

## **Reading and Righting Whiteness: Reflection Statement for Showcase**

In *Reading and Righting Whiteness*, I intended to deconstruct Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*<sup>1</sup> as a text that profoundly unveils and demolishes the Australian "whiteness" of its theoretical and literal readers. Given my desire to demonstrably navigate both the field of whiteness theory and what I discovered was an "unreadable" Indigenous epic that had divided public and critical circles, my project fell naturally in line with the medium of the critical response. My composition was the result of an accumulative interest in the construction of race and identity, as well as my dual loves of close textual analysis and rigorous self-challenge. This was buttressed, in turn, by my aspirations to disseminate whiteness to readers who may be unfamiliar with this school of thought. The combination of these ambitions led to the formation of my essay's purpose: to accessibly examine the white identity's construction in the Australian novel; to research widely the areas of whiteness and the Indigenous worldview; and, ultimately, to contribute to an innovative reading of Wright's text that was erected on my own experience of negotiating *Carpentaria*'s "storied terrain."

I understood from the earliest point in the course that, given the conceptual obscurity and theoretical nuances of critical whiteness theory, my essay's audience was potentially limited. Consequently, I hoped that by creating a compelling exploration of a little-known Indigenous fiction, I could encompass a somewhat broader selection of mature readers and critics. I expected that my investigation of Wright's manipulation of the white reader would, nonetheless, resonate specifically with critics of whiteness who were invested in the field of literature. Furthermore, my examination of the 'Dreamtime Narrative' and its conflict with the implicit whiteness of 'Magic Realism' would appeal to those interested in race and Indigenous literary studies. As such, the ideal mode of publication for my essay leant itself to the likes of *Critical Race and Whiteness Studies*: an Australian journal with the stated aim of

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<sup>1</sup> A. Wright (2006), *Carpentaria*, Giramondo Publishing Company, Australia

challenging “racial privilege and the construction and maintenance of race and whiteness” through interdisciplinary analysis.<sup>2</sup> Inclusion in the 2013 publication “Mapping your Law/Lore” was an outcome that I felt complimented the Aboriginal focus of my piece. Thus, I crafted my essay in a way that was appropriate for the journal’s University and online readership.

In many ways, my Major Work journey began long before the beginning of the Extension 2 English course, for the Preliminary and HSC courses of English functioned as a stimulating backdrop to the development of my thesis. In the first instance, my thematic study of ‘Power’ in the English Advanced Preliminary course piqued my curiosity for the implicit power relations that shape the world’s racial and non-racial discourses. Later, this would translate into my reading of Desperance’s “desires” as “not so much for the black body as they are for themselves, and their couplings/beatings not as expressions of dominance but the *makings* of a dominant self.” My subsequent study of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, underscored by the identity narrative which Othello ‘the Venetian’ constructs for himself, witnessed the conception of my personal interest in the psychological dimension of ‘race.’ Moreover, it eventually inspired my investigation of Wright’s portrayal of ‘Angel Day.’ On another level, the quality of my essay was latently shaped by the ‘Conflicting Perspectives’ Module in English Advanced and my comparative study of *Julius Caesar* and its 2012 African adaption by the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Due to *Carpentaria*’s incommensurability with a ‘white’ reading perspective, traversing Wright’s narrative was unequivocally difficult. To assist the development of my Major Work in this respect, I examined Sylvan Barnet’s *A Short Guide to Writing About Literature*,<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Association, 2013, *Who are we?*, accessed 12/5/13, <http://www.acrawsa.org.au/>.

<sup>3</sup> S. Barnet & W. Cain (2000), *A Short Guide to Writing About Literature*, 8<sup>th</sup> edn., Addison Wesley Longman, Inc., Sydney

which utilised the reader-response medium to deconstruct the process of literary analysis itself. I appropriated Barnett's methods to formally structure the bulk of my analysis. Furthermore, Barnett motivated my desire to provide a wide-ranging textual analysis of *Carpentaria*; whose scope would do justice to the intricacies of Wright's novel. A further consideration of mine was the 'voice' of my Major Work, as Barnett's wry criticism of the proliferation of emotionless, esoteric scripts in the public domain illustrated the effectiveness of the critic's use of the personal pronoun. This impelled my abandonment of language which obscured meaning in its complexity, and foresaw my increasing use of 'brief' transitional paragraphs to ground readers within "my" discussion of *Carpentaria*.

To address the interests of my specified audience and also my compositional intention, it was imperative that my Major Work articulated a comprehensive definition of whiteness. My reading of Richard Dyer's *WHITE*<sup>4</sup> was instrumental to my understanding of the aphorism, as his text exemplified the accessible structure I wanted my essay to emulate. Dyer's contribution to my Major Work was supplemented by Timothy Barnett's five-fold definition of whiteness in *Reading "Whiteness" in English Studies*,<sup>5</sup> and the introduction by Anne Brewster and Fiona Probyn-Rapsey in *Approaching Whiteness*.<sup>6</sup> This compilation of works proved to be my primary source of insight into the form of a critical whiteness essay, and led me to explain that it must not be understood "as an essential or biological category, but rather as a socially constructed 'strategy of authority.'" Notably, Dyer also provided his description of the concept following his introduction - a 'necessary safeguard' against reader confusion – and explained where reference to whiteness in textual analyses was most pertinent. I followed his example: appropriately reiterating "whiteness" throughout the work to promote reader engagement, and commencing my essay with a discussion of the maxim.

