Multilayered Representations of Australian Identity, History, and Cultural Continuity: A Multimodal Systemic Functional Analysis of the Picturebook *My Place*

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1. Introduction

The rich tapestry of history, culture, and identity finds a powerful voice in children's literature, especially in picturebooks, which integrate visual and verbal narratives to convey complex ideas in an accessible way. These narratives are effective tools for introducing young readers to fundamental social concepts. Moreover, picturebooks are widely recognised for fostering children's cognitive development. According to Vygotsky (1986), children's comprehension of complex ideas and principles is enhanced when they are presented in a visually engaging way, such as through picturebooks.

Australia, with its unique flora and fauna, distinctive history, diverse landscapes, and multicultural society, has produced a repository of children's literature; however, many classic picturebooks mainly originate from the United Kingdom and the United States. For example, despite the large number of titles introduced for British and American picturebooks, only three Australian picturebooks are mentioned in Katsura (2006). Australian picturebooks often reflect the country's distinctive identity, addressing themes such as Indigenous heritage, immigration, the relationship between people and the land, biodiversity, and ecosystem. *My Place*, written by Nadia Wheatley and illustrated by Donna Rawlins (1988/2008), is one of these examples. Through its innovative reverse chronological structure and consistent use of child narrators in each spread, *My Place* invites readers of all ages to engage with Australian identity and conveys

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a meaningful sense of continuity that interweaves children's individual stories with broader Australian history. The picturebook transcends the conventional boundaries of children's literature, presenting a narrative that spans more than two centuries of Australian history after British settlement, including historical events. Each spread introduces a different era, allowing readers to witness the gradual transformation of a single location from the present day to the peaceful past of pre-colonial Australia.

This study employs multimodal Systemic Functional Linguistics (hereafter, SFL) analysis to examine dynamic interactions between text and image to convey meaning in *My Place*, which reveals subtle and effective ways to enhance understanding of its visual and verbal narratives. Ultimately, the findings illuminate the importance of multimodal texts in education and their potential to cultivate a more detailed appreciation of Australian identity. Before the theoretical foundations and frameworks of SFL and SFL-based multimodal analyses are explained, the following section first discusses the background and narrative structure of *My Place*.

2. *My Place* as Historical Narrative

My Place, written by Nadia Wheatley and illustrated by Donna Rawlins, is an Australian picturebook initially published in 1988. The narrative situates Indigenous Australian girls at both the beginning (set in 1988) and end of the story (set in 1788), simultaneously emphasising the contributions of diverse ethnic immigrant groups. Upon its initial release, the book received multiple awards, including the CBCA Book of the Year for Younger Readers and the inaugural Eve Pownall Award for Non-fiction. Its appeal encompasses both adult and young audiences, and its cultural and educational importance is further demonstrated by its adaptation into a 26-episode television miniseries (Wheatley, n.d.). Later, a twentieth anniversary edition was issued in 2008. This edition includes an additional spread, showing a comprehensive timeline of Australian history that begins with First Nations history and spans from 1788 to 2008 with a combination of images and text. Figure 1 presents this timeline spread from the twentieth anniversary edition.

Figure 1: Timeline of Changes from 1788 to 2008

(Wheatley & Rawlins, 2008)

This timeline delineates the years at decade intervals and the protagonists' names from each corresponding spread from 1788 to 1988, and highlights significant events in Australian history. The timeline, as noted on Wheatley's website, covers 'the Mabo[1] and Wik[2] judgements' and 'the Apology of 2008,'[3] which are crucial moments in Australia's reconciliation efforts with Indigenous peoples.

3. Previous Studies

SFL and its extension to multimodality have been applied to various media (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) and picturebooks (Painter et al., 2013). For instance, Painter et al. (2013) analyse Australian picturebooks such as *Possum Magic* and others, demonstrating how visual and verbal elements work together to make meaning.

