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# Critical Disengagement: The Epistemic and White Supremacist Violence of Theatre Criticism in Canada and the USA

This article examines recent controversies sparked by the critical reception of work by Global Majority theatre artists in Canada and the USA, including Yolanda Bonnell, Yvette Nolan, and Antoinette Nwandu. It argues that, when faced with works that fall outside of their presumed expertise and experience, critics commonly resort to a strategy of critical disengagement, which displaces the focus from the work and refuses to evaluate it on its own terms. Through an analysis of case studies, we elucidate the concept of critical disengagement and its three distinct categories, 'othering', 'imposing', and 'self-staging'. These acts are representative of larger patterns in dominant theatre criticism practices, which are descended from neoclassical and Enlightenment formulations of criticism, and centre around the ideals of fair judgement and critical objectivity. When applied to the work of Global Majority theatre artists by a largely white critical establishment, they enact, consolidate, and reproduce what Gayatri Spivak calls epistemic violence. During this pivotal moment, as theatre communities in the Global North respond to calls for racial justice and decolonization, this article sheds light on the often overlooked role of criticism in sustaining white supremacy within theatre production and reception, and stresses the urgent need to re-imagine critical practices. Signy Lynch is a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Toronto Mississauga and recipient of the Governor General's Gold Medal (York University, 2022). She has published articles on theatre criticism and intercultural theatre in *Contemporary Theatre Review*, *Canadian Theatre Review*, and *Theatre Research in Canada*. Michelle MacArthur is associate professor at the University of Windsor's School of Dramatic Art. She has published articles in *Contemporary Theatre Review*, *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, *Theatre Research in Canada*, *Canadian Theatre Review*, and several edited volumes. She is the editor of *Voices of a Generation: Three Millennial Plays* (Playwrights Canada Press, 2022).

*Key terms:* theatre reviewing, racial justice, *bug*, Indigenous theatre, Global Majority theatre, epistemic violence.

IN FEBRUARY 2020, manidoons collective, a Toronto-based circle of artists creating Indigenous performance, asked that only critics who are Indigenous, Black, and/or people of colour (IBPOC) review their show *bug*, citing both the cultural specificity of the work and the systemic racism embedded in 'current colonial reviewing practices' (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> Anishinaabe-Ojibwe and South Asian artist Yolanda Bonnell, the show's performer and creator, quickly became the face of this decision, which sparked a flurry of responses on social media and in the mainstream press in Canada and abroad.<sup>2</sup> While the largely white critical establishment generally respected manidoons's request, critics displayed varied and often limited understandings of its

reasoning. Many reacted defensively, and several implicitly suggested that the request supported the 'attack on criticism' evident in reduced arts coverage at major outlets across Canada and beyond. Established independent blogger Lynn Slotkin complained that 'the whole practice of reviewing plays in the media has been decimated over the last several years';<sup>3</sup> manidoons's 'provocative policy comes at a time when theatre criticism has been disrupted,' wrote Kelly Nestruck in a *Globe and Mail* op-ed.<sup>4</sup>

The *bug* controversy, however, was not novel but the latest manifestation in a long international history of tension between artists and critics, documented in theatre criticism scholarship over the last two decades.<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 1.** *bug*. manidoons collective, Toronto, 2020. Photograph: Dahlia Katz. Copyright courtesy of manidoons collective.

At the heart of this tension are unequal power dynamics in which, due to the printed word's ability to outlive performance, as Josette Féral points out, the critic's assessment of the artist's work reaches a much larger audience than the work itself.<sup>6</sup> Artists push back against the limits of conventional criticism, including the harm done by ignorant reviews; critics, concerned about their waning relevance, see artists' responses as a threat to their imperilled profession.

More recent scholarship has established that this tension is particularly heightened in the relationship between artists from equity-seeking groups and a critical establishment that is largely white and male.<sup>7</sup> However, exactly how this relationship manifests – how critics write about these artists' work and what the persistent problems are – has yet to be interrogated in any depth. This is especially true of the critical reception of the work of Global Majority artists working in the Global North such as many IBPOC artists in

the USA and Canada. And yet, IBPOC artists in these countries (and elsewhere in the world) have a long-standing history of critiquing mainstream criticism and its gatekeeping role. In op-eds, interviews, and social media posts, these artists have drawn attention to the harm critics cause through ignorant or racist reviews. This important context underlying manidoons's request was overlooked in its media coverage.

This article intervenes in ongoing scholarly analyses of white supremacy within theatre production and reception by examining the role theatre criticism plays within these systems of power in the USA and Canada. It brings the overlooked body of work of IBPOC artists writing on critics into conversation with urgent questions around the changing landscape of theatre reviewing, as greater attention to racial justice and decolonization, on the one hand, and the erosion of print journalism, on the other, are demanding that critics re-examine their practices. When faced

with works that fall outside of their presumed expertise, critics commonly resort to a strategy that we call critical disengagement, by which they displace focus from artistic works and refuse to evaluate them on their own terms. Critical disengagement, as identified above, reifies critics' knowledge and protects their power while devaluing artists' work. Its pervasiveness as a pattern within mainstream responses to IBPOC work is a form of what Gayatri Spivak calls epistemic violence, which points to the sustained influence of white supremacy within dominant critical models. From an examination of case studies of incidents in Toronto and Chicago, three key manifestations of critical disengagement emerge, best denoted as othering, imposing, and self-centring, which together uphold power differentials between critics and IBPOC artists.

In her seminal essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Spivak characterizes epistemic violence as 'the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other'.<sup>8</sup> Kristie Dotson, extending Spivak's concept in her examination of how the attempts of marginalized groups at giving testimony are silenced, observes that 'one method of executing epistemic violence is to damage a given group's ability to speak and be heard'.<sup>9</sup> Dotson stresses the importance of reciprocity within the exchange between speaker and audience: an audience must be '*willing and capable of hearing us*'.<sup>10</sup> For our purposes, testimony takes the creative form of theatre, and its success as an illocutionary act depends upon its audience's willingness and capacity to engage with it. Critical disengagement, then, is a form of silencing whereby a critic's refusal to reciprocate within a communicative exchange enacts epistemic violence by undermining the experience and knowledge that inform the artwork. Critics, as mediators between the work and other spectators, can also interfere with how the testimony is received by its broader public. Yvette Nolan accurately observes in her book on Indigenous performance that 'Reviews can be an obstacle to even entering into a dialogue with the audience'.<sup>11</sup> Examining case studies from major theatre centres in Canada and the United States, and

drawing on the writings of IBPOC artists to analyze them, our reading of critical disengagement contextualizes troubling patterns in reviewing practices as part of a movement toward re-imagining anti-racist and anti-colonial critical practices at this pivotal moment.<sup>12</sup>

## Understanding Critical Disengagement

The concept of critical disengagement is perhaps most clearly illustrated in an example from the USA that preceded the *bug* controversy by three decades. This example represents an interesting inversion of manidoons's request in which, instead of an artist asking that certain critics not review their work, a critic insisted on not reviewing an artist's work. In 1994, dance critic Arlene Croce wrote a notorious non-review of choreographer Bill T. Jones's show *Still/Here* for the *New Yorker*. In 'Discussing the Undiscussable', Croce explains her decision not to attend or review (but to subsequently condemn) Jones's show for its incorporation of footage from 'real' people, non-dancers living with cancer and AIDS. Croce's objection lies in the argument that such incorporation placed *Still/Here* decidedly 'beyond criticism' by becoming what she referred to as 'victim art', its presumed focus on eliciting sympathy meaning that it couldn't objectively stand as an art piece. Croce explains her decision:

A critic has three options: (1) to see and review; (2) to see and not review; (3) not to see. A fourth option – to write about what one has not seen – becomes possible on strange occasions like 'Still/Here', from which one feels excluded by reason of its express intentions, which are unintelligible as theatre.<sup>13</sup>

By choosing the fourth option, Croce refuses to engage with the work on its own terms; that is, as a piece that blurs the lines between dance and performance art (by incorporating the accounts, via video, of those living with illness). Instead, she centres herself, telling us more about her personal artistic values than the work she has not seen. This example is crucial because of its landmark status in discussions of contested performance criticism: it

sparked *The Crisis of Criticism* (1998), an important collection of essays edited by Maurice Berger, and one of the few to focus on cultural criticism to date. It also demonstrates the longevity of the debates at the centre of our article.

