

Unwinding Australia: The Politics of Evasion Post-Mabo

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In keeping with the conference theme of Coming to Terms, I will do two things: I will reflect on the socio-cultural soulcape of Australia post-1992; and, I will reflect on the *spectre Australis* that First Nations people live in and under, and write into post-1990s, and some of the things with which my settler audience, critics, and readers might need to come to terms.

It's been thirty years since the High Court of Australia recognised that a group of Torres Strait Islanders led by Eddie Koiki Mabo held ownership of Mer Island. In acknowledging the traditional rights to the Meriam people for their land, the Court also held that native title existed for all First Nations people in Australia. This decision, known as the Mabo decision, recognised the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to their lands; rights that existed before the British invasion and that exist today. The High Court judgment in the Mabo case introduced the doctrine of native title into Australian law, removed the myth of *terra nullius*, and established a legal framework for native title claims by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of Australia.

In the thirty years that have passed, settler Australians want to hear what First Nations people have done. The question is always framed as, "How have things changed?" as if it is First Nations people who somehow need to change because of this High Court decision. I don't want to underestimate that decision, the overruling of *terra nullius*, as an important historical truth, but I want to put emphasis on *who* needed to shift their mindset in the aftermath of this overruling of the settler myth, and in which way.

The Mabo decision intensified a polarisation in the sociocultural fabric of Australia that had been growing since the 1980s. While Aboriginal activism has always been present from the early decades of frontier resistance in the nineteenth century, sectors of the settler population became extremely unsettled throughout the 1980s; some actively sought to distance themselves, however awkwardly and uneasily, from a triumphalist, uncritical view of the past. And in the unsettled decade of the late 1980s and early 1990s, Australia was "hopefully symptomatic." It was displaying the symptoms of the great Australian disease of not telling the past: of not acknowledging the shocking dispossession, disregard, and dismissal of the nation's first peoples; of not recognising the pretence of equality and a fair go and mateship, and of the flattening of intersections of identity, such as race, cultural backgrounds and sexualities, other than heteronormative ones. All of this was brewing and intensifying. Australia was symptomatic, and its great disease of evasion and unease was about burst into the open, like a massive lancing of an infection. It wouldn't be pleasant and would require a reopening of deep-seated infections, but it would be necessary for healing.

¹ Material from this presentation has appeared in my article "Cultural Rigour: First Nations Critical Culture." *Sydney Review of Books*, 7 Feb 2023.

And a cultural conflict brought into the open in the aftermath of the bicentenary of invasion and the Mabo decision, would have been healthy. Paul Keating broached some of the conversations that needed to happen in the 1992 Redfern Park address. Although I know that speech is over-eulogised in the minds of settlers, it was the first time that a Prime Minister used the pronoun “we” to settler Australians, as the ones who needed to shift and change.

But what happens when symptoms of a long-term illness are suppressed? In 1995, just three years after the Mabo decision, Auntie Rosemary Van den Berg delivered an excoriating address to the Adelaide ASAL gathering. In her paper “Rewriting the Mainstream,” Auntie Rosemary eloquently and passionately argued that the mainstream—white(?)stream—was in dire need of rewriting; not before noting, however, that there were no First Nations people of *Tarntanya*/Adelaide speaking at the conference. She observes in her paper:

[M]ost representations of Aboriginal people come, not from Aborigines themselves, but from white people writing them. In fiction, biography and anthropology, most are representations of white perceptions of Aboriginal people and their culture. Many become distorted and are not real. Academics who work in the field of literature should consult Aboriginal sources and read Aboriginal texts; and listen to the people. Rewriting the mainstream is essential. (Van den Berg 160)

That task of rewriting the mainstream remains essential twenty-seven years on. I’m pleased to say I’m not the only First Nations speaker or presenter at this conference. Since Rosemary’s paper, we do have more First Nations literature on bookshelves; we do have more First Nations people at gatherings such as this. Yet despite our presence at literary conferences, settler Australia has not come as far in its engagement with and readings of our writings. I’ll speak to this in more detail in the second half of the paper, but first, I want to address the post-Mabo climate that we write into and the continuing legacy of evasion of settler writing in the post-Howard years. To do so, I want to examine some settler texts from the 1990s. And this is a reflection on the context that is Australian settler hubris in twenty-first-century Australia.