Some researchers have mentioned the work of *My Place*. Nikolajeva and Scott (2003) argue how the setting itself becomes an 'Actor,' referring to three media: hand-drawn maps, illustrations, and narrative text. The hand-drawn maps provide a spatial-temporal account of the immediate environment, while the illustrations depict each child narrator from their life. The narrative text complements these visual elements by telling stories of protagonists' relationship with friend and/ or family, and historical events. This combination of personal and historical

perspectives creates a rich, multifaceted presentation of both permanence (through the Moreton Bay Fig) and change (through human activity). Kümmerling-Meibaur and Mebauer (2015) discuss how *My Place* portrays the environmental changes.

The back cover of *My Place* (1988) describes the book as "WARNING: THIS BOOK IS A TIME MACHINE" that allows readers to travel back in time and meet Australian children with different backgrounds and eras, emphasising that "everyone's part of History" and that "no matter where you live in Australia, your place has a story as old as the land." This description highlights the book's educational potential, and several previous studies have examined its use in classrooms for teaching Australian history, identity, and social awareness (Australian Children's Television Foundation and Education Services Australia Ltd, 2011; Charlton et al., 2014). However, there remains a notable gap in research that applies multimodal SFL analysis to this picturebook. To address this gap, the following section introduces the theoretical foundations and for examining how *My Place* makes meaning across time and space through its visual and verbal narratives.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study utilises a multimodal and social semiotic approach (Halliday, 1978; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Painter et al., 2013), combining this with metafunctions, especially the textual metafunction, and stratification within SFL (Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013) to analyse text and images in *My Place*. SFL provides a dynamic framework for understanding of social semiotics including language, which was initially proposed by M. A. K. Halliday in the 1960s and further developed by him (Halliday, 1978, 1985, 1994) and other researchers, including Ruqaiya Hasan (Halliday & Hasan, 1985), Christian Matthiessen (1995), and Jim Martin (1992). This approach facilitates a comprehensive understanding of meaning-making processes of semiotic resources. The following sections introduce some key concepts and frameworks required in this study.

4.1 Stratification and Metafunction

In SFL (Halliday, 1985, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013 etc.), language is conceptualised as comprising three interrelated strata: language resources, context of situation, and context of culture. These strata constitute the concept of stratification. The stratum of language resources specifies three levels: 1) words and sounds, 2) lexicogrammar (realised from words and sounds), and 3) semantics (realised from lexicogrammar). This stratified model of language, incorporating metafunctions, provides a comprehensive understanding of how language functions within its situational, social and cultural contexts.

Language resources within the framework of stratification simultaneously manifest three types of meaning referred to as metafunctions, which consist of three metafunctions: 1) **Ideational** metafunction, 2) **Interpersonal** metafunction, and 3) **Textual** metafunction. The **ideational** metafunction is further subdivided into: i) **experiential** metafunction, which serves to interpret our external and internal experiences, and ii) **logical metafunction**, which constructs logical connections of language. The interpersonal metafunction facilitates to establish and maintain interactions and relationships among people, whereas the textual metafunction provides cohesion to the ideational and interpersonal metafunctions, generating meaning texts and establishing "sequences of discourse, organising the discursive flow, and creating cohesion and continuity as it moves along." (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013, p. 31).

The simultaneous application of the three metafunctions to a single text facilitates a more comprehensive and nuanced analysis of meaning-making processes. This multifaceted approach enables researchers to elucidate the intricate layers of meaning embedded within text, thereby providing a more detailed and holistic understanding of its semiotic content. Figure 2 illustrates stratification and metafunctions simultaneously.
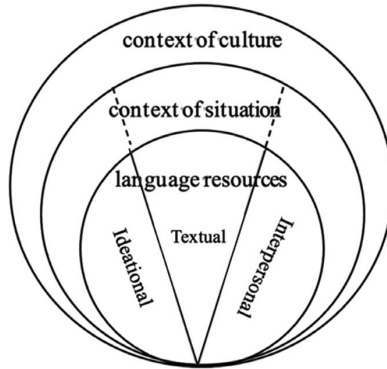
Figure 2: Interrelation of Stratification and Metafunctions

This study examines the textual metafunction to elucidate the semantic relationship between visual and verbal elements, emphasising the interplay between language and imagery. Through a comprehensive analysis of how these components interact, this research aims to provide a deeper understanding into the meanings conveyed to readers.

