

The Cove Park/Varuna International Exchange Residency

What will stay with me most from my four-week stay in Varuna is a renewed fascination with communal and cultural connections to land. Before arriving in Australia for my residency I had already expected new landscapes: different trees, birds, flowers, rocks, but actually being around all of it in the flesh was a completely different story. My first night at the National Writers' House I was amazed by each and every outside sound, as well as the beautifully colourful birds and trees casually existing around me. Then there were the blue mountains themselves, which surprised me with how truly majestic they are, nevermind the fact that they were literally only minutes away from where I slept. Photos, or poetry, truly can't do them justice. However, beyond the geography of it all, it was the sheer sense of history all these elements represented. Perhaps I'm too guilty of taking my local Scottish landscapes for granted, but being in a completely new country to me, in a completely new hemisphere to me, I couldn't help but think about the millions of years of time that permeated each rock, canyon and eco-system around me.

In part because of this, I found particular joy during my time in Australia learning stories of land and country from Aboriginal people I met. Dharug and Gundungurra country has such a vast and deep history to it and I gained huge amounts of respect for all those keeping that history alive today. Before coming here I had heard about customs like land acknowledgements and welcomes, but actually experiencing them first-hand felt truly special. I feel privileged to have been able to take part in welcomes at different places and in different contexts, from the informal smoking ceremony welcome at Redfern Community Centre to the dance and music welcome at the Blue Mountain Writers' Festival. Most moving to me, however, was Uncle Chris' welcome to Varuna and to experience the smoke and stories in front of the big yellow house itself. These welcomes, all very different from one another, made me think about my own relationship to both land and ancestors, both back in Scotland and within my own wider heritage.

As for the Blue Mountains Writers' Festival, I made so many connections and got to experience a wide variety of different writers and people. The highlight for me was an event celebrating the publication of *Blue Mountain Elders Stories from Our Hearts*, a compilation of life stories by local Aboriginal Elders. Not only were many of the stories these Elders told on stage harrowing in terms of the realities of traditional treatment of Aboriginal people in the past, but the way they discussed identity itself felt very profound to me. Seeing and hearing members of an older generation saying things like "there is no half or quarter blood, if you're Aboriginal then you're Aboriginal" was incredibly moving and also very relevant to my own work and practice exploring mixed-race and mixed-cultural heritage. I wish those kind of inter-generational conversations were happening more in Scotland too.

I was also able to spend time meeting and getting to know amazing writers and people at Varuna itself. With me for my whole 4-week run was Ingrid Horricks from Te Whanganui a Tara Wellington, Hansda Sowvendra Shekar from Jharkhand, and Yanbeni Yanthan from Nagaland, and the kinship and friendship formed through our month together will undoubtedly continue going forwards. During the week of the Festival we were also joined by Merinda Dutton of Blackfulla Bookclub and Ali Cobby Eckermann, both of whom I learned a lot from in terms of community and writing practice, and both of whom I look forward to visiting again if I can get myself back to this part of the world.

Between all of these experiences I wrote a lot, and I edited even more. In my application for this opportunity I set the goal of finalising my long-running second poetry collection manuscript, and I'm pleased to say that I succeeded in that. There is still a journey to go before publication I'm sure, but thanks to this incredible opportunity I'm more hopeful than ever that I will make it there.

- Sean Wai Keung, 2025