Some of the texts that I’m about to consider are not literary. But they are examples of filmic and prose texts that are popular and acclaimed, and that have left a legacy that has become *de rigueur* in the wider settler reading/writing population. These texts are a barometer of settler ideals, expectations, and aspirations. They are flatliners that suppress diversities, complexities, entanglements, and intersections in post-invasion Australia for First Nations people and more recent diasporas of peoples from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

What happened to the simmering unease of the late 1980s and early 1990s, that was potentially productive in terms of moving the nation towards a difficult conversation? And when did the evasion discourse of Australian settler literature and film become *de rigueur*? In 1996 the Australian State was repositioned. The mindset of a significant portion of the population shifted, further evidencing the significant polarisation that had been occurring, and the condition that the nation was poised to either address or suppress as a national disease. As a nation polarised to erupt into a difficult conversation that needed to be had, acknowledging white Australia’s black history, present and future, and changing the way it is written and spoken about in the present, Australia swung the other way. In 1996 John Howard urged Australians to feel relaxed and comfortable about the past, and he drew on a completely different pronoun to the “we” of Keating: he shifted the pronoun to “us” Australians, united by a set of symbols. In addressing the “us” among Australians, Howard also demarcated a space of “them”—those who can be read as the unspoken enemy of Australian unity. This is the spectre of otherness that hangs in the unwritten landscape, like a stratum of unfinished,

unspoken, unresolved pressure, above and around and beneath the flatline semblance of national unity. This is how Howard put it in his 1997 Invasion Day speech:

[T]he symbols that we hold very dear as Australians and the beliefs that we have about what it is to be an Australian are not things that can ever be imposed from above by political leaders of any persuasion. They are not things that can be generated by a self-appointed, cultural elite who seek to tell us what our identity ought to be. Rather they are feelings and attitudes that grow out of the spirit of the people. . . . [T]hose things that we hold dear as Australian[s] . . . have come in two ways. They have come out of great traumatic events such as the events of the 25th of April 1915 . . . and there are those other things that through long usage and custom and a feeling that suits the temperament of the Australian people we have come to love and to hold dear And I think it is very important when we think of our identity we remember that essentially it grows out of the spirit of the people and it is never something that can be imposed. (Howard)

Howard went on to say that in only a few short years, Australia would celebrate a centenary of nationhood: a centenary which only four generations had fashioned into a unique culture; a decent, tolerant, cohesive society built on a thriving modern economy respected around the world.

This masterful weaponisation of “us and them” discourse of national identity and what it means to be Australian, underpinned the debates and contestations that came to the fore in literary and artistic circles in the years that followed. Howard claimed that custom and long usage are the cradle of national culture and the representation of what “us” Australians hold dear: a continuation of sameness. He positioned aspects of Australian experience to blur class differences, intersectionality, and diversity, by emphasising friendliness and hard work, and not questioning national symbols. Shared cultural symbols provided people with a common vocabulary for talking about and framing the terms of debate for national issues. He was most successful of all in transitioning the Australian psyche from Menzies’s forgotten class to the battlers that he had identified.

Conservative governments that have had the lion’s share of Commonwealth power since the Mabo decision—for twenty-one out of the last thirty years—have historically pitted those who are interested in advancing conversations and facilitating genuine dialogues around class, race, and gender equity against “ordinary” Australians, usually still imagined as a white settler. In 1996 Howard capitalised on the national anxiety of a significant sector of the population who were unsettled by the events of the 1980s and the Mabo decision. Such things as increasing public displays of First Nations activism around the bicentenary of the invasion; increasing evidence of what was still being called multiculturalism; and, what some saw as the erosion of key Australian values of heteronormativity, Christian marriage, and nuclear families. In weaponising the “us and them” discourse, Howard repositioned the State as one in which identity is determined not through leadership or consultation, or what he described as the Left reforming interventionist agenda that might involve putting cultural change on a political agenda or a school curriculum or that might even involve legislating for it. In Australia, post-Howard national identity became a grassroots movement and an expression of the State. Howard’s success was his ability to appeal to Australian anti-intellectualism; and to rally fear against an imagined national enemy of “leftist elites” who challenge long-held traditions and assumptions and threaten social cohesion; and to promote the ideal of national “unity.”

