

‘We have yet to reach our postcolonial moment’: Chelsea Watego on colonialism and the canon

The Brisbane author and academic talks about her new book, settler colonialism and the everyday-ness of ongoing dispossession



*Chelsea Watego, the author of *Another Day in the Colony*. ‘To look in on conversations that aren’t designed for you – well, this is the experience that Blackfellas have with a lot of the accounts of us.’*

Paul Daley
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Celebrated Munanjahli and South Sea Islander academic and writer Chelsea Watego unambiguously wrote her book *Another Day in the Colony* for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readership.

There’s nothing stopping you reading it if you’re not Indigenous. But if you do with an open mind – even if you’re the type of “progressive” whitefella who considers him- or herself conversant with the woeful and violent racism upon which Australia is founded – you might wander about for days afterwards with ringing in your ears.

That will partly be the sound of the pennies hitting the floor. It will also be the internal alarm of an awakening consciousness that no matter how much you might think you understand or even sympathise, you can’t fully. So, best read it with a simple proposition in mind: you will never understand what it is like to confront oppressive colonial structures in almost every facet of your life and on every single day of it.

“To look in on conversations that aren’t designed for you – well, this is the experience that Blackfellas have with a lot of the accounts of us,” says Watego. “... And that’s what I want readers who feel that this book is not written for them to understand – you know, you can sit in and listen, but maybe not everything there is for the taking.

“And that’s OK. It’s the very opposite of colonising – you can see something, but you don’t have to take it and claim it.”

Watego is talking on the phone from her home in Brisbane amid planning for the next evening’s Fortitude Valley book launch and party for 150 Indigenous mates. Even before the book hit shops late last month, pre-orders necessitated an early reprint (and another since).

Those of us for whom the book was not intended should start with the title – Another Day in the Colony.

She explains: “Another Day in the Colony is a hashtag that came out of Blackfella Twitter ... it is distinctly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on Twitter claiming conversations that are for us – and it’s just taken off in all sorts of interesting ways.

“People use [the hashtag] to describe the tragic violence Blackfellas are subjected to and at the same time you use it to describe the mundane ridiculous encounters that we have every day ... I love what it has done for Blackfellas, in particular, to be able to externalise the stuff that happens to us and to say, ‘This is not about us, this is about the colony,’ and it’s also about insisting that we have yet to reach our postcolonial moment in this country.”

So, it is sometimes said – and the hashtag used – with an eyeroll?

“Absolutely,” she says. “So, you use it sarcastically. You use it angrily and in all kinds of humorous ways. And you can say it – you know, ‘Well, that’s just another day in the colony’ about the mundane, everyday reality of settler colonialism and how it’s experienced by Blackfellas.”

Watego is a former Aboriginal health worker who became a celebrated Indigenist health humanities scholar, writer and public intellectual. In her book she writes with candour, elegance and occasional biting humour six compelling essays including “don’t feed the natives”, “animals, cannibals and criminals”, “fuck hope” and the astonishing “the unpublishable story” (about which more shortly).

Each essay – or chapter – is preceded with a document from her life’s archive. They include records of two (utterly ridiculous) Queensland police charges – one for swearing at a cop in Dalby (where she worked as an Aboriginal health officer as a younger woman) and 20 years later for public nuisance ... for arguing with a man outside a Brisbane nightclub. Then there is her 2007 Dean’s Commendation for Outstanding PhD at the University of Queensland, and a drawing for Harmony Day by her then seven-year-old daughter (she has five children).

“Each of those images at the start of each essay ... they are all representations of me from different people and different vantage points,” she says. “Whether it’s the state, whether it’s the judge, whether it’s my child, whether it’s my academic institution ... what I wanted to do was allow the readers to think, ‘Well, which account is true?’ Because I’m all of those things – whether it’s the drunken Aborigine or the academic, award-winning scholar ... but it just goes to the heart of it that we are always being defined by others in ways that don’t speak fully to our account as human beings on our own country.”



Writing with candour, elegance and occasional biting humour: Chelsea Watego.

Her daughter’s drawing depicts Watego in a red frock, beside a gunyah, holding a boomerang. She drew her father holding spears.

