

White critics don't know how to deal with the golden age of Indigenous stories

First Nations writers are reduced to moral objects, to be emptily liked or disliked in a white culture war we never asked for

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Michelle Lim Davidson, Anthony Taufa and Nakkiah Lui in Sydney Theatre Company's production of Lui's *How to Rule the World*. Photograph: Prudence Upton

We're in the midst of a renaissance in First Nations literature. I should be elated. Alexis Wright won the 2018 Stella for the unrivalled *Tracker*, and in 2019 Melissa Lucashenko is shortlisted for the relentless *Too Much Lip*. Claire Coleman's got another highly anticipated book, *The Old Lie*, coming out this year, Tony Birch has *The White Girl* in the works, and Kirli Saunders will make her debut soon with *Kindred*. Four out of 10 of *The Next Chapter* fellows are Indigenous. Others are energetically honing releases into next year and beyond.

So why do I feel this restlessness?

In December, Nayuka Gorrie and I both turned up to speak at the Stella prize longlist party with the same itching discontent. We had separately written speeches to confront its majority white audience. I talked about the "endless, patronising praise" I got from white audiences, and how I salve it with the frank reading of Indigenous women who "do you the dignity of taking you seriously".

Gorrie, ever prophetic, said that the night felt “frivolous” as the colony bore its power down around mob, and that “the work of Blak women is eternal, but often unregarded until it’s too late”.

Not long after, Nakkiah Lui tweeted.

This response from Larissa Berendht means so much to me and is an educational read. It’s from a fellow Aboriginal women who engages with my work in a way that I’ve never seen before - she acknowledges power. She’s understands context. It’s so brilliant to have another woman of colour, and Aboriginal woman, review my work.

The critic needs to be visible and present, so does their identity. Otherwise the dynamics and power structures of art don’t change, and conversations with it don’t keep up with the rest of community as we diversify and question more.

The difference of opinion between women of colour and white men to my work is absolutely staggering. Often the difference tends to invalidate the opinion of the other... usually because it’s White Men who take the authority about what is art and have the privilege of people valuing their opinion more. When you value one group over the other, it invalidates and devalues the other. It’s called structural oppression. I write about it all the time, however it’s rarely acknowledged when people publicly respond back to the work.

As a young Aboriginal woman who creates work, having your voice and your work constantly critiqued by those who have privilege and power, from a colonial lens that is never acknowledged by the viewer, is belittling and a little bit soul destroying. It's like White Men (and white people) have authority over me, take it upon themselves to validate instead of listen, and that's just meant to be a given because criticism is inevitable. But what is the value of criticism if there is no introspection or critique of the critic? If they don't ask themselves the same questions that artists have to?

My gender and racial identity are mentioned in every review, but the critic never mentions theirs. I think that would make a huge difference to me as a reader. Does it also highlight an irony that when it comes to art about race in Australia, it's constantly those who have racial privilege who are given the platform to respond? And if you are making work as a marginalised person for other marginalised people, can those who have privilege judge the work without acknowledging their privilege?

If race and power are allowed to be invisible, that's upholding oppression and racial supremacy because neutrality is a privilege.

We need more diverse discourse with our critique and public engagement with art otherwise what's the point? We need the critic to engage with their own identity and privilege because otherwise we have innately bias opinions that may not have the education or knowledge to contextualise a work.

Mainly, I want there to be an acknowledgment that audiences aren't just White men or white people. Criticism and public opinions of art need to be diverse, otherwise Whiteness and power yet again get to be invisible.

[Nakkiah Lui](#)

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Some of thoughts on what it's like when yourself and your work are continually assessed and critiqued by the colonial eye aka White (straight) men.

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It feels like a moment where we are angry and ready enough to address how white Australian review culture maligns Indigenous work by only superficially engaging with it. It feels like a moment where we are ready to sustain our own review culture. We have centuries of white engagement with Indigenous story as evidence for the need to change; we also have our own critics, who show us what's possible when whiteness loses its frame of evaluative authority over a work. Larissa Behrendt gave one such visionary review of Lui's latest satire, *How to Rule the World*. It inspired Lui's now-fateful tweet.