While this example is one of critical disengagement taken to the extreme, since Croce refused even to see the work that she was meant to review, this article will map out similar but more subtle forms of disengagement in cases where critics *have* seen the work under discussion but choose not to assess it on its own terms. These are representative of larger patterns in dominant theatre criticism practices, which are descended from neoclassical and Enlightenment formulations of criticism and centre around the ideals of fair judgement and critical objectivity. Our discussion primarily grounds critical disengagement in case studies from two major global theatre cities, Toronto and Chicago. Focusing on these cities provides a departure point for examination and helps to delimit the bounds of this article, while facilitating a discussion of three modes of critical disengagement that are applicable in wider contexts. Although their demographics differ, both Toronto and Chicago are known as multicultural cities and as two of North America's most vibrant theatre centres. Yet, despite these reputations, the theatre communities of both cities have been critiqued for not equitably representing the diversity of their populations, and both have been recent sites of major controversies involving theatre critics' reviews of the work of IBPOC artists.<sup>14</sup>

In analyzing mainstream criticism of the work of Global Majority theatre artists, this article regularly uses the acronym 'IBPOC'. This acronym stands for 'Indigenous, Black and/or People Of Colour', and is more commonly used in the USA and Canada – the areas central to our study – than other acronyms, including BAME ('Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic'), which is generally popular in the UK. IBPOC is similar to its counterpart BIPOC, but centres the firstness of Indigenous peoples on the continent of North America. Despite their now common usage, there have been some noted critiques of both acronyms,

observing how they may, at times, be unhelpful and reductive.<sup>15</sup> Despite such valuable critiques, this article uses the acronym IBPOC because it is part of the language that the manidoons collective uses, and because our article seeks to explore similarities in the way that mainstream critics treat the work of artists who are non-white.

Building on findings from our recent survey of digital theatre reviewers in Canada, which revealed a lack of diversity amongst those writing about theatre on the most visible platforms (publications with a print equivalent, most often newspapers),<sup>16</sup> this article seeks to examine the power dynamics at play in the critical reception of productions like *Still/Here* and *bug* by asking how critics write about IBPOC artists. In order to illuminate the power dynamics underlying our case studies and theorize our conception of critical disengagement, we draw on writings on criticism by IBPOC artists throughout this article. These writings – features and op-eds published in mainstream media outlets, and social media and blog posts – are valuable sources of knowledge coming from those who may not be scholars but who are experts in their own experiences of discrimination and marginalization. In centring their voices, we follow George Dei's principle of anti-racist research, which 'places the minoritized at the centre of analysis by focusing on their lived experiences', and bring scholarly attention to this long-existing body of literature.<sup>17</sup>

In their writings, IBPOC artists have leveraged critiques against a variety of critics. This includes, expectedly, theatre critics who write for major newspapers, but also, in our age of waning print journalism, other types of critics such as independent bloggers. In some cases, these bloggers, despite their smaller platforms, gain high status in the communities for which they write, and they may be less likely to be constrained by editorial concerns about cultural competence in their writing.<sup>18</sup> For international readers, in particular, we have offered the context of their position and platform for some of the reviewers we cite.

Our case studies illustrate the three broad forms of critical disengagement specified



earlier, each with a particular focus. The first is 'othering', which is about the artist. The second is 'imposing', which is about the artists' work. The third, 'self-centring', is neither about the artists nor their work, but about the critics themselves. These categories are porous and work together to sustain the critic's power through epistemic violence. However, as constructions, they help to identify and understand the distinct ways in which criticism goes wrong, while they also shed light on critical disengagement as a practice. The examples of the Tita Collective's *Tita Jokes* (2021) and Native Earth Performing Arts' *Death of a Chief* (2008) in Toronto elucidate 'othering' and 'imposing' as methods of critical disengagement, and contextualize the critical uproar over *bug* and the manidoons collective's request, as cited above. The Chicago premiere of Antoinette Nwandu's play *Pass Over* (2017) facilitates an exploration of the phenomenon of 'self-staging'.

### Critical Disengagement as Othering

Lynn Slotkin's January 2020 blog review of *Tita Jokes*, an all-Filipina sketch-show described by the creators as 'a love letter to the strong Filipinas in the artists' lives: their mothers, sisters, aunts, grandmothers, and friends' (Figure 2),<sup>19</sup> garnered widespread accusations of racism when Slotkin complained, among other things, that she did not understand what 'Tita' meant nor to whom the show was intended to appeal. Slotkin asks: 'Is it for a Philippine audience or a general audience? They have to decide.'<sup>20</sup>

*Tita Jokes* was being remounted after a successful run at the Toronto Fringe, and the show's many supporters quickly drew attention to Slotkin's review on social media. Actor-director Eva Barrie wrote a lengthy public Facebook post about the incident, calling the review racist, and noting: 'It was incredibly frustrating for me to witness these talented artists be torn down in such a way, and more frustrating because this has been happening for years.'<sup>21</sup> Tita Collective member Alia Rasul also responded publicly on Facebook, writing, 'We feel okay that you had to look up what Tita meant. I'd like to invite you to think about how



**Figure 2.** *Tita Jokes*. Tita Collective, Toronto, 2021. Photograph: Tita Collective. Copyright courtesy of Tita Collective.

that felt, and imagine a group of people who constantly feel alienated in art spaces.'<sup>22</sup> In her op-ed about manidoons's *bug* request written in the months that followed, Yolanda Bonell cited the *Tita Jokes* incident. She explained:

White folks do not understand what it is like to walk through the world as a person of colour. However, as people of colour, being constantly inundated with whiteness in the media, in our everyday lives, in academia, in institutions, we are required to understand whiteness. We know how and when we need to code switch.<sup>23</sup>

In their responses, both Rasul and Bonnell identified a pervasive double standard within the theatre community which expects the work of white artists to be universally understood while the work of IBPOC artists is relegated to 'niche' level and so requires translation. Slotkin's question of 'for whom [*Tita Jokes*] is

meant',<sup>24</sup> and her insistence that the creators must decide between 'a Philippine or a general audience', imply that she, as a white audience member, cannot access the show because of its cultural specificity – a standard rarely applied to the work of white artists. Significantly, the binary Slotkin sets up between a Filipino and a general audience undermines the diversity of theatre audiences and casts the creators as 'other'. Despite theatre's purported ability to evoke empathy and understanding in its audiences, this othering of IPBOC artists through a process of centring whiteness indicates an unwillingness to hear or recognize the particularized experience that informs the work.