Watego writes: “We were placed in our natural habitat among animals and elements that she and her four siblings are named after in Yugambeh language: Kargaru, Murun, Bilinba, Gibam and Yalgan. She had never seen her family in this setting before, but this was, according to her, at age seven, her culture. Her cultural representation placed us in another time and place, one which was unfamiliar. Or was it?”

She says the drawing revealed that despite having two Indigenous parents living in a proud urban Black community and being constantly exposed to sophisticated conversations about identity, her daughter “knew at age seven what the representation of [her] culture was meant to be”.

“This gets at the everyday-ness of settler colonialism in terms of how it makes us think about ourselves and what dispossession does. In that, when we go to tell our story, we locate ourselves in another place and another time because that has been narrated for us. So, I wanted to show the everyday-ness of how this plays out in the psyche of our people.”

Critiquing the canon of revered Australian 20th-century literature through this paradigm is a bold, welcome provocation. Look out Patrick White and Randolph Stow (Ion Idriess, Lawson and Paterson, you should be up next).

Watego references Wiradjuri writer Jeanine Leane's observations of Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves*, his reimagined tale about Eliza Fraser, about the Scottish woman shipwrecked off the coast of Queensland, taken in by Butchulla people and for whom Fraser Island is named. White, says Watego, "readily constructed a fictional story of Aboriginal cannibals, not having met Aboriginal people".

Watego writes: "She [Leane] also wrote of his claim that he didn't need to engage with Butchulla [people] when visiting K'gari, also known as Fraser Island, because their account would complicate things. How ironic that the Black people from which the Black characters originate could get in the way of a supposed 'good story'. The canon of Australian literature, we are reminded, is to be of service to the coloniser, not the colonised, and Black bodies get conjured up in the most vile and fanciful ways to aid it, with absolutely no accountability."

In this context Watego's "the unpublishable story" unfolds as a remarkable comparative study of two books both published by University of Queensland Press (also the publisher of *Another day in the Colony*).

One book is *Finding Eliza: Power and colonial storytelling*, by Larissa Behrendt, in which (in Watego's words) the author "interrogates the role that Aboriginal characters – both men and women – play in upholding Eliza as the epitome of white feminine virtue". The other is *Saltwater: An epic fight for justice in the tropics*, by Cathy McLennan – chronicling her stint as a lawyer with Townsville Aboriginal Legal Service.

Watego writes: "Like Eliza (Fraser), McLennan uses her captivity story of life in the tropics among 'the Aborigines' to go on the speaking circuit, this time at writers' festivals and universities. She is lauded in the media for her 'insights' into crime, justice and alcoholism in Aboriginal communities. She is not simply a writer: she is a knower, via this account of a group of murderous Aboriginal children. It is striking that despite its animalistic depictions of Aboriginal people, *Saltwater* has been so routinely celebrated. This speaks not to the quality of the text but rather to the continued popularity of the 'drama of white women among savages' narrative."

We read the full essay in Watego's book. But the "unpublishable" backstory began when the Australian Feminist Law Journal invited Watego to contribute to a special edition on "Indigenous Writing on Law and Justice". She critiqued the McLennan book. Two anonymous peer reviews praised the essay.

Watego writes: "Sadly, the journal's managing editor and the editor-in-chief didn't share the same viewpoint as the anonymous reviewers or the special issue editors, Gomerioi scholar Alison Whittaker and Birri Gubba and Yugambah scholar Dr Nicole Watson.



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“The story of what transpired is documented elsewhere but suffice to say after much back and forth, the managing editor and editor-in-chief advised that this work was not publishable in any form because it apparently posed a threat of defamation ... I was eventually permitted to write an editorial about the experience of not being published in the special issue in lieu of the article I had submitted. But this would be accompanied with another contribution from a white man to explain how defamation law works...”

Watego laughs. But it's a laugh of exasperation – a what-the-actual-fuck laugh – more than humour.

“It was bizarre. And you kind of go, ‘This just can't be for real'... the fact that in that special issue a white male legal voice was given a space that I was denied in order to rationalise why the story couldn't be told. And this was just a critique of the text.”

And *that* is another day in the colony.

- *Another Day in the Colony, by Chelsea Watego, is published by University of Queensland Press and is out now*