In Australia

White people write my culture for me.

Timmah Ball

Timmah Ball is an urban planner and writer of Ballardong Noongar descent. She has written for *Meanjin*, *Inflection Journal*, *Right Now* and *Assemble Papers*.

In the seventies, Melbourne's counter-cultural landscape erupted. My Mum had just arrived from Perth, where the racism Aboriginals experienced seemed distant and easy to forget. After share housing in the inner north, she headed to the suburbs with my Dad. Walking down Koornang road and other local shopping strips, she stood out. The cosmopolitanism of the inner city vanished as the overwhelming whiteness set in. But by the time I was in school, waves of migration had changed the area. There were families from India and Sri Lanka, and proximity to Monash University saw large numbers of international students settle in the neighborhood. My mother's early self-consciousness eased as multiculturalism began to define Melbourne.

Beneath the shifting demographics, peculiar ideas continued to drift through the quiet, dead-end street we moved to after my parents divorced. Kids rode their bikes around and people introduced themselves warmly but questions followed. Was my Mum just renting or had she bought the property? Was it just the two of us? Would we stay long? Most people in the street owned their homes and there were concerns an unstable rental demographic might alter the mood of the neighborhood. My mum had bought the house with plans to renovate. But our neighbors remained curious. We were liked but assumptions were made.

One woman gave us a half-empty carton of milk before going on holidays; another offered us the use of their pool while they spent the summer in Anglesea. And when VCE results were announced and I received several awards, their shrill reactions hurt, as if doing well was unexpected. To imagine we were disadvantaged was bizarre, but these small instances marked our difference, possibly felt by us more than our neighbors. Whether intentional or not, these acts implied we were different and in need. As Stan Grant suggests 'it seems many non-Indigenous people find it easier to identify us if we are poor.' (np)

More than ever, the socio-economic status of Indigenous Australians is shifting with many of us becoming middle class. But as levels of education and professional status rise, misconceptions continue to scar us, and the growing popularity of Aboriginal culture creates new tensions and unforeseen consequences. Today, Aboriginal knowledge carries cachet, both economic and cultural and it is often white Australia who is the quickest to exploit this.

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The thick heat of Barcelona's summer eases the frustration that festered over winter. Sangria fueled conversations at the Plaza del Sol with artists and academics linger into the early hours of the morning. I forget the structural racism, which dominated my career. The summer school, entitled 'Decolonizing, Knowledge and Power', is a moment to pause, an intellectual feast where complex ideas thrive.

In one densely theoretical lecture, I drift onto Facebook and I'm not ready for the sharp reality check. Images of young hooded boys strapped to chairs fill my iPhone screen. Who are they? The haunting images look like stills from a grueling film I don't want to see and I wonder why anyone would post them. As I scroll down, it becomes clear that this isn't a film, this is Australia.

The news of Don Dale Youth Detention Centre stung. As I discussed decolonial theory at the University Autonoma de Barcelona, Aboriginal boys in Darwin were tortured. ABC's *Four Corners* program had uncovered footage showing extreme abuse inflicted on young boys held in Don Dale (Meldrum-Hanna, Worthington, np). They were gassed and held in insolation, an infringement of their most basic human rights. These incidents undermine the complacency, which sets in when you have privilege, forcing you to reassess the values and priorities that guide you. In Australia, the rising popularity of Aboriginal culture uncomfortably parallels the sickening number of avoidable Aboriginal deaths. Elijah Doughty, Ms Dhu, Lynette Dayle, Rebecca Maher and many more unnecessary deaths. As Nayuka Gorrie proclaimed, 'Black rage is justified' (2016, np), but it is ignored and ridiculed by a white Australia that assumes we should be greatful for the sudden interest in our culture.

The growing appetite for Aboriginal culture is astounding, at times lulling us into a false sense of security where power is shifting. Moments before I logged onto Facebook and saw the frightening images, I received two emails promoting PhD scholarships for Aboriginal students. Both Deakin and Griffith Universities were looking for Aboriginal candidates

to research how Indigenous knowledge contributes to environmental sustainability. Another email from a University of Melbourne lecturer followed, wanting to know whether I was available to appear on a panel discussing Aboriginal knowledge in the built environment, for a small fee. A sickening situation started to emerge: some of us were venerated by institutions as others were defiled. The disparity between my freedom and the events that occurred at Don Dale filled me with unease. Two different worlds existed and navigating the gulf between them was overwhelming. Indigenous Academic Bronwyn Carlson wrote that we are living on an 'interface where a range of discourses converge are messy and difficult to articulate and make sense of.' (204) Her words illuminated the gravitas of our differences, something I struggled to comprehend.