Slotkin's critical disengagement is manifested as othering: the flattening and binary placement of work by a critical establishment that continues to divide plays according to imagined differences between the white mainstream and those existing outside it. Othering as a practice of critical disengagement ignores creators' intentions or terms of engagement in favour of a superficial focus on identity. Nikki Shaffeeullah, a Toronto-based theatre-maker, succinctly describes how critics' superficial fixation on identity operates:

They read a marginalized identity as a genre; they assume a marginalized identity is intended to be in and of itself a source of dramatic conflict; or they simply fixate on a character's marginalized identity at the expense of their stories, or other elements such as the production's design, direction, and so on.<sup>25</sup>

This act is, in Dotson's elaboration of epistemic violence, a failure to meet the speaker halfway in the communicative exchange due to pernicious ignorance.<sup>26</sup> Slotkin's response to *Tita Jokes* reflects a problem with the predominantly white (and often male) critical establishment – a feature underscored by Jill Dolan, who suggests that works by members of equity-seeking groups are often 'suspect as "special interest" vehicles' and so are not given consideration for how they might connect to a wider audience.<sup>27</sup>

Othering often occurs in two key modes: homogenization and stereotyping. Reviewers homogenize when they assume sameness amongst a group of people by virtue of their

shared ethnic or cultural background. American playwright Donja R. Love explains in a blogpost:

Critics comparing artists of marginalized identities to other artists that exist within the same marginalized identity seems like the standard. *Oh, this Black writer is just like this other Black writer. That Muslim writer is telling a similar story as that other Muslim writer, because they're both Muslim. Those two writers are Queer so surely their plays are the same.*<sup>28</sup>

Former Artistic Director of Toronto's Cahoots Theatre, Marjorie Chan, recalls that one critic compared Cahoots' production of Kawa Ada's *The Wanderers* to Ins Choi's Canadian hit *Kim's Convenience*. Chan notes that the pieces are of '[d]ifferent styles, different modes, different intentions, different time periods, and born of different cultures', with the only connection between them being that they are plays by writers of colour.<sup>29</sup> Reviewers resort to the second subcategory, stereotyping, as a form of racist shorthand when describing a person or group of people from a shared cultural or ethnic background. Thus they compare, for example, a First Nations actress's face to a stone statue – an image rooted in stereotypes of Indigeneity as fixed and archaic – and imply that Indigenous peoples are stoic.<sup>30</sup> Another example of such gross reductionism cited by IBPOC artists is the tendency of critics to associate non-white artists with labels from 'cultural food'. For example, 'in a review of Nandita Shenoy's *Washer/Dryer* reviewed by *Stage Scene LA*, a "kumquat" and "jasmine rice" are referenced for no reason at all'.<sup>31</sup> Acts of stereotyping suggest critics' limited ability to perceive IBPOC artists' works and cultures beyond what they can consume from them.<sup>32</sup>

The assumption that plays by IBPOC artists are a matter of 'special interest' is at the root of acts of othering, and is reflective of a broader fixation on race, where, as Shaffeeullah explains above, race is assumed to be the subject of the show by the mere presence of minoritized characters and/or the playwright's minoritized identity. As Love, cited earlier, writes:

Because I am Black, my play was reduced to a melodramatic race play. Because every Black

playwright is intentionally writing about race, always – right? Do white artists get that – the assumption of what they’re writing about, the comparisons? Was Tracy Letts or Sarah Ruhl ever compared, so frequently, to other white artists?<sup>33</sup>

The Latinx Theatre Commons (LTC), a collective of Latinx theatre-makers, make a similar critique in an essay published on HowlRound which draws attention to the harm caused by expectations of IBPOC artists that are rooted in stereotypes. Pointing to several examples of problematic reviews that demand more ‘Latino flavour’, the LTC argue that ‘such reviews suggest that, for instance, playwrights can only write about culturally specific issues or have characters that fit into the reviewer’s assumptions about that cultural community, of which they are not a part’.<sup>34</sup> Beyond any possible material impacts on the artist’s work itself (box office,

funding applications, and so on), acts of othering devalue artists’ particularized knowledge and experience, and circulate and recirculate harmful stereotypes that sustain white supremacy.

### Critical Disengagement as Imposing

Our next case study is grounded in the critical reception of a landmark adaptation of *Julius Caesar* which premiered at Canada’s National Arts Centre (NAC) in 2008 in co-production with Native Earth Performing Arts (NEPA). *Death of a Chief*, adapted by Yvette Nolan, NEPA’s then Artistic Director, and Kennedy C. MacKinnon, used Shakespeare’s play to explore issues of power, ambition, and corruption within post-contact Indigenous self-governments (Figure 3). The creative team made several choices in their adaptation,



**Figure 3.** *Death of a Chief*. Native Earth Performing Arts, Ottawa, 2008. Photograph: Nina Lee Aquino. Copyright courtesy of Native Earth Performing Arts.



including cutting and intercutting scenes and adding a movement-based opening sequence that foreshadowed the action of the first half of the play.<sup>35</sup> Significantly, women were cast in many of the main roles (including Monique Mojica and Jani Lauzon as Caesar and Antony) due to the gender make-up of the all-Indigenous cast and Nolan's interest in interrogating male dominance within First Nations governance structures.<sup>36</sup> When discussing her choice to adapt *Julius Caesar*, Nolan stresses Shakespeare's versatility: 'He's everywhere. Every community, every cultural group has been able to find their own experience reflected in Shakespeare, even though he wrote in English.'<sup>37</sup> *Death of a Chief* also served the practical purpose of providing the Indigenous cast with experience in Shakespearean performance, as they had expressed frustration at being overlooked for these roles.<sup>38</sup>

However, NEPA's reclaiming of Shakespeare was challenged by the mainstream critical reception of *Death of a Chief*, which, through critical disengagement, drew boundaries around the play. Rather than engage with what the artists presented, the predominantly white reviewers imposed expectations upon it grounded in their limited artistic and cultural associations regarding Shakespeare and who can and should produce which plays. Critic Richard Ouzounian reviewed the NAC production's remount at Toronto's Buddies in Bad Times Theatre for the *Toronto Star*, a major local newspaper. The review is headlined 'Julius Caesar Doesn't Work in Indian Setting',<sup>39</sup> implying that *Death of a Chief* had been insufficiently adapted to an Indigenous context. Ouzounian questions the play's relevance to 'aboriginal political disputes' and suggests that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Coriolanus* would be better suited to a 'native setting'.<sup>40</sup> He states: 'As often happens in Stratford and Shaw, a play has been taken out of its rightful period and put into another without asking whether or not it belongs there.'<sup>41</sup> The *Globe and Mail's* Kelly Nestruck, theatre critic at one of Canada's national newspapers, makes a similar argument about the production. His review is headlined 'Shakespeare done right . . . and wrong', and his

assessment of *Death of a Chief* as 'Shakespeare done wrong' stands in contrast to his positive evaluation of Soulepper Theatre's concurrent 'airy, straightforward' production of *As You Like It*.<sup>42</sup> Like Ouzounian, Nestruck recognizes Indigenous cultural elements present in the performance, but concludes that 'the play fails to make any resonant connections to Aboriginal issues'.<sup>43</sup>

In both cases, the underlying implications suggest a paradox: that the NEPA adaptation of *Julius Caesar* is 'not Indian enough'<sup>44</sup> (according to standards imagined by settler reviewers) but also that Shakespeare's play is irrelevant to Indigenous communities in the first place. This demonstrates a totally reductive understanding of Indigeneity. Indeed, Nestruck goes so far as to quote the claim made by the press material that the play engages with 'the legacy of colonization and the impact of ambition and in-fighting on the Native community' before dismissing NEPA's concept as an idea generated 'mainly for the grant application'.<sup>45</sup> Rather than consider how these themes might be present in the play or expand on his argument that they are lacking (and thus engage with it on its own terms), Nestruck devotes most of his double review to praising *As You Like It* and, in the remaining space, swiftly critiques *Death of a Chief's* performances, short length, and gender-blind casting – elements that might provide an easier focus because, unlike the production's Indigeneity, they fit within the scope of his knowledge and expectations of contemporary Shakespeare staging.