4.2 Textual Metafunction to Create Cohesion

In the textual metafunction of language resources, especially in the stratum of lexicogrammar, the system that clarifies textual cohesion is THEME, which is categorised into two parts: Theme and Rheme. The system of THEME is closely related to information structure, involving Given and New information. Typically, the structure follows the order Given ^ New, with Theme aligning with Given and New with Rheme. This interplay between thematic and information structure significantly contributes to cohesion and coherence in texts. The analysis of these relationships provides valuable insights into textual cohesion and coherence, which are essential for effective communication in both spoken and written language (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013). For instance, a thematic analysis of the typical sentence "This is my place" from the spread in *My Place* results in Table 1.

Table 1: Example of the System of THEME and Given/New

	This	is my place.
THEME	Theme	Rheme
Given and New	Given	New

Theme 'This' in Table 1 functions as the point of departure for the message. As Given information, 'This' refers to a house visually present on each spread except the last one (set in 1788). Thus, what 'This' refers to is assumed to be known to readers. On the other hand, Rheme 'is my place' provides new information about Theme.

The demonstrative pronoun here refers to the image illustrated next to the text on the spread. The structure of this sentence contributes to textual cohesion by establishing a clear topic and stating connection to the place. As New information, 'is my place' presents the core message in relation to the illustration.

The alignment of Theme with Given and Rheme with New creates a natural flow of information from what is known or established to what is new or important. This structure helps readers easily follow the development of ideas, enhancing the overall coherence of the text. This simple but effective structure, typical on each spread in *My Place*, serves to introduce the narrator's connection to a particular location.

Another resource of the textual metafunction is cohesion to create cohesive links that indicate semantic relationship in the unfolding text beyond the domain of grammar. Cohesion consists of five types in English: (i) reference, (ii) ellipsis, (iii) substitution, and (iv) conjunction, and (v) lexical cohesion (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Reference refers to resources for identifying a participant or circumstantial element such as demonstratives, the definite article, pronouns, comparatives, and spatial and temporal deixis. Ellipsis refers to resources for omitting a clause, some part of a clause or group such as 'do' for verbal groups, and 'one' for nominal groups. Ellipsis and substitution are sometimes treated as a single resource (Halliday, 1994). Conjunction is larger items of connecting two clauses, or

sentence. Lexical cohesion is a component such as a repetition of particular lexical items, synonymy or hyponymy, and collocation (Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Martin, 2002). These frameworks are used to analyse the visual and verbal narratives in *My Place*, exploring the meaning-making processes that shape and transform individual identities within the historical context of Australian colonisation and its lasting effects on contemporary society. The following results demonstrate how the visual and verbal narratives collaborate to construct historical, cultural, and environmental themes.

5. Results

5.1 Verbal Narrative Structure in *My Place*

The verbal narratives of *My Place* are distinctive. Typical picturebooks consist of 16 spreads (32 pages); however, the first edition of *My Place* contains 22 spreads (44 pages), while the twentieth anniversary edition features 23 spreads (46 pages) as it includes an additional double-page spread of the timeline (Figure 1). *My Place* includes more text than typical picturebooks.

My Place maintains a similar structure throughout, with the exception of the last double-page spread that is explained in 6.2.1. Each spread incorporates two modes: text and images (three illustrations and a hand-drawn map by the protagonist). Figure 3 depicts the opening spread of *My Place*. The narrative of this spread illustrates the time and space in 1988 when Australia marks a significant moment in Australian history, reflecting on the bicentennial of British colonisation.