The text that best expresses the Howard momentum that has been pervasive in the socio-cultural landscape ever since, is *The Castle*: the film hit Australian cinemas in 1997 and nailed the Howard ideology of “us” Australians, and it set the blueprint for the largely flatliner

non-intersectional evasive textual conversation to follow. Twenty-five years on, the timing of the film and its post-Mabo message are worth unwinding. The filmic narrative verifies gender binaries, heteronormativity, larrikinism, healthy scepticism, surface egalitarianism, traditional manufacturing working-class values, minimalist engagement with national current affairs, mateship, the great Aussie illusion of luck, chance, and minimum diversity, always matched by jibes at difference marked as humour, and an attachment to the Australian dream of private property represented through a small corner of Australia, the suburban backyard. However, comic *The Castle* may be, its overt representation of ideology enacts a self-reflexivity on the part of the viewer: How would you feel if you were the Kerrigan family for a moment? As such, it underlines a disengagement from politics and national current affairs that was being encouraged from the late 1990s onwards in Australia. That sensibility persists in popular settler texts in acts of disengagement with other Australians too, who don't have any property to start with.

Late in *The Castle*, the protagonist, Darryl Kerrigan states: "I'm really starting to understand how Aborigines feel . . . This house is like their land. It holds their memories. The land is their story. It's everything. You can't just pick it up and plonk it down somewhere else! This country's gotta stop stealing other people's land" (1:04:40–01:05:05). This is a classic line from the film, which is much overlaid as a reconciliation moment. But, Darryl's reference to knowing how Aborigines feel is poised as a statement spoken to the nation for consideration, as if he is saying this to everyone. His wife's dismissal with "Have you been drinking?" and Darryl's short rejoinder "This country's gotta stop stealing other people's land," are striking for the way the last statement is allowed to hang in the air for the rest of "us" Australians. Yet, what are the intersections of identity and entanglement between First Nations people and settlers, and the many different diasporas to Australia since, that are left unexplored in this statement, and in this film more generally, that have been evaded in Australian mainstream literature largely ever since?

Thinking about *The Castle* now, there's nothing about the Kerrigan family that threatens the status quo of the Australian dream and the mythscape of a united nation. The Kerrigan's challenge to the High Court is positioned as healthy insurgence. The Kerrigan's quarter acre is inconsequential to the State. Their win is positioned as a concession to a good family by a benevolent system. Indeed, the film glorifies white crime as Aussie larrikinism: the son in jail, the scene with the firearm, the scene where the truck is used to tear down someone's front gate. The film upholds a landmark case for those whose land and property really is sacred in post-Mabo Australia. And it is not First Nation's land!

When right-wing politicians and newspapers were arguing against native title, *The Castle* sold a reassuring story to a nervous settler nation. Think about the casting: How would these roles be received with a family anything other than white, and what sort of appeal would the film have had if the family fighting for their piece of land were Aboriginal? Or Lebanese? Can you imagine a different reaction if a First Nations protagonist or protagonist of Islamic heritage pulled down the front gates of someone else's property in a tow truck, or pulled a gun on someone? Would it be funny? Imagine also a First Nations family being so relaxed about a son or anyone who is incarcerated. A search through Australian secondary school social sciences and humanities curricula revealed that *The Castle* is still a popular text used in units relating to identity and culture in Australian high schools.¹ However dismissive we might be about this and other popular cultural texts, this film and other popular texts are canonised transmitters of Australian settler identity.

At the heart of Howard's eleven-year legacy is an unease, a disease, something that Australians would perhaps rather not admit. For a decade, Howard's power resided in his ability to speak directly and powerfully to the great negative core of the Australian soul; its timidity, conformity, fear of other people and new ideas, its colonial desire to ape rather than lead, that

sometimes seems closer to terror of the uniqueness of this land and its people. The nation was frightened and unsure, and unready for the great changes it must make, and ill-fitted for the robust debates it needs to have.