When writing about the play's critical reception, Métis scholar Jason Woodman Simmonds concludes that critics 'take their particular experiences in the theatre world as a body of knowledge that extends magically in the form of an opinion about what constitutes authentic Shakespearean performance and impose their opinion onto the experiences of NEPA's self-fashioned community'.<sup>46</sup> Rather than interrogate the limits of their understanding, they rely on what they do know. By imposing settler-generated standards on to the play, Nestruck and Ouzounian's reviews serve a gatekeeping role by



delineating the limits of Shakespearean adaptation.<sup>47</sup> The epistemic violence brought about by their critical disengagement works to delegitimize Indigenous interpretations of Shakespeare and demotes Indigenous performers to stereotypical roles such as the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

In their *HowlRound* essay, the Latinx Theatre Commons identify 'a larger pattern seen in American theatre criticism in which the reviewer imposes their own mistaken expectations on to an artist of colour'.<sup>48</sup> While sometimes these mistaken expectations are grounded in racist ideas connected to artists' identities and thus fall under our first category of 'othering', they may also be grounded in normative western artistic standards.<sup>49</sup> Whereas *othering* often responds to the creators and performers of the works reviewed, *imposing* relates more to the works themselves. One example of imposing is when Aristotelian models of plot and structure are upheld as the default standard for artistic works. Such an act ignores that, as Charles C. Smith asserts, 'theatre, acting, drama have long histories in other parts of the world' outside of 'the West', which may be 'based on other aesthetic standards'.<sup>50</sup> Just like othering, imposing demonstrates how critics let their expectations and lack of competence in certain areas cloud their ability to engage with the works in front of them. Instead, critics impose a set of 'universal' standards to their evaluation and dismiss works that do not fit those criteria. In cases of imposing, these standards are typically tied to Eurocentric theatrical norms, as opposed to the perceived backgrounds of the artists whose work is being reviewed.

In an interview about her collective's request that *bug* be reviewed by IBPOC critics, Yolanda Bonnell illuminates how the practice of imposing operates as a strategy of critical disengagement:

There is often a tone along the lines of 'I don't understand this, therefore it's not valid or good art'. Aspects like style, movement, language, and music are at risk of being dismissed. There are so many different styles of theatre or storytelling. Can everyone be proficient in all of those? Probably not. But as reviewers, I think there's a responsibility in

acknowledging that you may not understand certain cultural aspects of how the storyteller is choosing to tell that story.<sup>51</sup>

Here Bonnell reveals how a lack of expertise in particular artistic and/or cultural traditions is often unacknowledged among reviewers, whose reliance on their existing knowledge leads them to mischaracterize work outside their direct range (the case of Nestruck and Ouzounian when reviewing *Death of a Chief*). The reviewers that Bonnell identifies display what Kathleen Smith, former editor of the magazine *The Dance Current*, describes as a 'lack of experience and simpatico with non-Western modes of understanding and knowing art'.<sup>52</sup> In the same interview quoted above, Bonnell highlights the 'Eurocentric notions of excellence'<sup>53</sup> that pervade mainstream criticism, which means that, even when reviewers have some idea of relevant artistic and/or cultural traditions, they may instinctively value them less than European models such as the aforementioned Aristotelian dramaturgical structure. The act of imposing shapes not only what reviewers make of a work but also how they actually experience it. Nolan observes – here expressing a sentiment shared by many IBPOC artists in their critiques of mainstream reviewing – that 'the reviewer brings his teachings, his worldview, and his lens to view the work, and those things can preclude his viewing of the work in any other way. So often, the reviewer does not review what he sees, but what he wishes he had seen.'<sup>54</sup> This statement again specifies that what is at stake in these discussions is not cultural sensitivity, but cultural and artistic competence.

Crucial to understanding imposing as a form of critical disengagement is the discourse of universalism. One consequence of this discourse is the assumption that artistic works can be objectively good or bad (as opposed to dependent on culturally relative artistic standards), and that a critic is able to be 'objective' in judgement.<sup>55</sup> Dolan underscores the connection between objectivity and universality as critical values, and their role in constituting authority within traditional models of criticism, pointing to the 'preponderance of white male critics [who] write from unexamined

gender and race biases that leave them ignorant of how theatre and popular culture can represent others':

Many continue to buy into the myth of objectivity, insisting that to be balanced and fair, a critic needs to erase his or her predilections and prejudices and come to their spectating experiences as a 'universalist'. I don't believe objectivity is possible or desirable; instead, it simply masks the biases that any critic, of necessity, brings to his or her work.<sup>56</sup>

Here, Dolan outlines the relationship between knowledge and power within the critical establishment. The critic's unexamined belief that they can come to spectating free of bias and take on a universalist position rests on the assumption that their knowledge is singular and expansive, and that the standards applied to evaluation transcend the specifics of identity and culture.

Besides its false assumption of objectivity, the discourse of universalism is problematic because it is almost always unequivocally associated with whiteness. Thus, championship of the 'universal' goes hand-in-hand with championship of whiteness and the perpetuation of white supremacy. In a keynote speech for the American Theatre Critics Association, Diep Tran observes that 'we have all been socialized to read the white experience as the universal one, as the one we should identify with and have empathy for'.<sup>57</sup> Nestruck and Ouzounian, in their reviews of *Death of a Chief*, reinforce this equation of universality with whiteness when they imagine limits around how Shakespeare's 'universal' play might apply to Indigenous peoples.<sup>58</sup>

Imposing as a form of critical disengagement is supported by the universalist assumption that one set of standards, one that is Eurocentric and ultimately white supremacist, can be applied to all artistic works. Rather than require critics to examine their biases and the limitations of their knowledge, imposing allows critics to abdicate responsibility in their communicative exchange with artists by reframing critical ignorance as artistic failure. Refusing to meet artists' works in their integrity, critics impose their own standards and, in so doing, they

enact an epistemic violence that sustains white supremacy in theatre.