The verbal component of each spread consistently comprises four paragraphs. The first paragraph invariably begins with either a statement of the protagonist's name or the sentence, "This is my place." One of these always appears at the beginning. The rest of the text in the first paragraph includes the protagonist's age and name, and a description of their immediate surroundings, all within the same paragraph. The subsequent three paragraphs, while varying in order across the spreads, include a paragraph that elaborates on the personal and/or impersonal

events occurring around the protagonist, a paragraph introducing their pets or favourite possessions (such as a poster of the Beatles in the spread of 1968), and a paragraph beginning with "This is a map of my place," which explains their hand-drawn map by the protagonist. Present tense is used in most verbal narratives.

Figure 3: Townhouse and Girl Protagonist in the First Spread in 1988

(Wheatley & Rawlins, 1988/2008)

5.2 Visual Narrative Structure in *My Place*

The colours in *My Place* are bright and cheerful, created with colour pencil. Each spread displaying images, including three illustrations and a hand-drawn map that looks created by the protagonist. It is not just any map, but one that encompasses everything that made their world unique during those times. The big fig tree is always depicted in the centre of each map. Its historical perspective over 200 years clearly shows the environmental changes and the industrial pollution causing harm to the land and rivers.

6. Discussion

6.1 Thematic Movements in Verbal Narratives

The different young narrators, aged 8 to 12 and featured on each spread of *My Place*, function as effective literary devices. This narrative style, with its reverse chronological progression from 1988 to 1788, enhances historical comprehension, nurtures empathy for historical figures, and fosters cognitive proximity for readers

of all ages. The narrative begins from a contemporary perspective and progressily traces its way back to 1788 when the First Fleet arrived at Botany Bay in Sydney where convicts and officers from England landed. This approach enables readers to contextualise historical events and effectively reduce temporal distance. The experience of history through the perspectives of the young protagonists from various eras allows readers to empathise with the lives and emotions of people from those times. This backwards progression of Australian history scaffolds historical learning; therefore, readers gradually build their understanding of distant time periods. This effect is further reinforced by the visual narratives.

The syntactical repetition enhances the effect of the textual metafunction. The consistent use of the present tense in the verbal narratives of the young protagonists fosters a closer connection between readers and characters, enabling readers to engage more directly with the characters' thoughts, feelings, and actions (Jauss, 2011). In addition, the use of the possessive 'my' in "this is my place" as Rheme emphasises the personal nature of the statement, contributing to the development of the narrator's voice and perspective in each spread. This possessive language also subtly suggests the concept of individual land ownership introduced by white settlers, contrasting sharply with Indigenous views of land as a shared resource rather than a commodity. In fact, on the last two spreads (set in 1788) where the Indigenous protagonist Barangaroo appears, "I **belong to** this place" (emphasis added) is used instead of "This is my place," which is present in all spreads other than this one. On the last double-page spread, the voice of Barangaroo's grandmother emerges for the first time as an adult, saying:

> Sometimes, at the end of the day, I climb to the top of the big tree and play that I'm the only person in the world. If I look one way, the sea runs out till it meets the sky. But the other way, the land goes on till the sun sets.
>
> My grandmother says, 'We've always belonged to this place.'
> 'But how long?' I ask. 'And how far?'

> My grandmother says, 'Forever and ever.'
>
> (The final double-page spread of 1788 in *My Place*)

This verbal narrative highlights the importance of ancestral knowledge and the continuity of Indigenous identity, reflecting a fundamental Indigenous belief that land is not an individual possession but rather a shared resource integral to community and culture.

The name Barangaroo on these spreads seems to commemorate a notable Indigenous woman. Barangaroo was one of Eora women who controlled the food supply; therefore, they possessed significant status and self-esteem within their communities, which contributed to their power in society. She was very likely present at the first meeting between the European settlers and Indigenous women at Manly in February 1788 (Karskens, 2014). This strikingly contrasts with European notions of gender roles during colonisation. As Cloran (1989) argues, language in children's literature functions as a tool in the socialisation of gender. The depiction of Barangaroo and her grandmother would offer readers a new perspective, emphasisng the importance of women also holding power.