Plains of Promise by Waanyi writer Alexis Wright was published in 1997 and arrived to much less fanfare than *The Castle*, the text that spoke to Howard's "us." *Plains of Promise* is neither subtle nor polite; amid its intricate plot, and beautifully crafted words in the language of the coloniser, *Plains of Promise* spoke to the "them," those other Australians outside the "us" for whom Howard claimed he was governing. Wright's narrative is a brutal parody of *The Castle* and the Howard Australian mythscape that evokes Russell Ward's Australian legend of egalitarianism, mateship, larrikinism, anti-intellectualism, and healthy non-threatening, anti-authoritarianism. *Plains of Promise* posits an overtly political and determinedly fictional account of First Nations people's experiences in Australia. It's a text that writes at the intersectionality of racism, sexism, classism, ableism, chauvinism, and all that hovers in the spectre of irresolution and disease about the nation, and the bearing that these intersections and entanglements have on First Nations/Waanyi protagonists in the novel. With its particular focus on the way intersectionalities impact the lives and futures of Waanyi women, *Plains of Promise* is a polar antithesis to the sensibility captured in the phrase "a man's home is his castle."

So, we're living under the spectre of post-Howard euphemisms that locate truth as divisive, and under Howard's "us" Australians. Charges of identity politics and the construction of an ideological hard border or binary between ethnic identity and art and literature are a legacy of Howardism—terms that get used a lot and deconstructed less, like the slippery charge of identity politics in art and literature. In literature, art, music, and in policy, the terms race and culture are conflated in Australian discourse. Together these two words are the drivers of Australian national policy and historical discourse. The politics of race, the politics of skin, the politics of representation are the cornerstone of Australian policy and practice since the invasion, and literature is the handmaid who tells this tale. White identity politics is the most dominant force in Australian literary production.

The charge that identity politics impedes art has only entered the public space since First Nations and people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities infiltrated the space and now use the space and its affordances to tell their, "our," own tales or stories. The presences of "otherness" challenge the unspoken identity of settlerism and make those identities explicit and explicitly political as they have been politicised in public discourse. And when identities are unmasked, charges of identity politics come from those who have to concede space and see themselves represented, not always to their own liking, in someone else's picture. All creative pieces are identity politics in some ways; all writing is identity politics. If you've got an identity and you're writing anything, it's identity politics.

How, then, am I reading the settler landscape of influential writing post-Mabo and in the aftermath of Howardism? What is influential here is defined by the literary economy of prizes and the visibility of a text in public purview. In the main, settler texts tend to be repurposed—reading it from outside anyway—largely intersectional-less, battler narratives where the protagonists battle different obstacles, depending on the times, as Sujatha Fernandes, points out so well in her essay for the *Sydney Review of Books* in 2019, "The Great White Social Justice Novel" (Fernandez). On the whole, popular literature in post-Mabo Australia, and that which sits on the border between literary and popular still loves to produce a good battler narrative. And the best battler is the battler who succeeds, the one who is aspirational within a recognisable setting, the one that reinforces meritocracy and the myth of a classless, raceless society: a place where intersectionality, like racial-cultural background, sexuality, pronoun, age, ability, religion, spirituality, and socioeconomic class, and the complex and contested histories of place are flattened or erased.

