

# ‘Country’ in Representations of Speech and Thought in Australian Contemporary Verse Novels

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## Introduction

The utility of the verse novel for social and cultural critique became apparent in Early Victorian times, and influenced the development of the form. The move to portraying everyday life for didactic purposes required a shift from overblown emotion to ordinary feeling, greater emphasis on the psychological, and greater narrative momentum (Bose 20–21). The more successful verse novelists of the period, according to Bose, also adapted their writing to incorporate fictional imperatives such as ‘character and incident’ (36). The changed cultural circumstances of the late-twentieth-century in turn prompted verse novels in English to adopt the novelistic preference, noted by Lars Sauerberg, for ‘strong narrative drive, mimesis of the world-as-we-know-it, and a foregrounding of the subject (human agent) as part of the cast and or in a narrative stance’ (446–47).

Verse novels written in English today arise in a range of cultural contexts. The scope of this paper restricts itself to three acclaimed contemporary Australian verse novels which provide political and social critique. Research is yet to describe how stylistic preferences help shape social commentary in such verse novels. To redress this neglect, this paper offers a close reading of representations of speech and thought in Lisa Jacobson’s *The Sunlit Zone* (2011); Judy Johnson’s *Jack* (2006); and Geoff Page’s *Freehold* (2005). Central to each of these verse novels is a preoccupation with discourses of ‘country.’ Australia, a continent completely surrounded by water, is the setting for each narrative, so ‘country’ necessarily encompasses and may refer to the mainland, coastlines, islands or seas. ‘Country’ in *Jack* and *Freehold* is additionally synonymous with colonial perspectives of ‘nation.’ Country-as-commodity is prominent in the futuristic narrative of *The Sunlit Zone*. In all three texts, ‘country’ evokes connections between people, landscape, belonging, identity and subjectivity. The intermingling of discourses of country in this paper reflects these multifaceted invocations.

The chosen texts also share a stylistic preference for representations of speech and thought that are close to ‘naturally’ occurring oral communication, and which incorporate vernacular, regional idiom, and colloquial diction. This is not to suggest that the texts are representative of all Australian verse novels in these respects, or indeed, of verse novels per se. Other Australian verse novels use vernacular, regional idiom, and colloquial diction; Les Murray’s *Fredy Neptune*, for instance, is distinctive for those very features; yet in terms of genre Murray’s verse novel varies considerably from those of Page, Johnson or Jacobson, and this difference accounts for its exclusion. Other Australian verse novels depict relationships to land from non-Indigenous (*The Scarring*, Page 1999; *Dispossessed*, Hodgins 1994) and Indigenous (*Ruby Moonlight*, Cobby Eckerman 2012) perspectives.





