6.2 Thematic Movements in Visual Narratives

The visual elements in *My Place* are just as important as the verbal text in conveying meaning. The illustrations are depicted using coloured pencils, through which symbolic, metaphoric, and literal messages are conveyed via visual elements such as drawn lines (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The colours used in each spread reflect changes in the environment surrounding the protagonists over time. In the double-page spread illustrating the timeline (Figure 1) added in the 2008 edition, the crimson red line extending from the top left to the bottom right signifies a temporal progression that begins long before 1788 and culminates in the publication year of 2008. The movement from left to right indicates the flow of time (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), suggesting that Australia's history commences long before European settlement and will continue into the future. The following

section delves into the remarkable visual narratives, especially focusing on the Indigenous girl protagonist out of 21 spreads, as told by the 21 protagonists.

6.2.1. Visual Narratives of Change: Two Indigenous Protagonists

Unlike the other protagonists, the only Indigenous protagonist who lived before British colonisation, Barangaroo, appears on the concluding two spreads, where she offers a pre-colonial perspective through her eyes. Set in 1788, the penultimate spread follows the same style as the other spreads (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Bush and Girl Protagonist in the Penultimate Spread in 1988
(Wheatley & Rawlins, 1988/2008)

The final double-page spread creates a striking visual composition, foregrounding a close-up of the fig tree's dark branches and Barangaroo's silhouette sitting on the branch. Both figures are depicted in deep shadow against a sun-tinted crimson sky and its reflection on the sea's surfice, and the yellow sun. This spread emphasises the natural environment, symbolised by the untouched landscape of the pre-colonial era (Figure 5).
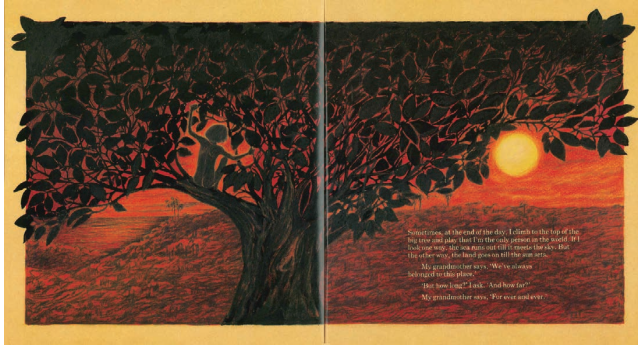
Figure 5: Fig Tree and Girl Protagonist in the Final Double-spread in 1788
(Wheatley & Rawlins, 1988/2008)

In contrast, on the first spread (set in 1988) in Figure 3, Laura, a girl with Indigenous ancestry, is the protagonist; however, her lighter skin tone suggests diverse heritage, reflecting demographic changes over 200 years. An Aboriginal flag hangs from a window in her home, indicating a connection to her Indigenous roots. Despite being in the same location as it was 200 years ago, this place is now part of a townhouse with power lines and paved streets characteristic of a modern urban landscape. The roots of the fig tree are focused in this spread, showing the enduring presence of Indigenous heritage since English settlement.

In this setting, one cannot observe the crimson sky or its reflection on the sea's surface stretching to the horizon—nor can one see the expansive terrestrial landscape from the fig tree as was possible in Barangaroo's time. Instead, the Aboriginal flag hanging in her window—where black symbolises Australian First Nations peoples, red stands for the earth and the colour of ochre used in ceremonies, and yellow represents the sun as a constant renewer of life (Australian Government, 2022)—conjures up memories of a landscape characterised by abundant wildlife and unspoiled nature. This spread evokes a sense of connection to land that was integral to Indigenous culture before the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788. This contrast between the two spreads from the different eras effectively illustrates profound changes in the landscape, lifestyle, and representation of

Indigenous peoples over two centuries while highlighting continuity in the Indigenous presence and identity alongside impacts from the modernisation and the environmental pollution caused by industrialisation that have further altered their relationship with the land.

