlers

Those who came to this land from 1788 onwards are not referred to as ‘**settlers**’ since it was they who relocated thousands of kilometres away from their homes, while Aboriginal people remained established in the places from which they originated. Therefore it is preferred those who displaced themselves to this land are called ‘**colonists**’ or ‘**invaders**’ (Hromek 2019).

Country, On Country

‘**Country**’ (capital C) has a different meaning to the western understanding of the word ‘country’ (small c). The western experience of land is one of property, an appropriated ground given a monetary value, a landscape that is tamed, built upon, produced, owned. In the Aboriginal sense of the word, **Country** relates to the nation or cultural group and land that they/we belong to, yearn for, find healing from and will return to. However, Country means much more than land, it is their/our place of origin in cultural, spiritual and literal terms. It includes not only land but also skies and waters. Country soars high into the atmosphere, deep into the planet crust and far into the oceans. Country incorporates both the tangible and the intangible, for instance, all the knowledges and cultural practices associated with land. People are part of Country, and their/our identity is derived in a large way in relation to Country. Their/our belonging, nurturing and reciprocal relationships come through our connection to Country. In this way Country is key to our health and wellbeing. So caring for Country is not only caring for land, it is caring for themselves/ourselves (Hromek 2019).

Country holds everything including spaces and places. Spaces and places, even those in urban centres, are thus full of Country (Hromek 2018), and therefore need appropriate cultural care to ensure healthy landscapes.

We are always **on Country** inasmuch as wherever we are is Country that has belonging for a group of people who care, maintain and

design that land. Whenever “on Country” there are protocols for behaviour which are determined by the Laws of that land.

Cultural Heritage, Culture, Heritage

Culture refers to the complete ways of living built up, practised and refined by people and communicated from generation to the next. **Heritage** is that which comes or belongs to one by reason of birth. **Cultural heritage** is the legacy of tangible physical artefacts and intangible aspects of a group or society. These are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations. **Tangible heritage** includes buildings and historic places, monuments, artefacts, etc, which are considered worthy of preservation for the future. Tangible cultural heritage has a physical presence. **Intangible heritage** includes traditions or living expressions inherited from ancestors and passed on to descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts, food and medicine heritage, designs and digital heritage. Intangible cultural heritage is commonly defined as not having a physical presence (Janke 1998, p. 316; UNESCO 2003).

Cultural Practice

Cultural practices include any practice that Indigenous peoples carry out that connects them to their culture, Country and Dreaming. This may be weaving, carving, cultural burning or fishing, and cultural practitioners might be storytellers or musicians or artists. A cultural practice is not restricted to ‘traditional’ practices –indeed robotics or writing could be a cultural practice if they connect with culture and Country.

Decolonisation

Decolonisation is an unsettling process as it involves the repatriation of Indigenous people’s lands, lives and rights; in doing so the colonised are freed from colonial domination and the colonisers return to their own lands (Tuck & Yang 2012). However due to the colonial system brought to Australia, settler colonialism, in which so-called ‘settlers’ come to Indigenous lands with the intention of making a new home on the land, ‘a homemaking that insists on settler sovereignty over all things in their new domain’ (Tuck & Yang 2012, p. 5) this decolonial aim is not possible. Michael Yellow Bird (citizen of the Three Affiliated Tribes of Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara tribes in west-central North Dakota) discusses a decolonisation approach for settler colonisation, which is ‘creating and consciously using various strategies to liberate oneself from, or adapt to, or survive in oppressive conditions. It is the restoration of cultural practices, thinking, beliefs and values that were taken

away or abandoned but are still relevant or necessary for survival and well-being. It is the birth and use of new ideas, thinking, technologies and lifestyles that contribute to the advancement and empowerment of Indigenous Peoples' (Yellow Bird 2008, p. 284). Yuin academic Anthony McKnight talks of reculturalisation and decolonisation of the self (2015, p. 288) in which decolonisation becomes a process of liberation not only of lands, but self.

Dreaming

The **Dreaming** refers the continuous actions of creation. An adopted English word to describe the formation of the world and human beings, it is often referred to in relation to spiritual matters and creation stories, and refers to both past and present as a dynamic transmission that occurs between physical, sacred and human worlds. With the Dreaming being understood as both past and present, it is the source of First Peoples' capacity to maintain adaptivity, innovation and resourcefulness in relation to their culture.

Elders, Knowledge Holders

Elders are deeply respected within Indigenous communities, and as a mark of this respect are usually referred to as Aunt or Uncle. Elder status is determined within and by their particular community, and is not related to age. **Knowledge Holders** are individuals or groups that hold, maintain and nurture specific sets of cultural knowledge about Country, including the environment, heritage, flora and fauna, and how to care for it.

First Nations, First Nations Peoples, First Peoples

'**First Peoples**', '**First Nations**' and '**First Nations Peoples**' are self-identifying terms many Indigenous peoples prefer internationally and within Australia as they describe their relationships with the land as the first inhabitants of that land.