### Critical Disengagement as Self-Centring

Antoinette Nwandu's *Pass Over* presents two young Black men, Moses and Kitch, who must find ways to pass the time as they remain stuck on a street corner, dreaming about the promised land but unable to pass over their oppressive circumstances. Their world is disrupted at different moments by the appearance of the aptly named Master/Mister and a police officer, who torment the two friends in different ways. Master/Mister brings the play to a tragic end when he shoots Moses.<sup>59</sup> The play melds Beckett and the Old Testament in its trenchant critique of systemic anti-Blackness and the cyclical violence of white supremacy. Nwandu characterizes the critical response to the play's 2017 Chicago premiere as "'not-all-white-people" side-stepping'; a 'crash course in the myriad ways people who feel implicated by a play's message attempt to dodge that bullet'.<sup>60</sup>

Theatre critic Hedy Weiss wrote what has been widely seen as an infamously racist review of the show in major local newspaper the *Chicago Sun-Times*. Weiss took issue with Nwandu's characterization of a white police officer, noting that 'Nwandu's simplistic, wholly generic characterization of a racist white cop (clearly meant to indict *all* white cops) is wrong-headed and self-defeating'.<sup>61</sup> With this language, Weiss lets her subjective views on police officers overshadow what was presented on stage. Weiss then moves her discussion even further away from the production, challenging the idea that anyone might have a problem with the police and citing 'news reports about recent shootings' and 'the look of relief when the police arrive on the scene' (notably not mentioning *who* is looking relieved).<sup>62</sup> Underlying her response is a sense of defensiveness common in self-centring as a mode of disengagement, whereby critics, when confronted by a work's political message, choose to foreground their discomfort rather than analyze what the production is attempting to do.

Underlying the strategies of critical disengagement is a need to elevate critics' knowledge above that of artists, thus maintaining the uneven power dynamic between the two. This is tied to a model of criticism that positions critics as omniscient beings who determine the standards by which artworks will be evaluated. In some cases, critics move beyond imposing inappropriate standards to projecting themselves or their concerns on to artworks. This critical self-centring may involve both the more introspective act of self-indulgence, when critics centre their own importance in their writing over the works they review, and the outward-facing act of self-protectiveness, when critics respond to artworks as though they pose a threat to them.

Self-centring is a subtler form of critical disengagement compared to the previous two discussed above. Often laced with emotion, it pulls up the curtain on the critical ideal of objectivity to reveal critics' subjective responses. The insertion of the self into reviews (including via emotional responses) is at odds with the traditional positioning of critics as neutral and distanced outsiders. Importantly, and in contradistinction to feminist and anti-racist approaches to criticism that foreground social location and conceive of knowledge as 'situated, not objective', self-centring as a form of critical disengagement does not acknowledge subjectivity; it just reveals it.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, critics' failure to acknowledge their subject positions, while concurrently centring themselves, leads to a failure in their communicative exchange with the artist, or, to use Dotson's terms, an unwillingness or incapacity to hear artists.

To return to the example that began this article, we can now see how self-centring also manifests in the mainstream critical response to manidoons's request about reviews for *bug*. Instead of taking advantage of the moment to examine the structural problems of racism in criticism that the request was clearly meant to highlight, critics chose to focus more on how manidoons's request impacted on them and prevailing critical practices. For example, in the opening of his op-ed on manidoons's request, *Globe and Mail* theatre critic Kelly Nestruck asks, 'Should artists be allowed to

choose which colour of critic reviews them?'<sup>64</sup> His question reflects a greater interest in who was not invited than *why* the request was made.

In their analysis of the media coverage of *bug*, Sanchari Sur notes that instead of working to understand the request and its context, the central focus of Nestruck's piece was 'his apparent, and alleged, inability to review Bonnell's play *bug*'.<sup>65</sup> Further, they note that the piece 'reveals a desire to gain control of a narrative that Nestruck seems to be unable to control'.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, Nestruck's attempt to control the narrative was further reinforced in his subsequent coverage of *bug* – a discussion between himself and Cree scholar, artist, and writer Karyn Recollet, published in the *Globe and Mail* under the headline, 'A Cree professor and a white critic went to Yolanda Bonnell's bug. Then, they discussed'.<sup>67</sup> On the surface, the piece may appear to respect manidoons's request by centring an Indigenous voice in the newspaper's coverage of the show, but the dialogue is guided by Nestruck as he tries to wrestle it into the framework of a traditional review, beginning with his own interpretation before asking Recollet for hers.

Nestruck finally asks Recollet to give the play a star rating, acknowledging that this might be 'the colonial construct that Bonnell is trying to avoid'. Recollet subverts Nestruck's question by offering an alternative kind of star rating: 'The stars that were offered within this performance were manifold – the stage design depicted a waterway that was mapped in stars. If I were to provide a rating then, it would be a full-on constellation'.<sup>68</sup> Like the critical response to *Pass Over*, this example demonstrates the immanent presence of critics' subjectivities in the reviewing process, despite their insistence on their objective judgement. Here, as in many cases, the self-centring is prompted by a threat to the critic's power. Rather than allow Recollet to write about *bug* on her own, Nestruck asserts his authority by inserting himself into the piece.<sup>69</sup>

Nestruck's response also illustrates an inability to engage with the structural elements of manidoons's critique. For example, while he acknowledges in his initial op-ed that

his reviewing was shaped by a 'white settler lens', his example of how that lens operates is a moment when he had tears in his eyes during a show which featured a lullaby his grandmother used to sing.<sup>70</sup> By grounding this example in a personal anecdote focused on his individualized experience, Nestruck fails to address the structural component of the 'white settler lens' and its entrenchment in the ongoing history of colonialism and Indigenous dispossession in Canada. Rather than offering an example connected to his grandmother, had he truly understood manidoons's request, Nestruck might have delved further into the admittedly 'dismissive review' that he wrote about *Death of a Chief* in 2008 (discussed above).<sup>71</sup> This brings us to the final point of our article: the inability of mainstream critics to confront the structural impact (and epistemic violence) of their work is one of the greatest barriers to overcoming critical disengagement and the white supremacy it enables. This often directly results from critics' self-centring, which encourages them to interpret structural critiques personally. It also helps to explain why, despite IBPOC artists' longstanding critiques of mainstream reviewing practices, critical disengagement persists to this day.

In an age of waning print coverage, when critics' relevance might seem to rely on their absolute, expansive expertise, it makes sense that they might resist or reject works that fall outside that expertise. And yet, by holding on to their own power, critics become invested in maintaining the status quo, ultimately furthering the white supremacy of the theatre industry. While self-centring may have emerged as a survival strategy among critics, its persistence has resulted in widespread critical incompetence, and has had a substantially negative impact on the work of artists of colour, in particular.<sup>72</sup>

### Re-Imagining Theatre Criticism

The case studies in this article have elucidated a persistent pattern of how critical disengagement manifests in reviews of theatre created by IBPOC artists, and how reviewers misrepresent their work when they fail to consider it

on its own terms and within its sociocultural context. Incompetent reviews play an interfering role in knowledge production pertaining to large bodies of artistic work, and in doing so they enact a form of epistemic violence. As Dotson argues, 'Epistemic violence in testimony is a refusal, intentional or unintentional, of an audience to communicatively reciprocate a linguistic exchange owing to pernicious ignorance. Pernicious ignorance should be understood to refer to any reliable ignorance that, in a given context, harms another person (or set of persons).'<sup>73</sup> This 'refusal' runs through our case studies and manifests in critical disengagement in the forms of othering, imposing, and self-centring. Despite a long history of critique from IBPOC artists and scholars, mainstream critics, by always centring themselves as individuals and failing to understand the structural problems of theatre criticism, perpetuate a kind of pernicious ignorance through their reviews. Such ignorance will persist unless significant steps are taken to counter it by both institutions and individual critics. This might begin, as Tomaž Krpič has argued in a recent issue of *New Theatre Quarterly*, by acknowledging the importance of the critic's 'bodily presence in the theatre' to their experience and the reviews they produce.<sup>74</sup> While Krpič's article does not focus on the particulars of identity, his assertion that the researcher/reviewer's 'condition of being a body and having a body affects her/his perceptions and comprehension of the play or the performance' suggests a situated knowledge that pushes back against critical ideals of objectivity.<sup>75</sup>