Wheatley and Rawlins's portrayal of the Indigenous girl protagonists in both the first and the last spreads of *My Place* demonstrates a tendency in children's books to reflect social and political changes in society. As Koss et al. (2018) noted, children's literature often reflects society's changes; depictions of problems in books serve as a measure for their general society acceptance.

Wheatley and Rawlins show their dedication to honouring and depicting the continuous challenges and successes of Indigenous Australians within a broad perspective of Australian history by bracketing *My Place* with two Indigenous girl protagonists. Many researchers who regard picturebooks as an ideal medium for conveying messages of diversity, promoting children's knowledge of diverse family and community structures, and empowering marginalised groups align with this perspective (Caple & Tian, 2022; Boutte et al., 2008; Temple et al., 1998). The composition of each spread contributes to the overall meaning. In many spreads, the protagonists are depicted interacting with their surroundings—whether it is Laura sitting on the roots on the fig tree or Barangaroo looking out over an expansive landscape sitting on a branch of the same fig tree.

6.2.2 The Fig Tree as a Witness to Historical and Environmental Change

The fig tree serves as a constant presence throughout *My Place*, which plays a crucial role in the visual narrative as well as the verbal narrative. More precisely, its official common name is the Moreton Bay Fig, one of Australia's native plants distributed in Queensland and New South Wales. These majestic trees bear functional flowers and purple fruits year-round, with massive trunks and prominent buttresses supporting their expansive crowns (Central Parklands, 2024).

This significant symbol that has survived the environmental changes consistently appears in the hand-drawn maps, providing a fixed point of reference

as the landscape over time. In addition to the hand-drawn maps, the Moreton Bay Fig is also illustrated in most spreads as well as in the written text of the picturebook. Its recurring presence functions as a witness to generations over 200 years and the transformation of the environment. Furthermore, the fig tree's roots, which run deep into the soil, metaphorically connect the two stories whose protagonists are Indigenous people: Laura in 1988 and Barangaroo in 1788 over 200 years, symbolising the continuity of life and the everlasting connection to Indigenous identity.

For the significance of the fig tree, Mokrzyck (2023, p. 94) states that "*My Place* never would have existed were it not for a fig tree." Thus, this visual motif establishes the Moreton Bay Fig as an essential element in the exploration of Australian history and identity. Through its constant presence across time, the Moreton Bay Fig serves as a unifying thread, linking the present to the past and reinforcing themes of belonging and heritage throughout *My Place*. In the first spread (Figure 3), Laura and her family sit on the root deep into the land. The depiction of Laura and her family sitting on the roots deep in the land seems to affirm the longstanding presence of Indigenous people.

The visual and verbal narratives consistently portray the Moreton Bay Fig, an Australian native flora, as an unchanging iconic image throughout the 200-year span, symbolising the enduring presence of Australian First Nations people. This visual iconic figure serves as a powerful reminder of the land's original inhabitants, who existed long before white settlement. The fig tree's permanence amid changing landscapes symbolises the resilience and continuity of Indigenous cultures, despite the profound transformations brought about by colonisation. Its roots, deeply embedded in the soil, metaphorically represent the unbroken connection between Australian First Nations people and their ancestral lands, transcending temporal boundaries within the story and highlighting their inseparable bond with their land.

6.3 Interrelation of Text and Images

My Place follows a distinctive structure, where each spread begins with the sentence "This is my place," displaying images, including three illustrations and a hand-drawn map created by the protagonist. Spanning backward from 1988 to 1788, *My Place* presents 21 spreads at 10-year intervals, maintaining a consistent composition.

The use of the demonstrative 'this' in the text alone does not provide a complete understanding of the spread. However, one of the three illustrations positioned in the upper left corner of each spread depicts a detailed representation of 'my place' for that specific era. This consistent interplay of text and images allows readers to progressively unravel Australian history as they move backwards through time. The relationship between text and images does not conclude within each spread; rather, it extends across spreads, creating a recurring motif. Both the textual representation of "this" and its corresponding images function as central themes.

