

This guide was made by the Moondani Toombadool Centre, with endorsement from Swinburne University.



## Purpose of This Guide

This guide supports respectful and inclusive language when referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is designed for use by all staff and students across Swinburne University of Technology.

This guide is organised into seven key sections to guide readers through the respectful use of language when referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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## 1. Welcome to Country

A Welcome to Country is a formal ceremony performed by an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Elder or a person with authority from the local Nation or language group. It welcomes people to their land and may include speech, song, dance, or a smoking ceremony.

- **When:** At the beginning of significant or formal events.
- **Who:** Only Traditional Owners or those with permission from them.
- **Why:** To welcome people to the specific land within cultural boundaries that their ancestors have cared for millennia.
- **Example:** "On behalf of the Wurundjeri people, I welcome you to our Country. We ask that you respect the land and our traditions during your time here."

Your local Aboriginal Land Council or Native Title representative body can advise on organising a Welcome to Country in your area.

## 2. Acknowledgement of Country

An Acknowledgement of Country is a respectful statement made by anyone Indigenous or non-Indigenous, to recognise the Traditional Owners and ongoing custodianship of the land. It pays respect to Elders past and present and affirms the continuing connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to Country.

- **When:** At the beginning of a meeting, speech, or event, especially when a formal Welcome to Country cannot be performed.
- **Who:** Anyone can deliver an Acknowledgement of Country.
- **How:** There is no set wording, be sincere, consider researching the Country you are acknowledging.
- **Example:** "I'd like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet today, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, and pay my respects to their Elders past and present."

Acknowledgements can also appear in written form, such as websites and social media. For example:

"Swinburne University of Technology acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and pays respect to Elders past and present."

## 3. Understanding Collective Terminology

Use 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' and avoid acronyms like 'ATSI'. Always capitalise terms and use plural forms to reflect diversity. 'Indigenous Australians' and 'First Nations' are acceptable when contextualised.

### Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

- **Definition:** The preferred term to collectively refer to Australia's First Peoples, recognising their distinct and diverse cultures.
- **Example:** "Swinburne University celebrates the achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across Australia."

### Aboriginal Australians

- **Definition:** Refers specifically to the First Peoples of mainland Australia and Tasmania.
- **Example:** "Many Aboriginal Australians have strong connections to their ancestral lands."

### Torres Strait Islander Peoples

- **Definition:** Refers to the First Peoples of the Torres Strait Islands, located north of mainland Queensland.
- **Example:** "Torres Strait Islander Peoples maintain unique cultural traditions linked to the sea."

### Indigenous Australians

- **Definition:** A collective term sometimes used for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Should always be capitalised and contextualised.
- **Example:** "Indigenous Australians contribute to every aspect of modern Australian society."

### First Nations

- **Definition:** A global term increasingly used to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, recognising their status as the First Peoples of Australia.
- **Example:** "First Nations perspectives are essential in shaping Australia's future."

### Wurundjeri People

- **Definition:** The Traditional Owners of the land in Melbourne's east and outer-east.
- **Example:** "We acknowledge the Wurundjeri People as the Traditional Owners of the land on which this campus stands."

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## Kulin

- **Definition:** Kulin Nation, an alliance of several Aboriginal Nations in central Victoria.
- **Example:** "The Kulin Nation is made up of five groups, Woiwurrung, Boonwurrung, Wathaurong, Taungurung, and Dja Dja Wurrung."

## Mob

- **Definition:** A colloquial and respectful term used within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to refer to family, clan, or community groups.
- **Example:** "I'm proud to be part of my mob."

## Elder

- **Definition:** A respected member of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community, recognised for their wisdom, cultural knowledge, and leadership.
- **Example:** "Elders play a vital role in passing down traditions."

## Brother Boy/Sista Girl

- **Definition:** Terms used within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to respectfully describe transgender people and those whose gender identity differs from that assigned at birth. "Brother Boy" generally refers to transgender men, while "Sista Girl" refers to transgender women. These terms acknowledge and affirm the unique experiences, cultural identities, and roles of gender-diverse people within Indigenous communities.
- **Example:** "Brother Boys and Sista Girls play important roles in strengthening community and sharing cultural knowledge."

## Blak

- **Definition:** A reclaimed contemporary term used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to assert a distinct and sovereign identity that is separate from colonial definitions of "Black." Coined by artist Destiny Deacon, "Blak" is a powerful expression of pride, resistance, and cultural strength. It reflects lived experiences, political consciousness, and the diversity of First Nations identities across Australia.
- **Example:** "Blak artists use storytelling and visual language to challenge stereotypes and celebrate Indigenous resilience."