The patterns of critical disengagement isolated in our article feed into wider networks of power relations and have serious implications for theatre production and reception more broadly.<sup>76</sup> Accordingly, the main issue is ultimately not individual critics writing problematic reviews (although these can be painful to artists and harmful to the public perception of particular shows), but the structural harm of their repeated patterns. Collectively, critics come to shape audiences' understandings of artistic works in ways that disadvantage the artists in the long term and influence broader public perceptions in ways that reinforce



white supremacy. This is true not just of the public-facing realm of theatre criticism tied to newspapers and blogs, but also of the work of theatre criticism that goes on in departments of theatre and performance studies, making this discussion of critical engagement relevant not just to the waning population of professional critics, but to scholars engaged in any form of criticism as well. Indeed, the academy, as a training ground for many critics, has directly contributed to the climate of professional criticism as it now stands.

Given the persistence of critical disengagement, is it any wonder that IBPOC artists have been responding with acts of refusal of their own? manidoons's request should be understood through this frame: as an opting out of an oppressive system, but also as a chance to build 'solidarity among IBPOC/variously colonized people' and 'create alternative ways of engaging with performances'.<sup>77</sup> The collective's request was inspired by a similar request made by Kim Senklip Harvey for the premiere of her play *Kamloopa: An Indigenous Matriarch Story* in 2018. Harvey understands mainstream theatre criticism as an extension of colonialism, observing that 'settlers have oppressively positioned themselves in this theatrical context to have some presumed kind of academic and/or artistic "authority" over Indigenous peoples'.<sup>78</sup> In order to oppose this, Harvey deliberately categorized *Kamloopa* not as 'theatre' but as 'Indigenous artistic ceremony'.<sup>79</sup> In doing this, she troubled settler reviewers' presumed universal knowledge by which they might claim authority to review the piece, and encouraged them to examine their limited artistic frameworks. The *Kamloopa* creative team then invited love letters from Indigenous women, an idea introduced by dramaturg Lindsay Lachance to provide an alternative to mainstream critical discourse that ensured the play remained 'about Indigenous women and for Indigenous women' and foregrounded care and support as critical values.<sup>80</sup>

The persistent work of artists like the manidoons collective, Senklip Harvey, and many others is generating some change, as well as experimental forms of criticism like the *Kamloopa* love letters. In 2017, sparked by the *Pass Over* reviews discussed in this article, a group

of Chicago artists formed the Chicago Theatre Accountability Coalition to hold the city's critics to task for their work. Also in 2017, Chicago artists Regina Victor and Katherine O'Keefe founded the Rescripted collective and The Key, a mentorship programme for emerging critics. Through their website, Rescripted publishes alternative reviews and runs programmes designed to 'reprogram the way we critically engage with each other using an empathetic lens, while cultivating critics and adding new voices to the field'.<sup>81</sup> These initiatives and others are not only addressing the role that theatre criticism has played and continues to play in upholding white supremacy, but they are also imagining what role theatre criticism might play in *overturning* white supremacy in the theatre.

## Notes and References

1. 'Why Playwright Yolanda Bonnell Asks that Only People of Colour Review Her Play Bug', *CBC*, 10 February 2020, <[cbc.ca/radio/q/monday-feb-10-2020-yolanda-bonnell-oscars-panel-and-more-1.5455921/why-playwright-yolanda-bonnell-asks-that-only-people-of-colour-review-her-play-bug-1.5456383](https://www.cbc.ca/radio/q/monday-feb-10-2020-yolanda-bonnell-oscars-panel-and-more-1.5455921/why-playwright-yolanda-bonnell-asks-that-only-people-of-colour-review-her-play-bug-1.5456383)>. We explain our usage of the term IBPOC in the next section of this article.

2. For international coverage of the event, see Poppy Noor, 'A Playwright Wants Only Critics of Colour to Review Her. Here's What Our Own Critics Think', *Guardian*, 21 February 2020, <[theguardian.com/culture/2020/feb/21/yolanda-bonnell-playwright-criticism-color](https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/feb/21/yolanda-bonnell-playwright-criticism-color)>; see also David Caviglioli, 'Une Dramaturge Canadienne Demande Aux Critiques Blancs de Ne Pas Écrire Sur Sa Pièce', *L'Obs*, 19 February 2020, <[nouvelobs.com/idees/20200219.OBS25042/une-dramaturge-canadienne-demande-aux-critiques-blancs-de-ne-pas-ecrire-sur-sa-pièce.html](https://www.nouvelobs.com/idees/20200219.OBS25042/une-dramaturge-canadienne-demande-aux-critiques-blancs-de-ne-pas-ecrire-sur-sa-pièce.html)>.

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4. Kelly Nestruck, 'How Should Media Respond When an Artist Limits Reviews to Critics Who Are Indigenous, Black and People of Colour?', *Globe and Mail*, 10 February 2020, <[theglobeandmail.com/arts/theatre-and-performance/article-how-should-media-respond-when-an-artist-limits-reviews-to-critics-who-0/](https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/theatre-and-performance/article-how-should-media-respond-when-an-artist-limits-reviews-to-critics-who-0/)>.

5. See, for example, Josette Féral, "'The Artwork Judges Them': The Theatre Critic in a Changing Landscape", *New Theatre Quarterly*, XVI, No. 4 (November 2000) [NTQ 64], p. 307–14, <[doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X00014056](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X00014056)>; *Theatre Criticism: Changing Landscapes*, ed. Duška Radosavljević (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016), particularly the introduction (p. 1–36), and the chapters by George Hunka ('Style versus Substance: American Theatre Criticism Since 1945', p. 39–50) and Andrew Haydon ('A Brief History of Online Theatre Criticism in England', p. 135–51); and Peter Holland, 'Critics and Their Audiences: The Rhetoric of Reviewing', *Shakespeare*, VI, No. 1–4 (2010), p. 292–304.