The rhythmic style of the textual metafunction in the visual and verbal elements of the picturebook facilitates meaning-making within individual pages and beyond. For example, "This is my place" appears in every spread; however, its meaning is enriched by the accompanying visual elements. In the 1988 spread (Figure 3), 'my place' is represented as a townhouse surrounded by urban development, signifying modernity and continuity. In contrast, in the 1788 spread (Figure 4), 'my place' is depicted as untouched bushland, reflecting Indigenous heritage and precolonial landscapes. These visual and verbal interactions emphasise the changes of identity and belonging over time.

Among the choice of cohesive devices, reference operates through different modes—text and images. Although the lexical cohesion is straightforward with the phrase "This is my place," its interaction with the adjacent image promotes a deeper understanding of each spread's historical context. In addition, the hand-drawn map by each protagonist in all spreads serve as visual cohesion akin to the lexical cohesion, illustrating processes of urbanisation, industrialisation, and

environmental pollution in a single location over two centuries.

Unlike the spreads of the other years, two spreads represent the year 1788 uniquely. The penultimate spread (Figure 4) replaces the textual metafunctional repetition of "This is my place" with "I belong to this place." Adjacent to this text, the protagonist, Barangaroo, is depicted as nude, next to a plant-made bush shelter amidst Australian bush. The lower right page of this spread illustrates a beached whale, canoes, and multiple unclothed figures on the shore. Notably, Barangaroo, named after a historical figure, continued her unclothed lifestyle even after other young Indigenous women adopted clothing (Karskens, 2014). The penultimate 1788 spread (Figure 4) maintains the narrative structure established from 1988 onward. However, the final double-page spread presents significant figures from history, with Barangaroo, the 1788 protagonist, referencing her grandmother's words, as previously mentioned:

> Sometimes, at the end of the day, I climb to the top of the big tree and play that I'm the only person in the world. If I look one way, the sea runs out till it meets the sky. But the other way, the land goes on till the sun sets.
>
> My grandmother says, 'We've always belonged to this place.'
> 'But how long?' I ask. 'And how far?'
> My grandmother says, 'Forever and ever.'
>
> (The final double-page spread of 1788 in *My Place*)

This verbal transition from the singular 'I' in the Bangararoo narrative, which was the same as the previous protagonists, to the plural 'we' in her grandmother verbal narrative demonstrates a value system that prioritises collective identity over individuality, highlighting the importance of community in Indigenous cultures. Alongside the text, the image in the final double-page spread foregrounds a close-up of the fig tree's dark branches where Barangaroo's silhouette sits, both depicted in deep shadow against a sun-tinted crimson sky and the yellow sun. The fig tree

here symbolises old time and nature in the very early state of the land, while the colour combination of this double-page spread indicates the same colour as the Aboriginal Flag as stated in the section of 5.2.1. Thus, the interplay of visual and verbal narratives in *My Place* creates a stronger meaning, effectively conveying a deeper message to readers.

6.4 Fuzzy Theme in Multimodal Texts

The multimodal SFL analyses of *My Place* reveal that its visual and verbal elements do not strictly follow a clear Theme-Rheme progression. Instead, thematic elements are fluid and interconnected, creating continuity across the spreads. This can be understood as a **Fuzzy Theme**, drawing from *fuzzy logic* (Sugeno, 1988), which allows for degrees of truth rather than binary oppositions.

The Moreton Bay Fig serves as a thematic anchor throughout different time periods in the visual and the verbal narratives, with its significance subtly shifting based on the historical and cultural context of each spread. While the tree remains constant as the 'Theme,' its interpretation evolves as the 'Rheme,' illustrating an ambiguous boundary between foregrounded and backgrounded elements.