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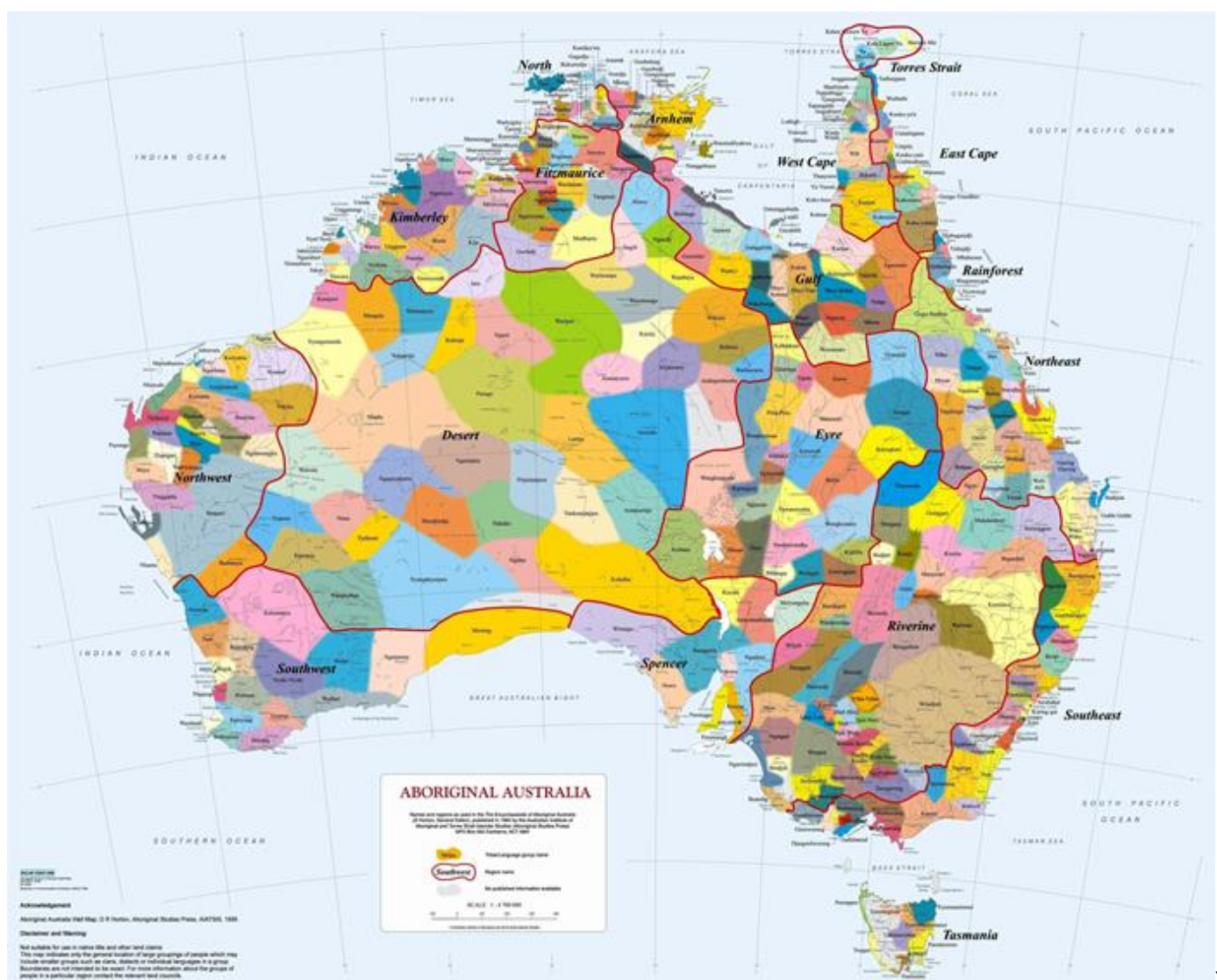
## 4. Place-Based Identity and Nation Groups

Use specific Nation or language group names where possible, such as **Wurundjeri (Woiwurrung)** from Victoria, **Yorta Yorta** from northern Victoria and southern NSW, **Yolngu** from Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, **Noongar** from south-west Western Australia, **Palawa** from Tasmania, and **Gubbi Gubbi** from Queensland.

Broader terms like **Koorie** (south-eastern Australia) or **Murri** (Queensland) are also used, but specific Nation names show deeper respect and accuracy.

Terms like **'Mob'** and **'Elder'** are respectful and widely used within communities.

The link below allows you to further explore and locate these groups in detail.



For more information, please visit the AIATSIS Website:  
<https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/map-indigenous-australia>



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## 5. Using Indigenous Place-Based Terms Appropriately

When referring to non-Indigenous Australians, it is important to recognise that place-based terms are often used by different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to describe people from outside their culture. Each term originates from distinct language groups and regions across Australia, reflecting local languages and histories.