6. Féral, "The Artwork Judges Them", p. 313.
7. Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator in Action: Feminist Criticism for the Stage and Screen* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Stefka Mihaylova, 'Whose Performance Is It Anyway? Performed Criticism as Feminist Strategy', *New Theatre Quarterly*, XXV, No. 3 (August 2009) [NTQ 99], p. 255–73, <[doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X09000438](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X09000438)>; Nikki Shafieullah, 'Reimagining Theatre Criticism', *Canadian Theatre Review*, CLXVIII (November 2016), p. 34–8, <[doi.org/10.3138/ctr.168.004](https://doi.org/10.3138/ctr.168.004)>; Megan Vaughan, *Theatre Blogging: The Emergence of a Critical Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).
8. Gayatri C. Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 271–313 (p. 280–1).
9. Kristie Dotson, 'Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing', *Hypatia*, XXVI, No. 2 (October 2011), p. 236–57 (p. 236).
10. *Ibid.*, p. 238 (original emphasis).
11. Yvette Nolan, *Medicine Shows: Indigenous Performance Culture* (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2015), p. 108.
12. While we draw on examples from these two countries, we do not mean to suggest that their constructions of race are analogous, as each has its own complicated and situated history of racialization and racism. Nevertheless, our case studies do reveal similar patterns in how critical disengagement presents itself across the two countries, which might be further tested in other international contexts.
13. Arlene Croce, 'Discussing the Undiscussable', in *The Crisis of Criticism*, ed. Maurice Berger (New York: The New Press, 1998), p. 15–29 (p. 16).
14. See Lisa Bertagnoli and Catey Sullivan, 'Four Fixes for Chicago Theatre's Diversity Problem: Here's a Call for the Local Scene to be a Better Mirror', *Crain's Chicago Business*, XLI, No. 1 (2018), p. 3; and Ric Knowles, 'Multicultural Text, Intercultural Performance: The Performance Ecology of Contemporary Toronto', in *Performance and the City*, ed. D. J. Hopkins, Shelley Orr, and Kim Solga (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 73–91 (p. 73).
15. For example, Jill Stoner notes that the acronym BIPOC 'conflate[s] histories, peoples, and issues that demand more nuanced approaches and understanding' ('Against Acronyms', *Inside Higher Ed*, 11 August 2021, <[insidehighered.com/views/2021/08/11/bipoc-and-dei-acronyms-arent-path-more-just-universities-opinion/](https://insidehighered.com/views/2021/08/11/bipoc-and-dei-acronyms-arent-path-more-just-universities-opinion/)>). In an extensive piece for the *Virginia Law Review*, Meera E. Deo delves further into the nuances of this discussion. Deo observes that 'Centring particular groups only in name ultimately furthers their marginalization because they remain excluded in fact though referenced in the term, erasing the power that comes from participation and inclusion'. She adds that 'BIPOC begins with the premise that we should *always* centre two particular racial groups – Black and Indigenous – within the people of colour category, though these communities are *not always* at the centre of the issue being discussed' ('Why BIPOC Fails', *Virginia Law Review*, CVII, 6 June 2021, <[virginialawreview.org/articles/why-bipoc-fails/](https://virginialawreview.org/articles/why-bipoc-fails/)>).
16. Michelle MacArthur, Signy Lynch, and Scott Mealey, 'Power, Perception, and Professionalism: An Empirical Study of Digital Theatre Criticism in Canada', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, XXXI, No. 4 (2021), p. 455–70.
17. George J. Sefa Dei, 'Critical Issues in Anti-Racist Research Methodologies: An Introduction', in *Critical Issues in Anti-Racist Research Methodologies*, ed. George J. Sefa Dei and Gurpreet Singh Johal (New York: P. Lang, 2005), p. 1–27 (p. 2).
18. For more on the changing landscape of theatre criticism in a Canadian context, and the incidence and impact of reviewers beyond those writing for major newspapers, see MacArthur, Lynch, and Mealey's recent 'Power, Perception, and Professionalism'.
19. 'Tita Jokes: Next Stage Theatre Festival', Facebook, n.d., <[m.facebook.com/events/561891521279438](https://m.facebook.com/events/561891521279438)>.
20. Lynn Slotkin, 'Review: FROM NEXT STAGE: TITA JOKES', 12 January 2020, <[slotkinletter.com/2020/01/review-from-next-stage-tita-jokes](https://slotkinletter.com/2020/01/review-from-next-stage-tita-jokes)>.
21. Eva Barrie, 'Racism in Reviews', Facebook, 15 January 2020, <[m.facebook.com/notes/eva-barrrie/racism-in-reviews/10157915279381170/](https://m.facebook.com/notes/eva-barrrie/racism-in-reviews/10157915279381170/)>, accessed 14 April 2020.
22. Alia Rasul quoted in Yolanda Bonnell, 'Why I'm Asking White Critics Not to Review My Show', *Vice*, 14 February 2020, <[vice.com/en/article/dyngxw/why-im-asking-white-critics-not-to-review-my-show](https://www.vice.com/en/article/dyngxw/why-im-asking-white-critics-not-to-review-my-show)>.
23. Bonnell, 'Why I'm Asking'.
24. Slotkin, 'Review: FROM NEXT STAGE: TITA JOKES'.
25. Nikki Shafieullah, 'Reimagining Theatre Criticism', p. 35.
26. Dotson, 'Tracking Epistemic Violence', p. 238.
27. Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator in Action*, p. 7.
28. Donja R. Love, 'The Problem with white critics critiquing work by Artists of Colour', *The Lark*, 25 June 2018, <[larktheatre.org/blog/problem-white-critics-critiquing-work-artists-color/](https://larktheatre.org/blog/problem-white-critics-critiquing-work-artists-color/)>.
29. Marjorie Chan, 'Closing Thoughts', *Cahoots Insider*, 22 March 2014, <[cahootsinsider.wordpress.com/2014/03/22/closing-thoughts/](https://cahootsinsider.wordpress.com/2014/03/22/closing-thoughts/)>.
30. Yvette Nolan references Toronto theatre critic Ray Conlogue's use of this description in a 1986 review of the original production of Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters* (Nolan, *Medicine Shows*, p. 109).
31. Tanuja Jagernauth and Regina Victor, 'The Need for Cultivating Theatre Critics of Colour', *HowlRound*, 7 April 2017, <[howlround.com/need-cultivating-theatre-critics-color/](https://howlround.com/need-cultivating-theatre-critics-color/)>.
32. For more on this, see bell hooks's seminal essay 'Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance', in her *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992) p. 21–39.
33. Love, 'The Problem with white critics'.
34. Latinx Theatre Commons, 'Cultural Microaggressions in Theatre Reviews', *HowlRound*, 16 March 2016, <[howlround.com/cultural-microaggressions-theatre-reviews/](https://howlround.com/cultural-microaggressions-theatre-reviews/)>.
35. For a detailed description of the creative process and the resulting adapted text in *Death of a Chief*, see Ric Knowles, 'The Death of a Chief: Watching for Adaptation; or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bard', *Shakespeare Bulletin*, XXV, No. 3 (2007), p. 53–65.
36. Yvette Nolan quoted in Sorouja Moll, 'The Death of a Chief: An Interview with Yvette Nolan', 12 March 2006, <[canadianshakespeares.ca/i\\_ynolan2.cfm](https://canadianshakespeares.ca/i_ynolan2.cfm)>, accessed 16 June 2021.
37. *Ibid.*
38. Yvette Nolan, 'What We Talk about When We Talk about Indian', in *Recasting Commodity and Spectacle in the Indigenous Americas*, ed. Helen Gilbert and Charlotte

Gleghorn (London: Institute of Latin American Studies, 2014), p. 223–34 (p. 223), <resolver.ebscohost.com/Redirect/PRL?EPackageLocationID=2835833.18915853.71471805&epcustomerid=s2947694>.

39. Richard Ouzounian, 'Julius Caesar Doesn't Work in Indian Setting', *Toronto Star*, 7 March 2008, <thestar.com/news/2008/03/07/julius\_caesar\_doesnt\_work\_in\_indian\_setting.html>.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid. Stratford and Shaw are two major Canadian repertory theatre festivals, dedicated to the work of Shakespeare and George Bernard Shaw respectively.

