

The Visitors: What if the English were turned away?

Essay by Dr. Liza-Mare Syron

Indigenous Scientia Senior Lecturer, UNSW Sydney

Context

“History is written by the victors”

This quote of the war time Prime Minister of Great Britain, Winston Churchill, implies that populous accounts on nation formation have historically been circulated by conquering states. This was certainly the case during the nineteenth century British imperial expansion of countries and continents such as North America, India, and Australia. Lands occupied by native peoples and communities. In Australia, Aboriginal lands were never seeded, nor were any treaties entered into with the British who arrived in Port Jackson in the summer of 1788. Instead, the international principle of *Terra Nullius* (nobody’s land) was invoked effectively erasing the existence of a people who had lived on that land for over 40,000 years.

The impact of colonisation/invasion on the Aboriginal experience in Australia was devastating. First there were western diseases that decimated many of the Sydney harbour clans. Many were removed from their traditional hunting grounds and settlements forced to gather in places riddled with sickness. Lands were propagated with non-indigenous plants and cleared for cattle and sheep. As the colonists encroached the coastal and inland countries worse was to come. Under the guise of ‘protection’ Aboriginal families were moved off their lands onto church run missions and reserves. Across the country children were removed from their families and forced into mission run schools to learn the English language and culture. In many instances Aboriginal people were punished for speaking their language, performing their ceremonies, and telling their stories. The question that *The Visitors* asks is, what if the English were turned away, and how might this history have been different?

The Visitors, a play by Murawari playwright Jane Harrison, presents a re-imagining of the arrival of the First Fleet in Sydney Harbour in 1788 from an indigenous

perspective placing the people and their culture front and centre in this historical account.¹ As Harrison states,

It's white history, *our* history "There are no first-person accounts of January 26, 1788 from an Indigenous perspective. The closest we've got is the William Dawes' account in his diaries of talking to Patyegarang, learning her language.² But I've read a lot of first contact history, from the Dawes diaries to Tim Flannery. And incidents referenced in the play actually happened.³

The story of Australia begins for many with the arrival of the British First Fleet. The first ship to reach the waters of Botany Bay was HMS Supply, on the 18th January, followed by the Alexander, Scarborough and Friendship all arriving the next day with the remainder on the 20th January. On the evening of 26th January the entire fleet had safely anchored in a small cove in Port Jackson Harbour, which was named Warrane by the local Gadigal people, but later renamed Sydney Cove by Governor Arthur Phillip. In reimagining these events as historical non-fiction, *The Visitors* foreground a gathering of local clan Elders from the Sydney Harbour basin who observe each ship as they arrive. While the characters in the play are imagined, many of the events that take place are drawn from Harrison's research of first contact accounts and stories.

The Play

WALTER: Of course they'll leave. Folk have come here on their nuwis⁴ before. Coming, going, sometimes trading, but always leaving eventually. We have long memories, eh. We know their visits are a passing event, a fleeting encounter. We are still here and will be forever. Do you really think that just because they come

¹ The Murrawari people are from the north west of NSW. Jane Harrison's other plays include; *Stolen*, and *Rainbows End*. Both plays have been on Secondary School curriculums.

² William Dawes was assigned to the first fleet to make astronomical observations and was the first to make extensive written records of the local clan languages of Sydney. Patyegarang was a young local indigenous woman aged about 15, who was Dawes' main language teacher and vital to his understanding and documentation of the Sydney Language.

³ Interview with Steve Meacham The Guardian. Wed 15 Jan 2020
<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/jan/15/playwright-jane-harrison-on-australia-day-this-isnt-just-black-history-people-are-forgetting>

⁴ A nuwis is a canoe made of bark.

ashore this one time that we might fade into nothingness, like
smoke into the sky?