These terms are used within communities and carry cultural meanings, so it is essential to use them respectfully and with an awareness of the context. Always consider the specific Nation or language group and be guided by community preferences when using place-based terminology for non-Indigenous people.

The image below shows examples of these terms used across different regions:

- Wadjela (Southwest WA)
- Kartiya (Kimberley region, WA)
- Balanda (Top End, NT)
- Udneyu (Central Australia)
- Migloo (Queensland)
- Gubba (Eastern states)



(Refer to the AIATSIS Map or local community resources for more detail on language groups and their terms.)

## 6. Engaging with Conceptual Language

Understanding the following key concepts is essential for engaging respectfully and knowledgeably with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, and experiences in Australia. Each term reflects significant social, historical, or cultural realities that continue to shape contemporary discussions. Clear definitions and relevant examples are provided to help clarify their use and significance in context.

### Country

In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, “Country” refers to far more than just the physical land or territory. It encompasses a deep spiritual, cultural, and familial connection to the land, waterways, skies, plants, animals, and ancestors. “Country” is alive, holds stories, and is central to identity, wellbeing, and belonging.

- **Example:** “Aunty Lorraine speaks of her Country, the Yorta Yorta lands along the Murray River, as a place where every tree and waterhole connects her to her ancestors and family. She returns regularly to care for the land, participate in ceremonies, and teach younger generations about the stories and responsibilities tied to Country.”

### Place

“Place” within this context refers to specific locations that carry unique cultural significance, histories, and relationships for different Nations or language groups.

- **Example:** For the Yolŋu people of north-east Arnhem Land, places like Yirrkala and the surrounding homelands are deeply connected to ancestral stories, ceremonies, and traditional responsibilities. These places are not just geographical sites but living landscapes that hold spiritual meaning and define community identity and obligations.

### Settler Colonialism:

The process by which Indigenous societies are **replaced** by incoming settler populations who establish their own political and social structures, often at the expense of the original inhabitant.

- **Example:** The British establishment of colonies in Australia resulted in the dispossession and marginalisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as settler communities expanded and imposed their own systems of governance.

### Assimilation:

Government policies and social practices intended to absorb Indigenous peoples into settler society, often by erasing cultural identities and traditions.

- **Example:** The forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families, known as the Stolen Generations, was part of assimilation policies aiming to integrate Indigenous children into non-Indigenous households and institutions.

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## **Terra Nullius:**

A legal doctrine meaning “land belonging to no one,” historically used to justify the denial of Indigenous sovereignty and land rights.

- **Example:** For more than 200 years, Australian law operated under the assumption of terra nullius, which meant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were treated as if they had no prior ownership or connection to the land.
- **Historical Note:** The concept of terra nullius was overturned by the 1992 Mabo decision in the High Court of Australia, which recognised Native Title and affirmed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples had occupied and cared for the land for thousands of years.

## **Resistance:**

The diverse acts and strategies employed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to maintain cultural identity, challenge injustice, and advocate for their rights.

- **Example:** Organising protests, preserving languages, and passing down traditions through generations are all forms of resistance that demonstrate resilience and cultural survival.

## **Whiteness:**

Refers to the systemic privileges and dominance associated with being identified as ‘white’ in settler societies, shaping societal norms and power structures.

- **Example:** Whiteness can be seen in the prioritisation of European histories and perspectives in Australian school curricula, often at the exclusion of Indigenous voices and knowledge.



## 7. Positionality and Personal Context

Positionality is crucial for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people when studying and working on Country and Place, as it shapes how perspectives are formed, communicated, and received. For Aboriginal people, acknowledging positionality allows for the sharing of personal and community connections to Country and Place, grounded in lived experience, ancestral knowledge, and cultural responsibilities. This reflection honours their authority, the diversity of Indigenous Nations and language groups, and the unique ways Country and Place are understood and cared for within each community.

For non-Aboriginal people, openly stating positionality demonstrates respect and transparency. It recognises their outsider status and the limitations of their perspective, helping to avoid appropriating Indigenous voices or experiences. By clarifying their cultural background and relationship to the land, non-Aboriginal people can approach their study and work with humility, seek guidance from Traditional Owners, and accurately represent Indigenous viewpoints. This practice encourages ethical engagement, fosters trust, and ensures that Indigenous histories, cultures, and relationships to Country and Place are represented authentically and respectfully.

Overall, reflecting on positionality promotes cultural sensitivity and accountability, ensuring that activities related to Country and Place recognise the ongoing custodianship of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the importance of place-based identities. It helps all individuals contribute thoughtfully to the broader conversation about history, belonging, and responsibility in Australia.

For further information, please contact the Moondani Toombadool Centre:

<http://www.swinburne.edu.au/about/our-university/indigenous-matters/contact-us/>