Histories, Knowledges, Learnings, Teachings

Words such as **knowledges**, **learnings**, **histories**, **teachings** are pluralised to reflect the multiplicity inherent in these Indigenous expressions and diversity of Indigenous nations all with independent values, customs, beliefs, traditions, histories and knowings across the continent (Hromek 2019).

Indigenous Architecture, Indigenous Design

First Peoples design their lands, not only in structural forms, but also literally as a designed landscape (Hromek 2018). **Indigenous architecture** has always had varying levels of permanency, from entirely moveable to permanent buildings. These were observed by

Europeans and recorded in their journals and letters (Pascoe 2014). Before colonisation, their permanency and therefore transportability was determined by the Country from which they originated, and the available resources of that land. Some peoples needed to move vast distances to ensure correct cultural care, resource sustainability and distribution, whereas others were able to remain fairly static due to the abundance of resources. Landscapes are also designed through skilful land management techniques, such as cultural burning, in which cool fire is used to ensure healthy ecosystems and biodiversity, and prevent largescale bushfires. Aboriginal women in particular also designed land through small-scale agriculture, or living larders. These ensured that future generations had food and other resources in the places to which they travelled.

Typically, **Indigenous design** occurs intergenerationally and iteratively, over many years, as a collaborative communal process. As such while our designs are not ownable to one person, they are communally maintained as part of cultural heritage.

Indigenous, Indigenous Person, Indigenous People, ATSI

The capitalised word **Indigenous** refers to peoples who identify as being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and an accepted definition of an **Indigenous person** as proposed by the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs in the 1980s is ‘a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which they live’.

Eve Tuck (Unangax and an enrolled member of the Aleut Community of St Paul Island, Alaska) describes **Indigenous peoples** as being ‘those who have creation stories, not colonization stories, about how we/they came to be in a particular place—indeed how we/they came to *be a place*. Our/their relationships to land comprise our/their epistemologies, ontologies, and cosmologies’ (2012, pp. 5-6). However, many First Peoples find the word ‘Indigenous’ to be offensive as it has been imposed on them by colonists and has in the past associated them with flora and fauna. More recently it is a word that academia, science and government use. It generalises mainland and islander cultures into one group despite their having very different cultures, customs, knowledges and even flags. While acknowledging their diversity, for practicality ‘Indigenous’ is used to recognise an international context (in which this word is often used) or to identify both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

ATSI, as an acronym, is not recommended as it does not acknowledge the cultural diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, implying instead one distinct group.

Land Rights, Native Title

In New South Wales the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act*, legislated in 1983 and amended in 2001, gave rights to the NSW and local Land Councils to make claims for vacant land held under the *Crown Lands Act*. The *Aboriginal Land Rights Act* also gave the right for Aboriginal peoples to seek agreements with landowners in relation to gaining access for hunting, fishing and gathering. This is commonly known as **Land Rights**.

Native Title is the official recognition under federal Australian law of the rights and interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in relation to land and water. Passed in 1993, Native Title laws legally reverse the notion of *terra nullius*.

Koori, Goori, Murri, Palawa, Nunga, Nyoongar, Anangu, Yolgnu, Bining

These are names adopted in relation to geography, identity and heritage by First Peoples, and are often their preferred identifying names. **Koori (Koorie)** is usually used by peoples from parts of New South Wales and Victoria. **Goori** is often used by peoples in northern New South Wales in the coastal regions. **Murri** is usually used by Aboriginal peoples in north western New South Wales and Queensland. Palawa (Palawah) is often adopted by Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples. **Nunga** is usually used by peoples in South Australia. **Nyoongar** is often used by Aboriginal peoples from south-western West Australia. Anangu is usually used by Aboriginal people in Central Australia. **Yolgnu** is often used by Aboriginal people in Northern Territory, specifically north-east Arnhem Land). **Bining** is used in Western Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory.

Law, Lore

There are differences between ‘**Law**’ (capital L), ‘**law**’ (small l) and ‘**lore**’. Law (with a capital) refers to the laws, customs and protocols of the land set out in the Dreaming as a set of rules or guidelines for every entity of/entity inhabiting that Country to follow. Terri Janke further defines **Law** as Indigenous Law or Indigenous Customary Law, which is ‘the body of rules, values and traditions which are accepted by the members of an Indigenous community as establishing standards or procedures to be upheld in that community’ (1998, p. 317). Laws vary from community to community, and cannot be changed by people as Law has been passed through the land and ancestors from the time Country came into being, and is related to Indigenous peoples’ identities and spiritualities, as well as being principles by which they live. According to Timmy Djawa Burarrwanga (from the Gumatj clan in north eastern Arnhem Land), Indigenous peoples carry Law in their blood and hearts, and it tells us the significance of sacredness and spirituality in ceremony

(Churchill 2016). The (small l) **laws** are those laws imposed on the land and the First Peoples by those who came from Europe; these laws can be changed by the stroke of a pen. '**Lore**' is used when referring to knowledge or tradition passed from generation to generation through story, song and other performative expressions (Hromek 2019).