And into that moment Jason Whittaker (no relation) interjected with his own review. Away!'s Daniel Browning described it as a review of the tweet, not a review of the play. It was unpromisingly titled "from the colonial perspective" and opened with a 12-paragraph missive on whiteness, and Whittaker's own promise to work against the "echoed boosterism" he saw in Behrendt's "more biased" review. It went on to praise only the white cast, and concluded that the play was an unfunny "slapstick comedy" filled with "flights of fancy". He gave little evidence in the review for his claim beyond what he thought was "predictable" about the play's race politics, or how its characters (who he does not name) were "ciphers for ... disadvantage"; at times, his criticism of Lui was merged with that of the character she played.

Whittaker's lack of exposition on the play itself makes for a pretty underwhelming review (bad singing? in a comedy?). It joins a long lineage of underwhelming responses (who I will deprive of clicks today), which have turned out to not be about Lui's work at all — like those that have "reviewed" her family's finances, or were written without even seeing the play. Together, they reveal a hollow white anxiety about a Blak literary golden age that Lui and Behrendt are part of leading. Both have already

advocated more finely than I could in their own defence, and in defence of our collective plight.

The more I pore over them, the more I see the connection between Whittaker's "colonial" dispatch and the grimaces of the mostly white Stella longlist audience.

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Blak literature is in a golden age. Our white audiences, who are majorities in both literary industry and buying power, are deep in an unseen crisis of how to deal with it. It's taboo for us to acknowledge this crisis; instead Blak writers are expected to meekly show gratitude for the small white gestures that get us onto the page or stage where we belong.

The crisis permeates the whole industry. It affects funding, literary awards and development programs that disempower Indigenous voices, become preoccupied with our "potential" instead of our work, and force us into competition with one another for scraps.

That devaluation is maybe most visible in how those voices are critically engaged with, prevalent across a whole gamut of white reviews – positive and negative – that evade dealing with the text before them. Many responses to Indigenous literature obligingly call it "important", as if that was a useful assessment rather than an empty flattery. It's a running gag among us that is getting less funny. After I mentioned my hatred of the I-word in my Stella rant, white women still came up to tell me that the speech was important. Some hand-wringing, then called it "crucial" or "vital". It was neither. It was a six-minute rant at a literary longlist. That night, no one called it funny or smart. It might not have been. I'll never know.

White audiences move quickly between what they do publicly and what they do privately. Their response becomes its own performance, where reading Blak literature or watching a Blak play makes a good reconciliatory act. White middle-class readers, not all of them but enough, love to touch us and heap praise on us when someone's watching. Without invitation, they grasp our arms at writers' festivals. They tell us about their Aboriginal friends or how much they hated the latest racist gaffe, which they repeat for our benefit. If you say you can, as Jason Whittaker claimed to do, rise above our "boosterism" and put us uppity mob back in our place, you play another kind of hero to another kind of white audience. Either way, we're reduced to moral objects, to be emptily and enthusiastically liked or disliked in a white culture war we never asked for.

Behind the closed doors of prizes and funding bodies, this little reconciliatory performance falls away. The turn is jarring. Predominantly non-Indigenous judges confide freely in one another about the Indigenous works they publicly proclaimed "important" – and in these rooms, where it matters, we lack a right of reply. We get only glimpses into what they say, but we see the outcomes. Though the tide is turning, the awards and grants are still broadly a whitewash.

For Indigenous creatives, these are just parts of the same culture of infantilisation that meets our work. We are ready for the task of wrestling with our audiences and reviewers on fair terms about our literature. We are even more ready to see genuine arts criticism that is responsible for the race of its giver – without white fawning or white tantrums. We are *most* ready for arts criticism from Indigenous people and people of colour, where we need not brace for either.

It's what we are owed from an industry that wants to profit from Blak story, and it is the dignity that white writers receive. Anything less is not only a racist reflection of their low expectations for us as readers and writers – it is an utter bore in the middle of an Indigenous renaissance that ought to thrill us.