The Visitors was first presented for development at the 2013 inaugural Yellamundie National Playwriting conference,⁵ with a further development as part of the Melbourne Theatre Company Cybec Electric series with a reading at the Melbourne Indigenous Festival in February 2014, directed by Wiradjuri theatre maker Leah Purcell.⁶ In January 2020 the play was produced by Moogahlin Performing Arts as part of the Sydney Festival at Carriageworks Sydney. The show was directed by Frederick Copperwaite with an all male indigenous cast including John Blair, Damion Hunter, Colin Kinchela, Nathan Leslie, Leroy Parsons, Glenn Shea, Kerri Simpson. Each of the seven roles in *The Visitors* are given a clan/family affiliation based on actual groups living in the greater Sydney area at the time. In the play, these clans are reframed by their environmental correlations and each member is assigned an archetypal role. For example, in the script Harrison describes her characters in the following ways:

Gary is from the *wallumedegal* clan from Northern Parramatta, known in the play as 'river mob'. Gary is the numbers man and bureaucrat.

Lawrence is from the *gweagal* clan of Botany Bay mob, known in the play as 'fire clan'. He is the youngest and an uninitiated man.

Gordon is *cadigal* from Sydney Cove and known in the play as the 'harbour dwelling clan'. He has General-like qualities.

Albert is *wangal* or South shore mob. The Engineer. Mr logic.

Jacob is *cameragal* from Manly Cove known in the play as North shore mob. He is the joker.

Walter is *burrattagal* from far west Sydney, 'River mob' or 'Eel place clan' He is a thinker and anthropologist.

⁵ Yellamundie Festival is produced by Moogahlin Performing Arts, a NSW indigenous theatre company.

⁶ The Wiradjuri nation is a large clan of central NSW.

Joseph is *kameygal* from the La Perouse area, 'Spear Clan'. 'The Doctor/healer'

The absence of women in the 2020 Sydney Festival production was primarily the choice of the director, Copperwaite, who spent two weeks prior to the production working with Jane on this approach. The suggestion that there was, or is, a lack of senior Aboriginal women knowledge holders is not based on reality. It is also believed that local fisherwoman *Barangaroo* was present at the first meeting between settlers and her *cameragal* people at Manly in 1788, and that she also participated in warfare with settlers at North Harbour in November of the same year.

The Visitors is not written in with a common play structure or format. There are no scenes or acts. Instead, the narrative flows continually from the beginning to the end. In doing this Harris is subverting the dominant play form. Here the indigenous playwright as active agent is asserting a type of sovereignty over the way in which an indigenous story is told and pays homage to traditional oral storytelling techniques. Historically, stories in indigenous culture had no beginning, middle or end. Instead time is situated as 'everywhen', happening simultaneously throughout time.⁷ However, Indigenous theatre is not just a version that deviates from the western form but is part of an indigenous cultural continuum, as an ongoing tradition of reclamation and reinvention of Aboriginal stories, and as a reconfiguration of knowledge production. What we can learn from this play is an indigenous perspective of a particular significant event.

The play starts with the clan Elders arriving one by one at the meeting circle to discuss the ship sitting out in the harbour and ends with the entire fleet having arrived. During discussions about what they should do the Elders affirm their collective understanding of local protocols as the process for consultation.

GARY: We speak one at a time, using the message stick. Agreed?
We listen more than we speak.
We stay until we all agree.
The agreement is for greater good, not favouring any one clan group.
Agreed?

⁷ The Australian anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner conveyed the idea in his 1956 essay 'The Dreaming'.

WALTER: Who are we, around this circle? Yes, we're the warriors of our mobs. We're the craftsmen. Scientists, Healers. We're cultured. We have language, more than one. We trade. We have ceremonies and songs. We have lore. We have protocols. And we share one particular protocol, and that is we welcome those who pass through our country.

Indigenous protocols are an expression of our epistemologies (ways of knowing), ontologies (ways of being) and axiologies (ways of doing).⁸ They are ethical principles which guide behaviour in particular situations. Protocols are based on the key principles of RESPECT (for others, for country, and all living things), RECIPROCITY (equality and sharing of ideas and materials), RECOGNITION (of custodianship over particular stories and country), and CONSULTATION (with others). These protocols also offer ways of engaging with indigenous peoples and their communities. In *The Visitors* these protocols define the way in which the characters interact and guide the process through which decisions are made.