What does the success of popularly and critically acclaimed novels tell us about contemporary Australia? A popular writer is the public's barometer. And the optimistically conservative view of national identity, Australian-ness, if you like, that was aired in *The Castle* has carried intertextually into popular literature of the moment. To evidence this, you only need to look at the work of Trent Dalton. Unlike many popular big-selling Australian authors, Dalton has been listed for prestigious awards. *Boy Swallows Universe* was long-listed for the Miles Franklin Award in 2019; at the New South Wales Premier's Prize it won the Glenda Jackson Award for New Writing and it won the People's Choice Award. It was also shortlisted for the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction. *Boy Swallows Universe* is the fastest Australian debut-selling novel in publishing history to date. With one exception, all reviewers I've seen engage with it have been laudatory. But in one of the few critical reviews I could find, settler Catriona Menzies-Pike describes Dalton as the Scott Morrison writer of the decade. In *All Our Shimmering Skies*, the pronoun "our" in Dalton's hands becomes a conduit for a melting pot evoking the language of evasion and euphemism. In this plot, a group of diverse people whose differences are superficially and stereotypically represented throughout, can put all differences—those that aren't explored in the text, anyway—aside under common symbols. Interestingly enough, these are the same traditions and icons John Howard evoked. In the novel, readers are given a painless, quick, sentimental version of reconciliation, that basically involves finding aspects of settlement to celebrate. There's no basis for land rights or reparative justice. Instead, readers are presented with facile set pieces, in the form of campfire scenes that bring together Yukio, a Japanese pilot, Greta, a woman of German heritage, and Molly, an orphan teen and her handsome Aboriginal boyfriend, who discover their common humanity together as bombs are exploding in the sky.

Of *Boy Swallows Universe*, Menzies-Pike writes, "Dalton presents a national domain with no obstacles too great for earnest well-intentioned individuals. There is seemingly no ill in the world that can't be sentimentalised by Dalton: prison, life, addiction, violence, colonialism. There is no insight into contemporary life here, just fantasy, built on nostalgia and dishonest nationalism" (Menzies-Pike). *Boy Swallows Universe* and *All Our Shimmering Skies* offer fairy tale endings where kids haul themselves up by their bootstraps through strength of will and character. These stories give literary and social value to narratives that rely on and reinforce pernicious and untrue ideas about poverty and social marginalisation. Socioeconomic success and security simply become a question of individual and moral fortitude, altruism, and determination to address it. A system of structural failures is not called into question at all, and if there is a role for First Nations people in Dalton's epic it is to advance the plot. As they were in *The Castle*, I would argue, the people who are bought together in the shimmering skies are settlers. *All Our Shimmering Skies* wants an easy group hug reconciliation, but the text doesn't want to recognise the violence of settler colonialism and its legacies. In his fiction, Dalton refuses to acknowledge that there's anything structural about suffering that his characters or anyone endures. And there's no room for the State in this world: both works, *Boy Swallows Universe* and *All Our Shimmering Skies*, optimistically promulgate the same deeply conservative vision of nationhood and identity as *The Castle* 25 years ago.

I want to turn now to the second focus of this paper—the reception of First Nations creative works in Australia. Settler readers have come some way, since the chauvinistic and overtly racist reception given to Oodgeroo's *We Are Going* in 1964, described in the *Australian Book Review* that same year as "Bad verses . . . jingles, clichés, laborious rhymes all piled up, plus the incessant, unvarying thud of a single message . . . [that] has nothing to do with poetry" (Anonymous 143). Yet, while it is tempting to say we've moved on, when I scan magazines and newspapers looking for reviews of First Nations writing, it is easy to encounter examples like the following review of *Fire Front: First Nations Power and Poetry Today* edited by

Gomeri writer and law scholar Allison Whitaker. This review appeared in the *Canberra Times*. It reads:

Inevitably, most of the poetry is “political,” just as Oodgeroo Noonuccal’s was in 1964 when, as Kath Walker, she first published *We Are Going*. Back then she described her poetry, unapologetically, as “sloganistic, civil-rightish, plain and simple.” . . . Strangely, however, the overall levels of artistry displayed [in *Fire Front*] tend to be below the technical accomplishment seen so clearly in the work of Aboriginal actors, such as Aaron Patterson, Leah Purcell, and Debra Mailman, or Aboriginal filmmakers, such as Rachel Perkins, Ivan Sen and Warwick Thornton. For those who love poetry, it’s sad to wonder why this should be so. (Page, “Fire Front”)

Also, in the *Canberra Times* two years later, I found this:

It is interesting to read [redacted] in the political landscape, they created a new generation of female aboriginal poets, such as Evelyn Araluen, Jazz Money, Ellen van Neerven, Natalie Harkin, Jeanine Leane, Alison Whitaker and others. [redacted] is much closer to the work of *Oodgeroo Noonuccal* (1920–1993) where the tradition began. . . . Araluen and her companions tend to be consciously postcolonial and intertextual; more angry too. (Page, “Review”)

In the last passage, I have blocked out the name of the poet and the work: I don’t think it’s helpful for white critics to play poets or writers off like this. But the critique is what I want you to note.

