



VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

## **VATE Inside Texts 2017**

# **Pair 7**

## **The Longest Memory by Fred D'Aguiar**

## **Black Diggers by Tom Wright**

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# Pair 7: The Longest Memory and Black Diggers

Teaching notes prepared by Ross Huggard

## Introduction

These two texts are set in different eras, countries and circumstances, the novel in the southern slave state Virginia at the turn of the eighteenth century, the play in early-twentieth century Australia and Europe in World War I. In both texts, the social marginalisation of a controlled underclass is an issue. The injustice of prejudice and maltreatment is seen in the states of the Deep South where slavery was viewed by those in control as justifiable and acceptable. In Australia, forced and underpaid labour, and dispossession of Aboriginal people along with their resistance to it, have not always been widely recognised. Abuse of both African-American slaves and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was accepted by many and seen as economically essential. Both texts explore long-term racism and invite readers to reflect on how lasting and socially-ingrained racist attitudes can be.

Themes such as dispossession, denial of human rights, forced labour, lack of education, misuse of religion, and the role of memory and forgetting in the formation of identity, are connected in these texts not only to time and place, but also to race and skin colour. The texts reveal that enslavement is typically both physical and psychological. This is well shown by contrasting Old Whitechapel advocating 'a simple lesson in obedience' (p. 12) for his wayward son, Chapel, with Nigel's plaintive refusal to participate in the ANZAC Day service in 1951, 'I don't want to join in. I don't belong.' (p. 96).

In modern-day Australia, the apology to the Stolen Generation in 2008 by the Rudd government was an important historical moment. Archie Roach, the Aboriginal singer, writer and activist, commented of the Rudd apology:

it's an apology not just for me, but for my mother and for my father and for my children who carry the burden of what happened to us stolen kids.

In the USA, slavery was abolished after the Civil War, the so-called Jim Crow laws of the early twentieth century were eventually overthrown, and racial segregation was outlawed in 1965.

## Activities

- Research the history and geographical location of 'slave' and 'free' States in the Union, from the 1776 American Declaration of Independence to the 1861 Civil War. Read the Declaration. What hopes might it have given to African-American slaves?
- When was slavery abolished in places other than the United States, such as the West Indies? Who were the abolitionists and what price did they pay for their activities?
- Make a timeline that includes: Aboriginal Protection Acts of various Australian State governments in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, 'black wars', indentured labour of South Sea Islanders in sugar cane fields of Queensland, Australian Federation, White Australia policy, WW1, WW2, 1949 Commonwealth Citizenship Act, assimilation policy, integration policy, Wave Hill, Commonwealth referendum, Land Rights protests, hand-back of Daguragu soil to Vincent Lingiari by Gough Whitlam, Wik and Mabo cases, Paul Keating's Redfern speech and Kevin Rudd's apology speech.
- When was the United Nations *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* proclaimed? In groups, discuss the thirty Articles in the Declaration and try to summarise them down to five or ten—are you able to?—if not, why not? What retrospective comment does the Declaration make on the themes, ideas and issues portrayed in these two texts?