

The Caretaker - Reflection Statement



Bangalee homestead

“If only we’d come here to learn instead of to teach.”
Sean Burke, Eurobodalla Shire Council Officer.

Australia is often deemed a “young” nation. A nation that has had foundations built from colonial traditions and newly constructed ideologies. Yet Australia possesses the oldest surviving culture in the world dating back sixty-five thousand years. *“The Caretaker”* is an intimate postcolonial fiction examining the complexities of white privilege through the character of Don, a marginalised white man who appreciates the beauty of Australia’s suppressed culture. The short story melds fact and fiction, past and present, creatively adapting events that transpired on my family farm, “Bangalee,” in the New South Wales coastal town of Bermagui. The microcosm of “Bangalee” embodies the possibilities for white Australia to embrace the significance of Indigenous traditions, as an alternate dimension of life.

My personal ties to the Indigenous culture manifested into the concept for my short story. Aboriginal heritage from my great grandmother, aunt and cousins, induced an imagining of the majestic rituals of a hushed culture. I discovered that my late uncle who supported Aboriginal communities had the honour of being the first white Australian to be buried at Woorabinda, a Queensland Aboriginal community. *“The Caretaker,”* was also propelled by my connection to Bangalee, a place of family congregation. After the discovery of corroboree rings on the property in 2012, I became conscious of the unity the land holds not only for my family but for families throughout history. I aspired to share my passion for Bangalee and the local Yuin tribe, and the Extension II course provided me the ideal opportunity.

Dismantling common Australian tradition is less to critique values, than to expose the cultural and spiritual benefits some white Australians overlook. Conflicting emotions

were raised when I attended the Centenary of ANZAC in Gallipoli. A proud commemoration for my country, yet I questioned the role of these legends and myths in stymieing white society's acknowledgement of the depth of our nation's history, including Indigenous spirituality. Just as soldiers are proudly decorated for their service to country, the Indigenous embrace the ornamentation of totems, "*The Umbarra, Black Duck, came alive,*" a way of valuing and respecting the land. The alternate decorations juxtapose positions of pride between the cultures. My target audience is white Australians saturated by jingoism, who with provocation may explore an ethereal realm of life, mimicking Don's experience. I envisaged my work to further appeal to the politically and socially engaged exhibiting an enthusiasm with Indigenous affairs.

To build ambience and authentic characterisation that could entertain and sustain my plot I conducted a series of interviews. The inflections and tone of Don's humorous character, "*Bloody hell, did I anger the spirits?*" was yielded from interviewing Don, "*Get up about six, have me breakfast and then decide what I'm gunna do for the rest of the day.*" Don's unpretentious manner is embellished by his place on the fringe of white society, a position allowing him to identify the significance of Indigenous culture's connection to land. The simile of Don encountering a goanna "*it's tongue extended, waving like a flag of territory,*" inspires Don to recognise the territorial rights of the ancient culture.

Interviewee Sean Burke, a white man from Eurobodalla Shire council, cried over his appreciation for Indigenous spirituality, "*the country owns you, you don't own the country,*" epitomising the purpose of my piece. Sean's affiliation with Gulaga, Mt Dromedary, "*I feel that I'm her adopted child, she's my mother,*" was a conduit for

my artistic license with Gulaga's creation tale. Sean highlighted a clear distinction between the maturation of modern Australians and past Indigenous youth, "*We carry a lot of childhood garbage with us and we don't get the processes of leaving that behind and taking on a new role.*" Two initiations are constructed in my piece. The initiation of Ira was designed to fit synchronistically with Don's metaphysical initiation. The motif of a giba, stone, represents the growth of both characters as they "*shed the skin of a younger self.*" However, to intensify the cultural distinction between characters Ira and Don, I examined documentary footage of young Indigenous boys performing traditional dances. Refining a masculine and socially apt voice for Don meant minimising his dialogue to condense his emotions, "*Beers the best medicine,*" knowledge gained from Gender and Language studies in English Extension I.