Martin Heidegger’s work suggests that the limits of an existing boundary or border are only known when something else makes its presence felt, or when another presence intervenes or unsettles or interrupts a designated space (Heidegger). We can apply this principle to literary borders. Into a previous absence we present ourselves on lands never ceded. And to wind back to Rosemary van den Berg’s call for the mainstream to be rewritten: First Nations writers are rewriting this nation, and writing ourselves back into a space from which we were previously excluded. And in doing so, we’re using the spectre to destabilise reality by challenging the authority of colonial vision and historical chronology. Our writing resists and challenges well-worn limiting modes of classifying and re-colonising First Nations writings and histories of people and place, and brings political and ethical insights into a socio-cultural context of previously socially and systematically reproduced absence.

Many First Nations literary scholars, like Sandra Phillips, Tony Birch, Larissa Behrendt, and Natalie Harkin, for example, agree that First Nations literature is flourishing. Or, as Alison Whittaker, Gomeri law scholar and poet and critic, noted in 2020 in the Introduction to *Fire Front*, First Nations writing is on fire. While the reception of our creative works by settler readers has changed in form, it’s still limiting and at times quite debilitating for First Nations culture. We find ourselves, in this moment when our writing is flourishing, that our settler readership is in stagnation. In a 2019 piece for *The Guardian* called “White Critics Don’t Know How to Deal with a Golden Age in Indigenous Stories,” Alison Whittaker wrote “We are in the midst of a renaissance. . . . Blak literature is in a golden age” (Alison Whittaker). And she should be elated: in that year Alexis Wright had just one the Stella, Melissa Lucashenko’s *Too Much Lip* was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Prize, and Tony Birch’s *The White Girl* had just been released. Yet, at the same time, Alison observes, “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 to get us onto the page or stage where we belong” (Alison Whittaker). Alison rightly notes that the devaluation is most visible in how those voices that settler readers are critically engaged with, and that are prevalent across the whole gamut of white reviews, positive and negative, evade dealing with the texts before them. Many responses to Indigenous literature obligingly call it important as if that were a useful assessment, rather than empty flattery. Others called it disappointing.

In 2020, Wuilli Wuilli author and scholar Lisa Fuller wrote of settler engagements with their debut novel of spectral realism, *Ghost Bird*, “that what is real for us, is speculative fiction for most.” She says:

Most people reading it would be non-Indigenous, and it would be magic realism for them. So, real for us, speculative fiction for most. Like I said, weird space to sit in. . . . I read the reviews and accept it as “just the way things are.” But maybe, one day, this won’t be the case. Those shining reviews, the ones that show a depth of understanding of cultural difference and an awareness of their language use, are the exception today. I live in hope that they will become the rule. . . . I’ve been hesitant to raise these issues outside of my safe circle. I know what will happen if I do. What has always happened to my whole life when I dare call out racist or belittling language use. People get tense and defensive, they think I’m having a go at them personally. (Fuller)

Lisa goes on to say how the use of certain terms and the application of certain labels to their work are both limiting and reductive. Lisa’s 2020 essay “Why Culturally Aware Reviews Matter” published in *Kill Your Darlings* speaks to the reductive capacity of settler critics’ words and readiness to classify First Nations texts in their reviewing. Structural racism, Lisa writes, and the ways our mob have been viewed by many Australians, bleeds through into everyday language. Lisa speaks strongly of their dislike of certain words, from the generic term “Indigenous,” asking “how in the hell has this word become a polite way to refer to First Nations peoples?” to more dangerous re-colonising words and terms like “speculative fiction” and “the Gothic.” Lisa calls such labels insidious. And Lisa concludes that she’s read reviews and she just accepts that that’s the way things are. And maybe one day that won’t be the case. But Lisa’s final comment here is a testimony to the post-Howard climate of evasion and euphemism and the damaging politics of settler civility and sensibility that is the spectre we write into—the idea that if you raise something about race or culture in art, you tend to get labelled divisive or rude.