Mission, Reserve

Set up in the 19th century by Christian missionaries, hypothetically **missions** were established to attend to the material, spiritual and welfare needs of Aboriginal peoples. In reality however, missions were about turning Aboriginal peoples into good Christians. From the 1880s, many missions were taken over by the government and turned into **reserves**, which were controlled and regimented by reserve managers. Aboriginal peoples were forced to leave their traditional lands to live on missions and reserves; their removals were accompanied by restrictions of movement, harsh conditions, poor living conditions and no access to education. Living on missions or reserves had devastating impacts on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal peoples, causing the disruption of culture, language and families.

Movement, Travelling

The words '**movement**', '**travelling**', or '**mobile**' are preferred to '**wanderers**', '**nomadic**' or '**hunters and gatherers**', which are inadequate terms to describe the relationships Aboriginal people have to Country. They disregard the many groups that exist across the continent, all with differing traditions, rituals, Dreaming stories and ways of relating to and moving around their various and varying environments. These words are not sufficient to describe the rich social, cultural and spiritual societies of Indigenous peoples. While gathering and hunting did occur, this term is deficient in explaining the peoples' relationships with the land, which are much more profound and based on a deep understanding of sustainability (Hromek 2019). For example, it is suggested that due to the relatively resource-rich coastal regions, there is little evidence that the peoples around the Sydney area migrated seasonally (Standfield 2012, p. 67). The words 'wander' and 'nomadic' also disregard the purposes for travel, be they land management, ceremonial or kin responsibilities. Once the British arrived and appropriated the land, clearly additional movement was required simply for survival. Greenop and Memmott (2006, p. 159) relate this to urban Indigenous culture, saying, 'Unfortunately incorrect notions that Aborigines [sic] just "wandered" Australia prior to white settlement, and that their system of landholding was not really a valid one, persist within the popular consciousness, and this damages recognition of the continuing culture of Indigenous city dwellers today'.

Protocols

Protocols are guidelines of appropriate behaviour assigned by each community to be used when interacting with Indigenous knowledges, peoples, lands or communities. There are no set protocols or processes for all Indigenous peoples or communities. They also may change or be fluid, so it is important to maintain genuine relationships to ensure correct responsiveness to protocols and ensure open communications with relevant peoples.

Sacred/Secret

Secret/sacred refers to information that, under customary laws, is made available only to the initiated; or information that can only be seen by men or women or particular people within the culture (Janke 1998, p. 317).

Saltwater, Desert, Freshwater, Rainforest, Spinifex

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people might use **self-identifying terms** in relation to their particular Country. For instance, saltwater people refers to those who live on the coast, freshwater people live by sources of fresh water, and likewise for desert, rainforest and spinifex.

Self-Determination, Sovereignty

Self-determination is a collective right, belonging to a group of peoples, rather than an individual right. According to article 1 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, self-determination is the right of all peoples to 'freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development' (The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 1966). Self-determination empowers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to decide the nature of their futures, giving them the right to be involved in all decisions that affect their lives. While self-determination was a policy adopted in 1972 by the federal Government, in actuality most governmental decisions are still made for Indigenous peoples, rather than with or by them.

Sovereignty is the inherent right for First Peoples to have status, dominion or authority over their lives and lands. It is the freedom conferred by ancestors to determine their own legislative and administrative arrangements and the character of their relationships with others. Australia was taken without treaty or consent. Nonetheless, First Peoples maintain themselves as distinct sovereign peoples, and the first sovereign nations of the Australian continent and nearby islands, and it is possessed under their own laws and customs (Referendum Council 2017).

Stories, Oral Traditions, Oral Histories

Indigenous peoples use **stories** and narratives as a means of sharing knowledges, histories and memories. Indigenous knowledges, unlike the written word, is not static; it responds to changes and adapts to new technologies and information. **Oral traditions**, including song, story, art, dance and language, remain key means of ensuring culture is passed along between generations, and **oral histories** enable a connection between oral traditions and written histories. While First Peoples may share stories about the Dreaming or creation through their oral histories, their stories may also be personal narratives containing biographical details of their life. Many stories have direct relationships to Country, land and places—the landscape is the keeper of these stories and is therefore key to their ongoing survival—so it is essential to understand them in context related to Country.

Traditional Owners, Custodians

Country has always been shared and ownership of land has never been understood in the western sense of a single person or group owning areas of land; there may be a number of groups who have connections with, belonging to and cultural responsibilities towards a place. Nowadays, **Traditional Owners** are known to be those **custodians** who are recognised as having connections with and knowledges of particular areas of land. Traditional Owners are the only people who can perform a Welcome to Country, everyone else should do an Acknowledgement of Country.

Truth-telling

Truth-telling is a process of retelling the true and full history as experienced by First Peoples since colonisation. Truth-telling is understood in the context of building a shared understanding of history and the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples with the objective of moving forward together.

Worldview

A **worldview** refers to the underlying philosophy of life or understanding of the world, cultural experiences and assumptions that position an individual or group. Indigenous people have an Indigenous worldview, whereas English speaking people are considered to have a Western worldview.



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