Interviewee Dan Morgan, the great nephew of Gubbo Ted Thomas - one of the last initiated males in the Bega Valley - loaned me a century old idiosyncratic account, "The Kuringal Ceremonies," by A.W.Howitt. The work outlines the hierarchical structure of Yuin elders including the "Goomera," providing authentic and credible elements for my story. Traversing sacred grounds I followed the footsteps of Aboriginal ancestors. The Ngaro Cultural Trail in the Whitsundays and a hike from Bangalee to Murrah Inlet drew my attention to specific plants and animals, providing depth to my piece, as in the personification, "*his paunch a wart-like burl growing lumpy as the Eucalypt's stomach he lent against.*" Immersion in the landscape provoked my inclusion of the min min lights. My symbolic implementation of this unresolved marvel is to expose the need of white Australians to "find answers," while indigenous culture has already named and embraced such beauty.

I delved into poetry and short story form to discern my choice of medium. Intent on displaying the dichotomy between the beauty of Australian landscape and the reality of colonisation, I reflected on Judith Wright's "The Hawthorne Hedge" from English Advanced, "*took root grew wild and high to hide behind,*" as her personification emulated the rhythm and fluidity I desired. The juxtaposition of Heidi Jay's poem "The Pool" and Vicki Mennie's short story "White on Black," displayed the effects of the two mediums in accessing memories, histories and imaginations. Mennie's "White on Black," engaged with me as a responder through humorous dialogue and profound characterisation, persuading my choice of a short story text. Gulaga's dreamtime tale was inspired by the work of Sally Morgan in the children's dreamtime story "The Flying Emu." Morgan's stylistic amalgamation of poetry and short story rhythm "*it was impossible to tell where a monster ended and a rock began,*" prompted my personification of Mt Dromedary, "*Gulaga...remains the mother of all that lives far and wide,*" a motif throughout my piece.

My composition parallels the purpose and methods of Katharine Susan Prichard's novel "Coonardoo," of Preliminary English Advanced Studies. Prichard's magnification of the captivating and beneficial aspects of the Aboriginal culture mirrors the motive of my piece. Don's "*sheltered homestead balcony,*" influenced by her mood-inducing "*white verandah,*" symbolises the characters foresight and restrictions to embrace a world beyond white culture. Vital to my stylistic nuances was the use of Aboriginal language - also influenced by Prichard. I sourced the translation for the Djirringang language from the "Macquarie Book of Aboriginal Words." The Djirringang vernacular is largely unrecorded requiring the compromise of dialect from nearby tribes.

The metamorphosis of Don is in stark contrast to representations found in Advanced

English novel *“Wrack”* and the film *“Charlie’s Country.”* “Wrack” in purporting to be about the search for the “true” founders of Australia ironically dismisses the Indigenous people, *“only white men, European men discover.”* “Charlie’s Country” conveys white Australia’s myopic attitude to Aboriginal culture. Railing against these constructions, *“The Caretaker,”* recognises an opportunity to embrace Indigenous traditions.

Initially I grappled with making the sequencing of dialogue authentic, particularly Don’s phone conversation with Wayne. In overcoming this I looked to other areas of dialogue I felt were more successful, including the pub scene, and drew upon my interviews and familiarity with gender and language to keep the dialect between the two brothers realistic and succinct. I prevaricated with the conclusion of my piece desiring a subtle and poignant experience for my audience. After several re-writes I concluded that Don’s epiphany would best resonate with my dreaming tale of Gulaga. Don’s final scene is therefore majestically embellished through personification, “Don sprung out from her body to join his nocturnal companions,” heightening the empowerment and enlightenment gained from recognising the worlds oldest culture.

“The Caretaker” grew from a hypothesis to proffer awareness of a particular cultural gem. It transformed into an evocative work encouraging Australians consumed by ubiquitous white mythology to embrace the opportunity for greater understanding of Indigenous culture. Like Sean Burke and Don, I have endeavored through *“The Caretaker”* to divulge how our oldest surviving culture is pivotal to the growth of modern life.

“Bring us into the nation,” - Noel Pearson, Aboriginal rights activist.