The recurring verbal narratives "This is my place" and "This is a map of my place," interact with corresponding the visual images (an illustration of my place and a hand-drawn map by a protagonist). They highlight the protagonist's time and space, grounding each narrative within its historical and cultural context. Each child narrator, except Barangaroo, asserts ownership of their environment, yet their relationship to the land varies depending on their temporal and cultural context. The phrases act as both a personal declaration and a shared connection across generations, merging individual experience with collective memory. This repetition of **Fuzzy Theme** fosters thematic continuity that transcends time while allowing for evolving interpretations of identity and belonging. Although the placement of visual elements and the positioning of the verbal narratives differ from spread to spread, similar compositions consistently emerge throughout the 20 spreads, reinforcing this continuity and creating a cohesive narrative structure. This aligns

with the concept of fuzziness, where meanings exist on a spectrum rather than in strict categories.

The application of the concept of Fuzzy Theme enhances understanding of how *My Place* makes meaning through a non-linear and layered approach to history and identity. The narrative avoids fixed thematic roles, permitting overlapping and evolving interpretations, especially in its representation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives. This challenges traditional notions of thematic progression and offers a new perspective for interpreting complex multimodal texts.

These findings reveal that the narratives in *My Place* offer rich educational opportunities for diverse audiences. For beginning readers, the visual elements make historical and cultural themes accessible. For older readers and instructors, the interplay of text and images serves as a resource for teaching and learning critical thinking and fostering empathy toward historical figures. In addition, the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in the first and the last spreads invites readers of all ages to reflect on Australian colonial history and its ongoing implications. The following Conclusion summarises how the multimodal interplay and its reverse chronological structure contribute to a deeper understanding of conventional perspectives on Australian history, identity, and social awareness.

7. Conclusion

My Place employs a reverse chronological narrative structure, featuring child protagonists of similar ages across a 200-year span from 1788 to 1988. This approach, along with the multimodal interplay of text and images, constructs the narrative that challenges traditional perspectives on Australian history and identity. The Moreton Bay Fig, consistently represented in both text and images, functions as a significant and stable motif, grounding the narrative in both temporal and spatial contexts while symbolising the enduring presence of Indigenous heritage.

This study employs the multimodal SFL analysis to demonstrate how Wheatley and Rawlins effectively utilise visual and verbal elements to convey

complex historical and cultural narratives. The book's unique structure and consistent use of child narrators reduce temporal distance, fostering empathy for diversities and understanding across generations. The structural similarity between the visual and the verbal narratives enhances readability for its readers.

While primarily centred on Australian history such as a penal colony, the Gold Rush and the Land Rights Movement, *My Place* also incorporates global events such as World Wars I and II, Vietnam War and cultural icons like the Beatles; thereby situating Australia's narrative within broader global context. This comprehensive approach enhances historical knowledge while promoting environmental and social consciousness in Australia for readers across all age groups. By juxtaposing Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives, particularly through the contrasting narratives of Barangaroo in 1788 and Laura in 1988, the picturebook challenges readers to confront Australia's colonial history and its ongoing impact on Australian First Nations peoples.

Consequently, *My Place* transcends the boundaries of a typical children's book and functions as an effective educational resource that deepens historical understanding and promotes multicultural, social and environmental awareness. This is accomplished by establishing cognitive and emotional proximity between contemporary readers and historical figures, effectively scaffolding temporal gaps in Australian history. This study emphasises the potential of multimodal texts in education, highlighting their ability to cultivate a more delicate appreciation of diverse histories and identities in Australia.

Notes

1 The Mabo judgement, also known as the Mabo decision, was a landmark 1992 High Court of Australia ruling that recognised the Torres Strait Islanders' ownership of Mer (Murray Island). This decision acknowledged the traditional rights of the Meriam people to their land and established the existence of native titles for all Indigenous people (National Museum Australia, 2022).

2 The Wik decision in 1996 concerned two native title claims in Queensland by the Wik and Thayorre peoples over pastoral leases and special mining leases. The High Court subsequently ruled in favour of the plaintiffs on the pastoral lease issue (AIATSIS, 2011).

3 The Apology of 2008 represents another Australian significant milestone, wherein Prime Min-

ister Kevin Rudd officially apologised to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, particularly addressing the Stolen Generations who had suffered forced child removal and assimilation (National Museum Australia, 2023).

Acknowledgement

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