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Aboriginal Writers on the Significance of Space, Sense of Place and Connection to Country

Anita Heiss

Anita was a guest of the Byron Bay Writers Festival in 1997 and 2003.

As an Aboriginal person I am often expected to be able to articulate my pre-defined, exotic and somehow tangible relationship with the land. This has become something I have written and spoken about as I attempt, as an artist and academic, to define myself in the world I have been born, socialised, educated and politicised into - my landscape, my place, my country.

I come from the Wiradjuri nation of western New South Wales. It is this country that I am patriotic to. I have, however lived much of my life on Gadigal land, aka the city of Sydney. But my spirit belongs and will finally rest with those of my ancestors back in Wiradjuri *ngurumbang* (country).

Contrary to those I met when I moved to the Gold Coast some years ago, I did not automatically become a Queenslanders. Even though I was born in Sydney I was never really a Sydneysider but a visitor, and I have never regarded myself as a New South Welshman (or Welsh-person, for the so inclined). My artistic creation has never strayed from being that of a Wiradjuri woman aware of where she will always belong.

Because I was born and bred in the city, I often write from an unexpected, yet very specific contemporary position, some-times jokingly referred to as that of the 'concrete Koori'. My experiences and everyday life belong to a land whose sacred sites are now covered in tar and concrete.

Excerpt from:

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However, when non-Indigenous people talk of 'stories of place' with an Indigenous 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 imposed upon us, when contemporary Aboriginal authors talk of space, and consider our sense of place and our connections to country, we often do so in terms of the environments we live in in the twenty-first century, especially as many of us are urban dwellers and indeed the largest concentration of the Aboriginal population lives in greater Sydney.

That said, this does not mean we are not aware of our responsibilities for maintaining stories and knowledge of our traditional areas. It does not mean that we are ignorant of our clan groups or language groups, our roles as owners and managers of country and our moieties.

Rather, what it means is that we consider our connections to country through familial lines, as well as connection through long political, social and other cultural associations to particular places.

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