Within weeks of returning to Australia there were more emails and requests. I was asked to be the Aboriginal representative on an arts advisory board and told about another opportunity to peruse a PhD at the University of Western Sydney. The title of the position was *Garuwanga: Forming a Competent Authority to Protect Indigenous Knowledge.* It would enable an Aboriginal person to develop research in governance frameworks for protecting and sharing Indigenous knowledge and culture. Universities and arts institutions were in a rush to secure our knowledge while others were left to die. Meanwhile, tributes flooded Facebook as I watched my friends grieve. Acclaimed Wemba-Wemba and Gunditjmara writer and artist Paola Balla solemnly posted:

> Every jangled, ragged strand of traumatised DNA hurts
> I had nightmares about boys dying in front of me last night, kissing the tar and concrete with their last breath
> crying for their mothers and grandmothers
> I rush to their little bodies, rubbing their backs and whispering comfort and love
> I woke up nauseated and sore
> 13 year old Dylan Voller looks like my little 12 year old son in the footage of him being choked and lifted by his little neck and then held down on a mattress and stripped by grown men
> I sob while trying to avoid the footage yet again
> My fears are not just for the boys and girls inside, but for the knowledge we have developed that
> nothing ever changes
> and in fact just gets worse
> This place feels and looks and sounds like the penal colony that it is

> The white mad men, cruel and vicious and pious are running the colony
> (July 2016)

I read Paolo's words over and over, wondering what value PhD scholarships bring as lives are violently destroyed. I wondered what it's like to be a white tenured academic, free to decide when it is beneficial to include Indigenous knowledge, free from the restless sleep Paolo describes. Disconnected from trauma and rage, it is often white Australia who chooses when Aboriginal knowledge is needed, producing programs, research agendas and books celebrating Aboriginal culture when it suits them. Their careers move forward while we scramble in the background doing the work. Occasionally universities create the structures that enable outstanding Aboriginal work. Books by Tony Birch, Gary Foley, Lynette Russell and many more may not exist without the academy. And research by white academics such as Claire Land advance our understanding of decolonial theory and ways to build solidarity across race. But too often, uneven power dynamics spoil what may be good intentions.

I experienced this when approached by two white academics with the request to contribute a book chapter to *The International Handbook of Contemporary Indigenous Architecture.* An opportunity to write about Indigenous art in public spaces felt exciting and flattering. But the opportunity was quickly soiled. I was expected to prepare a 5-10,000 word draft in a month, without payment—conditions which were unacceptable and cruel. Anger seethed through my chest as I wrote to the senior lecturer declining the offer. I refused to work under precarious conditions but I knew the book would push ahead and two white academics would gain further prestige from our stories.

Although there are always exceptions, exploitative scenarios occur too regularly. While Aboriginal communities grapple with death and unfathomable injustice, white people capitalise from our culture, earning fat salaries as they write yet another policy or action plan on how to close the gap. A recent study by the CIS showed that $5.9billion in annual funding for Indigenous affairs is not delivering notable improvements for Aboriginal communities. (Fitzpatrick, np) Instead, an article in *The Australian* highlighted severe misspending, 'such as an East Arnhem Land community with no notable history of suicides being required to undergo a suicide-awareness training program.' (Fitzpatrick, np) The community were not consulted but forced to participate. The stupidity of this situation is shocking though not surprising. In Australia, the opinions of white people are almost always valued over Aboriginal people's ideas and expertise.

In her award-winning poem 'Expert', Ellen van Neerven describes how her partner becomes the 'expert' in their relationship. The aptly titled piece cleverly conveys the paternalistic control white Australia holds onto. Our suggestions are often muted as the white majority have the final say. In the poem she describes how her white girlfriend 'has the answers because she saw a television ad for Recognition.' (48) She is the expert while van Neerven's 'knowledge is (too urban)—from the black media (not the whole truth I wouldn't trust it.)' (48) Their relationship reflects my own professional experiences, persistently ignored by white bosses who belittle my comments or tell me I am being 'anxious'.

In one particularly challenging role for a government agency, a colleague asked me to provide feedback on an Aboriginal employment strategy she had prepared. I thought it was slightly odd that I hadn't heard about it earlier. I was in an identified position working on projects to improve Aboriginal disadvantage in Melbourne's outer suburbs, but I had been excluded from the early development phase. After reading the draft I had numerous concerns: generic statements about improving economic outcomes were repeated, but there was nothing linking employment to education and the need to create culturally safe environments. Successful Aboriginal employment programs must focus on long-term careers, not on increasing entry-level jobs so that organisations can quickly improve quotas. Too often Aboriginal employment is about ticking boxes rather than investing in the long-term future and talent of Aboriginal people. The most excruciating aspect of the strategy was the award for 'best' local council, judged on who helped the most Aboriginal people into jobs. In a country where white supremacy reigns, did we really need another award for white institutions? My thoughts were ignored. Although I repeatedly sent emails and tried to organise a meeting with key staff, there was no interest. A month later an email was sent to three colleagues asking for feedback before the final draft was released for external consultation. I was cc'ed as a courtesy but not asked to comment. In Australia, only white people have the 'right' to comment on Aboriginal employment strategies.

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The architect entered the room wearing a black velvet blazer, oozing 'starchitect' cool. Having won the tender to design an Aboriginal health center in Melbourne's outer east, he promised a community engagement process that would incorporate local Aboriginal ideas. A series of co-design workshops between, community, government and the appointed architects were planned.