What, then, are some of the problems and limitations of Western settler review culture? Alison identifies the binaries, Lisa the limitations of language applied, and along with these my concerns are for the positionality of critics coming to our works. Drawing on Alison’s and Lisa’s, and my own, research into First Nations writing culture, the limitations of settler reviewer critiques are those of an evasion of the text, as well as the particular language and the position the critic brings to the task of reviewing. Alison articulates very succinctly the evasion of the text in favour of binary assessments, either negative or positive; and, Lisa speaks to the use of tired inappropriate colonial language used in settler review culture like “speculative” and “Gothic.” I’d like to add to those limitations another layer which is the persistent western positioning of and conflation with critique as objective expertise—an expertise that is assumed to be free of socio-cultural and political values.

Australian Vietnamese writer Shirley Le in an *Overland* essay in 2020 articulates the crisis and what’s at stake for First Nations writers, and writers of culturally and linguistically diverse writing cultures. In response to the news that the *Sydney Morning Herald* invested 100% of a grant from the Copyright Agency and the Judith Nielsen Institute for Journalism and

Ideas into exclusively developing the work of white Australian critics' culture, Shirley writes that "scrutiny of white critics' capacity to review people of colour's art is escalating in Australian art. It is ignorant and insensitive critique of the artistic production of First Nations and people of colour" (Le). Shirley evidences the review that Gamilaroi and Torres Strait Islander writer Nakkiah Lui received for their 2013 debut stage play *This Heaven* and their more recent work, *How to Rule the World* from the editor of *Quadrant* Roger Franklin in 2018. Franklin speculated on Nakkiah's parents' income, questioned the authenticity of her work, and throughout the review pined for more encouraging aspirational representations of Aboriginal life. In doing so, he entitled himself to erase Nakkiah's blackness and assimilate her story to his own white experiences.

Both Shirley and Alison note settler reviewers' willingness to conflate First Nations authors with the characters portrayed within their texts, thereby erasing the experiences of blackness and otherness with white expectations. When Gamilaroi academic and writer Larissa Berendt offered a culturally rigorous review of Nakkiah's work in 2019, which began by Larissa declaring her perspective as a First Nations writer and what she might bring to the text from this perspective, settler critic Jason Whittaker (no relation to Alison) proceeded to dismiss the close cultural context offered by Larissa, labelling the review as biased. Indeed, charges of identity politics surface quickly when both reviewer and reviewee are First Nations authors (Jason Whittaker).

The problem is structural. First Nations writers and writers from culturally diverse backgrounds, such as Alison Whittaker, Lisa Fuller, Shirley Le, Michael Mohammed Ahmad and many others, understand that review writing is intensely personal and subjective, in contrast to the cold distant voice that has long dominated the review space and conned readers into believing its objectivity. Literary communities of First Nations writers and writers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds treat every review as an opportunity for readers to understand art and the world around us from a different intersection in life. Yet literary analysis and critique are structured *about* First Nations people—not *for* First Nations people. That is, the review and critique produced about First Nations texts still reflects a colonial ethic, reinforcing non-First Nations settler people's conceptions of quality and rigour and best practice in the production of knowledge. This is a disempowering ethic, and it diminishes, demeans, and devalues First Nations people's cultural knowledge that goes against shifting power imbalances to promote cultural safety. Shifting a power balance is about providing space for First Nations and culturally and linguistically diverse writers, to bring a different set of tools to the space of critical and review culture, such as appraisal tools developed through First Nations peoples and worldviews. What's at stake here is the evasive dismissal of our texts on the one hand, and, on the other hand, boxing them into a colonial framework with limiting labels, like those Lisa Fuller and Goori and Lebanese writer Mykaela Saunders identified such as speculative fiction, fantasy, magic realism and the ever-persistent reducing of our First Nations spectral realism to the western bastardisation of the Gothic. As I have stated elsewhere:

If criticism has any purpose, it is to assert systems of value, other than those that are decreed by the mainstream or the market. First Nations critique writes into a spectre of absence and begins to fill it with a visual field of culturally informed tools of how our works need to be read against the grain of these evasion narratives. First Nations critical culture is addressing the complex intersections of First Nations identity and entanglement that a settler standpoint appears largely blind to. (Leane)

First Nations writers and writers of colour bring the practice of cultural rigour to literary reviewing—a practice notably undefined in mainstream peer-reviewed journal articles, but one that is evident in the development of critical appraisal tools developed by First Nations people in and for literary spaces. But there needs to be the space.

Critical appraisal tools developed by First Nations people direct attention to the cultural, political, and human rights of literary research. The most valuable critical tool of appraisal we bring to you is the voice of the author. Alison and Shirley Le, Natalie Harkin, Michael Mohammed Ahmad, and many other culturally diverse and First Nations writers, point out that the voice is still blocked or cut off in white literary gatekeeping.

This is not an argument that only First Nations writers and critics and scholars should review or write about First Nations critical creative works. It's a call to yield space and address the absence that has been socially produced, and to make space for culturally rigorous forms of literary critique, review, and analysis to grow. It's also a call, as expressed by Alison, Shirley, Mohammed, and others, to change the language of critical reviewing. Unpack your cultural suitcase and be guided by the words and tools of cultural appraisal of black and culturally and linguistically diverse essayists, reviewers and scholars. We do need more diverse critics and more spaces are needed for their works. But we have Alison Whittaker, we have Evelyn Araluen, and Larissa Behrendt, Natalie Harkin, along with many other First Nations writers, who write reviews and critiques of our work that are in themselves a set of tools that you can apply to the analysis and review of First Nations literature. Take for example, Goomeroi poet Luke Patterson's 2021 essay on Jazz Money's poetry, "Culture in the Making (a walk and a talk)"; or Melissa Lukashenko's 2017 essay on Kim Scott's *Taboo* in *The Guardian*; or my long-form essays on Evelyn Araluen or Ellen van Neerven published in *Sydney Review of Books*. All of these essays and reviews written by First Nations people are models and tools, and they deploy the concepts and terms you should be using when you approach First Nations works. This is a body of living, culturally rigorous critical work that defines its own evaluative framework and terminology. And these works are also community investments to grow and sustain First Nations writing cultures. Use these terms and tools, and acknowledge them as First Nations tools of appraisal. Use them in your engagements with First Nations work. All bodies of creative works need a culturally appropriate and culturally rigorous body of critical writing to sustain a healthy writing culture. And ours needs the space to develop, and that's partly where you need to yield the space. Alison Whittaker summarises it beautifully when she says, "we . . . have our own critics to show us what's possible when whiteness loses its evaluative authority over our work" (Alison Whittaker).

The moment is right; we have the tools and we have our own critics. What First Nations and culturally and linguistically diverse writers need is for our settler readers and critics to step back. Unpack your cognitive suitcase and listen to how to be welcomed into a new space, into another space that is not your space. In this paper I have unwound and backtracked from 1992 to 2022. I've spoken about *spectre Australis*, the space we are in post-Mabo and, hopefully, some of the ways a settler audience needs to shift on these lands never ceded. And I'd like to end, where I began, acknowledging the peoples and writing cultures of *lutruwita*/Tasmania and acknowledging all First Nations writers past and present, and the rich storytelling cultures of the nation's first peoples to whom this address was totally indebted.

Mandaang guwu, thank you.

NOTES

¹ See for example: <https://theeducationshop.com.au/downloads/teacher-packs/the-castle-teacher-pack/> & <https://www.australiancurriculumsupplies.com.au/castle-student-book-std-a-9781925771619>; and <https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/Teacher-Pack-The-Castle-film-by-Rob-Sitch-complete-teaching-unit-8725962> & <https://www.intoenglish.com.au/store/print-editions/the-castle-student-book>

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