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<sup>4</sup> R. Dyer (1997), *WHITE*, 1<sup>st</sup> edn., Routledge, Milton Park

<sup>5</sup> T. Barnett (2000), Reading "Whiteness" in English Studies, *College English*, vol. 63, no. 1

<sup>6</sup> A. Brewster & F. Probyn-Rapsey (2007), Approaching Whiteness: Introduction, *Australian Humanities Review*, vol. 42, August-September 2007, p. 1

In my desire to contribute a new critical perspective on *Carpentaria*, I came to recognise that my essay would have to deny the common tendency of the critic to regard the theoretical reader in absolute and essential terms. Thus, upon discovering Sandra R. Phillips' *Re/presenting the Indigenous Literary Terrain*<sup>7</sup> – a doctorate that had gathered and deconstructed actual reader responses to *Carpentaria* – my renewed consideration of the literal reader altered the direction of my thesis. Its application of reader-response theory to Wright's readership and fitting testimonials were incorporated into my Major Work to substantiate the premise that *Carpentaria* actively 'decolonises' its white readers.

Anne Brewster's *Indigenous Sovereignty and the Crisis of Whiteness in Alexis Wright's Carpentaria*<sup>8</sup> was critical to the formulation of my thesis, as from it I garnered knowledge of the inter-relationship between Indigenous (Spiritual) Sovereignty and the reign of whiteness. Contextualising Dyer's arguments within *Carpentaria*, Brewster motivated my consideration of Wright's Dreamtime as a narratological tool that displaces the 'white' racial worldview.

From Alison Ravenscroft's *Dreaming of Others: Carpentaria and its Critics*,<sup>9</sup> I cultivated a more nuanced reading of *Carpentaria* after learning of whiteness' scripting of Indigenous epistemologies as magic. Therefore, this source became integral to my discussion of white illogicality. Her commentary on the transcription of the Dreamtime into *Carpentaria* resonated with my discussion of the various "time schemes" of the novel, which had been shaped in turn by the testimony of Diane Molloy<sup>10</sup> and Lynda Ng.<sup>11</sup> However, Ravenscroft's belief that *Carpentaria* inscribes an "impossible dialectic," "precisely *unreadable* to a white

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<sup>7</sup> S. Phillips (2011), *Re/presenting Readings of the Indigenous Literary Terrain*, University of Queensland Press, Queensland

<sup>8</sup> A. Brewster (2010), *Indigenous Sovereignty and the Crisis of Whiteness in Alexis Wright's Carpentaria*, *Australian Literary Studies*, vol. 25, November 1

<sup>9</sup> A. Ravenscroft (2010), *Dreaming of Others: Carpentaria and its Critics*, *Cultural Studies Review*, vol. 16, no. 2

<sup>10</sup> D. Molloy (2013), *Finding Hope in the Stories: Alexis Wright's Carpentaria and the Carnavalesque Search for a New Order*, *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, vol. 12, no. 3

<sup>11</sup> L. Ng (2010), *Genre and Nation in the Contemporary Novel: Remapping the Literary Landscape After Globalisation*, University of New South Wales, Sydney

reader, and [so] our efforts at translation...must always fail” was problematic for the aims of my essay. I negotiated this ‘self-defeating’ approach by concluding that *Carpentaria* necessarily appears ‘unreadable’ to fully defamiliarise whiteness and distance the reader.

In time, I became perplexed by the number of potential directions with which to interpret *Carpentaria*, and the fear that I would begin the course on a divergent and inevitably fruitless path was paralysing. Thankfully, this dilemma was resolved with my reading of Lois Tyson’s *Critical Theory Today*,<sup>12</sup> which consolidated my understanding of the novel with its appraisal of a number of possible avenues for reader-response, post-colonial and cultural analyses of texts. After I had learned of the reader-response critic’s methodology when approaching fiction, I too began to search for the vignettes of ambiguity and its effect on the implied reader of *Carpentaria*. Moreover, I incorporated into my work a combination of structural changes relevant to both reader-response and cultural criticism, as my essay would, in light of Tyson’s instruction, implicitly combine the two fields at its conclusion.

The assistance proffered by the mentorship of Bernadette Brennan of the University of Sydney and Australian essayist Gerard Windsor helped me to avoid imposing the “instrumental logic of Western thought” on *Carpentaria* during my analysis. To assist reader engagement and promote textual integrity, I followed Brennan’s suggestion to dovetail my Major Work’s multifarious objectives and continually relate to a sole thesis: evidenced by my inclusion of a second ‘introductory’ paragraph which would streamline my analysis.

In retrospect, I can conclude that it was only through a gruelling process of researching and writing that I was able to realise the creation of my Major Work and achieve ‘victory’ over the most challenging novel I have ever read. The extensive effort demanded by the project has provided me a strong work ethic, and a pride in my finished product. Although I

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<sup>12</sup> T. Tyson (2006), *Critical Theory Today*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., Taylor & Francis Group, New York

discovered weaknesses in my area of essay writing, the feedback from others enabled me to cultivate an appreciation for my strengths, and deliver a conceptually developed reading of *Carpentaria* and the whiteness of her Australian readers.