As the first workshop started, a stifling sense of power permeated the room. The architect confidently flicked the switch on the projector. His introductory presentation included an awkward image of a black hand holding a white hand, as if a twee photo could erase colonization and the ongoing racism Aboriginal people endure. A new Aboriginal health center was vital but as people gently started to share their stories, the loudest voices were white. There were no opportunities to unpack the complexity of colonization and the stolen generation, but a white council worker explained to community why she thought the design should reflect the river. White voices drowned others who sat silently by the end. The 'starchitect' left smugly, another project to boast about bringing cultural cred and status to his illustrious career.

American journalist Barbara Ehrenreich recently wrote that 'there's something wrong with the fact that a relatively affluent person can afford to write about minimum wage jobs while people experiencing them can't (np). A similar power imbalance is rampant in Australia, where it seems that only the white have the power to write, design and make decisions about Aboriginal people. Her article 'In America, only the rich can afford to write about poverty' describes her realization 'that there was something wrong with an arrangement whereby a relatively affluent person such as I could afford to write about minimum wage jobs, squirrels as an urban food source or the penalties for sleeping in parks, while the people who were actually experiencing these sorts of things, or were in danger of experiencing them, could not.' (np)

Her circumstance mirrors how Aboriginal people are regularly disempowered from decision-making processes, and forced to watch on as others write about us, make decisions for us and disregard our views. Lived experience is not valued in this new economy, where there is money to be made from the 'Aboriginal problem'. And as the popularity of Aboriginal art and culture grows, more and more white Australians are desperate to ride the wave.

In the face of these issues Aboriginal writers have exploded onto the literary mainstream. This makes sense given the exceptional talent and stories within our communities. But I am continually perplexed by the bizarre sense of ownership to which white Australia clings. The amount of white people writing our stories when there are already incredible Aboriginals doing so is frustrating. At the opening of the 2016 Melbourne Writers Festival, the Miles Franklin Award nominees were read out. When A.S. Patrić won for *Black Rock White City*, I was thrilled and relieved. We need more stories about the experiences of migrants, written by

migrants. And just the thought of Lucy Treloar's *Salt Creek* winning made my blood boil. The *Sydney Morning Herald* described it as a 'respectful and unobtrusively beautiful homage to the Ngarrindjeri people.' (Goldsworthy, np) But given the urgent issues facing contemporary Aboriginal people did we really need another white women looking back on the past with nostalgia?

The issue of white Australians writing for us, or in fact their obsession with writing on behalf of numerous races, exploded at the opening of the Brisbane Writers Festival when Lionel Shriver confidently took to the stage in her Sombrero. Yassmin Abdel-Magied described how Lionel's critique of cultural appropriation was about 'mocking those who ask people to seek permission to use their stories. It became a celebration of the unfettered exploitation of the experiences of others.' (np) Many white Australians feel that it is their right to discuss, plan and write about Aboriginals, without any analysis of how this privilege maintains oppression and white supremacy. As Abdel-Magied states 'It's not always OK if a straight white woman writes the story of a queer Indigenous man, because when was the last time you heard a queer Indigenous man tell his own story?' (np)

Of course many white writers thought people like Yassmin Abdel-Magied had overreacted. Peter Craven described it as a 'silly frenzy over cultural identity.' (np) But when you are consistently excluded from writing about your own identity sidelined by whites that know better, you get angry. Writers like Christos Tsiolkas and Alexis Wright choose to connect with this anger, believing that 'we live and write and work and love in a world of contradiction, fragmentation and unease and it is through the struggle of this engagement that we can occasionally reach an understanding of our world.' (Tsiolkas, 37) As Aboriginal culture enters the mainstream, engaging with these tensions and contradictions will be vital. Although difficult, we need to challenge the nostalgic white settler narratives and the nebulous Aboriginal employment strategies written by white bureaucrats. The trauma of colonization may be the hardest story to tell, but 'change will require closer and quicker movement towards our understanding of despair.' (Wright, 160)

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As I finished the final edits for a small independent zine, I was struck by a reference to Aboriginal people having 'lived here once, not that long ago.' I had selected the poem based on its interesting reflections on modern dating and managed to skim over the simplistic descriptions of Aboriginals. I immediately contacted the (white) author who wrote the

poem, asking whether we could change the wording, as the statement suggested Aboriginals no longer lived here. I assumed it was a misjudgment on her behalf. I approached the issue with sensitivity but her reaction was troubling. She refused to understand that the statement might offend Aboriginals living in Melbourne. Instead of engaging with a contemporary Aboriginal perspective, she wanted to change the line to 'I am reminded that the Wurundjeri people used to make canoes here once, not that long ago.' In her opinion my comments had no relevance or value, she was just annoyed that I changed her words. She was the 'expert' and in Australia, white people always have the final say.

Note: This essay follows on from writing published in the spring issue of *Meanjin*, 75.3 (2016), 'Who's Afraid of the Black Middle Class?' See: https://meanjin.com.au/essays/whos-afraid-of-the-black-middle-class/

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