42. J. Kelly Nestruck, 'Shakespeare Done Right . . . and Wrong', *Globe and Mail*, 8 March 2008, <theglobeandmail.com/arts/shakespeare-done-right-and-wrong/article17981604/>.

43. Ibid.

44. Nolan, 'What We Talk about', p. 226.

45. Nestruck, 'Shakespeare Done Right'.

46. Jason Woodman Simmonds, 'Native Earth Performing Arts's *Death of a Chief*: Unearthing Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*', in *Performing Indigeneity*, ed. Ric Knowles and Yvette Nolan (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2016), p. 167–96 (p. 187).

47. As Stephen Purcell notes, reviews like these that attempt to police the boundaries of Shakespeare are often rooted in the dominant notion, circulated in mainstream theatre criticism, of 'the Shakespearean text as fixed and primary rather than open to contestation through performance'. Although Purcell does not extend his discussion to consider how this logocentrism affects decolonial interpretations of Shakespeare, the reception of *Death of a Chief* reveals an implicit understanding of performance as subservient to the text. See Stephen Purcell, "'That's Not Shakespeare": Policing the Boundaries of "Shakespeare" in Reviews', *Shakespeare*, VI, No. 3 (2010), p. 363–9 (p. 369).

48. Latinx Theatre Commons, 'Cultural Micro-aggressions'.

49. While the examples discussed in this section mostly address acts of inappropriately imposing normative western standards on works that are defined by other paradigms, this phenomenon also happens the other way, where works by IBPOC artists heavily grounded in 'western' aesthetics and artistic traditions are inappropriately assumed to be operating outside of these because of the identity of the artist. In the example offered by Marjorie Chan in our 'othering' section, *Kim's Convenience* by Ins Choi, a play very much operating within conventional 'western' aesthetics, was compared to a show that was operating outside them, seemingly because both playwrights were of Asian (East and West, respectively) descent.

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51. Bonnell, 'Why I'm Asking'.

52. Kathleen Smith, 'Is Everyone a Critic? Changing Paradigms in Dance Criticism', *The Dance Current*, <thedancecurrent.com/feature/everyone-critic>, accessed 10 November 2020.

53. Bonnell, 'Why I'm Asking'.

54. Yvette Nolan, 'Why it Matters Who Reviews Indigenous Theatre', *CBC Arts*, 19 February 2020, <cbc.ca/

arts/why-it-matters-who-reviews-indigenous-theatre-1.5467785>.

55. Mihaylova traces these critical ideals to 'the western modernist project of objective knowledge, transcending the contingencies of embodied existence' ('Whose Performance Is It Anyway?', p. 256).

56. Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator in Action*, p. 5. Among the many biases and 'predilections' that go unexamined in Croce's 'Discussing the Undiscussable' are those connected to race and sexual orientation. One has to wonder whether Croce's response might have been different were Jones not Black, gay, and HIV positive – identities which Croce relies on in labelling Jones a 'victim' artist.

57. Diep Tran, 'Theatre Criticism So White? Here's How to Change That', *American Theatre*, 11 April 2016, <americantheatre.org/2016/04/11/criticism-so-white-heres-how-to-change-that/>.

58. See Knowles, 'The Death of a Chief' for a discussion of NEPA's reclaiming of universality and his changing response to the play as a white, settler scholar-critic.

59. Nwandu revised the play for its run on Broadway in 2021, eliminating the murder of Moses and creating an alternative ending that she intended would give a glimmer of hope and healing to Black audiences; see Salamishah Tillet, 'Finding Redemption and Rebirth on the Road to Broadway', *New York Times*, 23 September 2021, <nytimes.com/2021/09/23/theater/pass-over-broadway.html>.

60. Antoinette Nwandu, 'When Critics Don't Like Their Reflection', *American Theatre*, 27 June 2017, <americantheatre.org/2017/06/27/when-critics-dont-like-their-reflection/>.

61. Hedy Weiss, "'Pass Over" envisions a Godot-like endgame for young black men', *Chicago Sun-Times*, 13 June 2017, <chicago.suntimes.com/2017/6/13/18440050/pass-over-envisions-a-godot-like-endgame-for-young-black-men>.

62. Ibid.

63. Mihaylova, 'Whose Performance Is It Anyway?', p. 256.

64. Nestruck, 'How Should Media Respond'.

65. Sanchari Sur, 'The Role of White Media in Perpetuating Online Racism', *This Magazine*, 18 February 2020, <this.org/2020/02/18/the-role-of-white-media-in-perpetuating-online-racism/>.

66. Ibid.

67. Karen Recollet and J. Kelly Nestruck, 'A Cree Professor and a White Critic Went to Yolanda Bonnell's Bug. Then, They Discussed', *Globe and Mail*, 18 February 2020, <theglobeandmail.com/arts/theatre-and-performance/article-a-cree-professor-and-a-white-critic-went-to-yolanda-bonnells-bug/>.

68. Ibid.

69. More recently, the *Globe and Mail* has begun hiring freelance IBPOC critics to review selected productions by IBPOC artists. For example, Métis writer Robyn Grant-Moran reviewed the NEPA and Soulpepper co-production of *Where the Blood Mixes* by Kevin Loring (Nlaka'pamux from the Lytton First Nation). See Robyn Grant-Moran, 'Where the Blood Mixes is a Roller Coaster that Never Loses Steam', *Globe and Mail*, 6 June 2022, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/theatre-and-performance/reviews/article-where-the-blood-mixes-is-a-roller-coaster-that-never-loses-steam/>.

70. Nestruck, 'How Should Media Respond'.

71. Ibid.
72. For a discussion of the impact of reviews on IBPOC artists, see Nolan, *Medicine Shows*.
73. Dotson, 'Tracking Epistemic Violence', p. 238.
74. Tomaž Krpič, 'On the Researcher's/Reviewer's Bodily Presence in Theatre', *New Theatre Quarterly* XXXV, No. 3 (August 2019) [NTQ 139], p. 238–50 (p. 238), <[doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X19000241](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X19000241)>.
75. Ibid, p. 248.
76. In the Canadian context, Robert Wallace has theorized the structural impact of theatre criticism in reproducing the status quo in his *Producing Marginality: Theatre and Criticism in Canada* (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1990), p. 130.
77. Cole Alvis, Yolanda Bonnell, Kim Senklip Harvey, Lindsay Lachance, and Sheetala Bhat, 'Radical Refusals and Indigenous Gifts of Love: A Conversation on Indigenous Theatre after *bug*', *Theatre Research in Canada*, XLII, No. 1 (May 2021), p. 100–19 (p. 102, 104), <[doi.org/10.3138/tric.42.1.f01](https://doi.org/10.3138/tric.42.1.f01)>.
78. Kim Senklip Harvey, 'Protocols for the Indigenous Artistic Ceremony Kamloopa', 20 August 2018, <[kimsenklipharvey.com/post/2018/08/20/protocols-for-the-indigenous-artistic-ceremony-kamloopa](https://kimsenklipharvey.com/post/2018/08/20/protocols-for-the-indigenous-artistic-ceremony-kamloopa)>.
79. Ibid.
80. Alvis et al., 'Radical Refusals', p. 105.
81. Rescripted, 'About Us', <[rescripted.org/about-us/](https://rescripted.org/about-us/)>.