Harrison has based the style of the play on Reginald Rose's *Twelve Angry Men*. Harrison took inspiration from the 1954 television play, involving a jury being disrupted by one cautiously deliberative juror who has doubts. In *The Visitors* it is Walter, the philosopher, who does not agree to a show of force to scare the boat away. Instead he asks the hard questions about the wellbeing of people who have travelled this far in a large boat only to sit for days in the harbour, and the responsibility of the local clan to welcome strangers.

WALTER: Our tradition - our protocol - is to welcome visitors to our country. We at least owe them that.

As the seven Elders discuss the fate of the visitors, one by one they come to see Walter's point of view and vote against the aggressive tactics of Gordon. By the end of the play the decision made by the local clans is to receive the visitors. As a small boat approaches, it is Gordon whose responsibility it is to welcome them. The outcome of the day's considerations is to echo across the daily lived experience of all their descendants.

GORDON: [*Towards the boats*]:

⁸ As defined by indigenous academic Aileen Moreton-Robertson in *An indigenous Woman's Standpoint Theory* (2013).

This is my country.

My father's country.

I know its patterns, its seasons, its soils, the texture of them, the colours, the particular shade of green of the grass the patyegarang nibbles after a fire has swept through, at dusk, when the patyegarang⁹ is most hungry, and most likely to be speared.

I know its secret springs where a thirst can be quenched even in the driest season.

I know my country's smells. The exact scent of leaf litter where bulbs of the chocolate lily hide under moss, though it is not my job to collect them.

And where the hardest flint is to be found. For tools, for trading. Its rivers are my blood, its rocky outcrops my bones, its winds are my breath as my lungs fill and empty. It is me.

When I welcome others, I honor my country.

We ask this, and this only.

While you walk on this country that you care for the land.

And that you look after the children of this land.

This is my country and my son's country.

In honour of my father, I welcome you.

ALL:

ngaya gawi niya

gulya guwagu yana ngurra wu winjara njurra

gay ngubaty gurung nula ngurra wu

warra mi yana allowah (local dialect of the Eora Nation)

What we also learn from this play is that the relationship between the local clans and the British colonisers/invaders/settlers was initially built on suspicion and mistrust. In this instance, it is the British who are the outsiders, the unknown, the perpetrators of violence. Their behaviour, their approaches, their lack of respect, their motivations, and their actions are all on trial. Evidence of their violence is provided by a shield with a bullet hole and the story of Gordon's father's death as a result of a first contact. Conflicting anecdotal evidence is also provided by Jacob

⁹ Patyegarang was a young woman from a Sydney harbour clan group who assisted Dawes with the documentation of local indigenous knowledge, languages, and astronomy.

the healer on several non-violent encounters. In weighing up all the evidence the final decision must be unanimous. In the end, one wonders if they made the right decision, or even if they had a choice at all in the matter.

Dr Liza-Mare Syron's family clan is Biripi from the Mid North Coast of NSW. Her qualifications include Doctor of Arts (University Sydney), Master of Creative Arts Research (University of Wollongong), and Master of Adult Education (UTS). She is widely published in the area of indigenous cultural arts practice and has received the following Australasian Theatre and Performance Studies association awards, the 2005 Phillip Parsons Prize for Performance as Research, the 2010 Marlis Thiersch Prize for research excellence in an English-language article, and a 2015 Rob Jordon award citation for a book chapter. Dr Syron is the Co-Founder and former Co-Artistic Director of Moogahlin Performing Arts, and her work history also includes, Indigenous Research Led (Macquarie University), Indigenous Research Fellow (Macquarie University) Senior Aboriginal Arts and Culture Officer (Arts NSW), and Head of Theatre (Eora College of Aboriginal Studies).