Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Whiteness isn’t intellectualism. Whiteness isn’t indigenous. Whiteness isn’t anything.

Chiwan Choi · Wednesday, April 27th, 2016

This is a room full of Whiteness.
Whiteness doesn’t notice the people are all white.
Whiteness does notice and just doesn’t care.
Whiteness does notice and is very happy.
Whiteness does notice and feels very safe.
Whiteness anoints these words on itself:
Indigenous. Intellectuals.

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Some months ago, I met Tom Lutz, main man of LARB, at a Big City Forum event curated and produced by Leonardo Bravo. I went to see Jessica Ceballos and Jen Hofer present. Melissa Chadburn presented too.

Before the event began, we introduced ourselves to each other. He said he’d been wanting to meet me, been wanting to talk to me about something. And we did after the event.

He wanted to talk to me about a problem that LARB was having. A diversity problem, by which it means a lack of diversity. He said he was told I was a person to talk to to help solve this problem, to fix this shortcoming.

But the thing is, he said they didn’t really have a diversity problem. According to Tom, people were mistaking LARB for a publication with diversity problems.

He knew this because he had gone to the Authors page on LARB’s website and counted all the faces that weren’t white. The non-white faces. Or faces that were not white white. Ya know? That’s how he was sure it was just some perception problem because he counted many not white white faces.

Then he asked me to write something for them.

I said no. I refuse to be an extra number on their diversity count that improves their chances at grants.

We planned to meet. Then he canceled. We planned to meet. Then it didn’t happen.

Then we met finally. We talked. I told him the problem wasn't how many writers of color LARB published. I told him he couldn't have all white editors and solve this problem.

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Here is the picture. Here are the names.

A screenshot from the article on The Hollywood Reporter.

They are very very happy.
LARB has editors who are people of color.
LARB didn't ask those precious few editors of color to be in their photo.
Look at the photo again.
They are very very happy. They are very very proud.

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They could have said no. Lutz and Specktor could have said no. No, THR, we will NOT only have these people pose for the photo.
They could have said no but chose not to.

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The words. The words are even worse than the photo, if that's possible. The words are the arrogance and the greed. The words are how they try to write us out of the narrative. (CLARIFICATIONS ADDED.)

Tom Lutz: "LARB draws on an intellectually alive city. That intellectual vibrancy has something to do with the kind of people (=WHITE) the industry attracts. They're here to make culture (=POC ARE STUPID AND DON'T HAVE CULTURE)."

Jamie Wolf: "LARB benefits from the fact that 'literary' has a broader meaning (=NOT LITERARY) here [in Los Angeles] than elsewhere."

Mary Sweeney: "It's young as a publication; it's not hobbled by long-standing traditions (=LIKE LATINOS AND TONGVA AND CHUMASH AND…)."

Matthew Specktor: "We kick as hard as we can against parochialism (=LIKE THEY DON'T HAVE TIME FOR THE WIDER CONTEXT OF RACE, FOR EXAMPLE). Our perspective is global (=BUT INTENTIONALLY BLIND TO THE PEOPLE IN THIS CITY, THIS CITY HE SUPPOSEDLY WROTE ABOUT IN HIS BIG IMPORTANT BOOK ABOUT THE CITY)."

Ugh. More words.

> "Its eclectic ethos has built an online audience that is one- third international, heavy on academics posted at the far corners of the Earth (Brazil, Taiwan, New Zealand). And yet it's rooted in an unmistakably ***indigenous*** mentality."

INDIGENOUS? INDIGENOUS!

And the title: The Juicy New Read of L.A.'s ***Intellectuals.***

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After that second meeting I had with Tom Lutz, I got another email from the Executive Editor (or some grand shit like that) about wanting to publish a poem of mine.

Nah.

They want me to want something from them. They want me to take something from them. They want me to take what they are offering me. Here, they say, take this gift from us and be one of us. You will enjoy the garden inside these walls.
All they need is for me to want from them, of them. That's all they need to erase me.
This is what LARB wants and does.
This is what Rattle wants and does.
This is what Red Hen Press wants and does.
This is what academia wants and does.
This is what (literally throw a rock and it will hit somebody that fits here) wants and does.

But why sell out in a zero dollar industry? Why get tempted for the biggest slice of a zero pie?

Because look, look at the photo. Read the piece. Where are all the writers and editors of color that contributed to this business?

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Whiteness is not just white people. As Junot Diaz said once at an event, "White people can't even mow their own lawns. You think they can hold up white supremacy without our help?" (I paraphrase but it's pretty close.)

Months after the Michael Derrick Hudson shit storm died down, months after (a handful) of #ActualAsianPoets had been named and elevated, a new wave of White on Asian crime appeared in print. On The New Yorker with Trillin. On Facebook with Mark Doty.

And then think pieces and interviews and poems published in response and NPR appearances and more things to list on CVs.
After MDH, Asian-American poets and academics had made lists of #ActualAsianPoets people should read instead of white men posing as Chinese women poets.

One such list exists here. It has been lauded. It has been praised.

In this list exists Trisha Low. Trisha Low says she hates her Asian family. Trisha Low says she loves her white family led by Vanessa Place. Trisha Low defends white supremacy and defends anti-Blackness.

But now she is on this list, you see. Because she is an #ActualAsianPoet. No longer #ActualWhiteApologist.

She is on this list. The AAWW is happy with this list. The academics are happy with this list. A

whole shit ton of poets are happy with this list.

How are we okay with this list? If this is elevating and promoting a poet who is out there supporting Whiteness, how is this list valid?

This list repeats Whiteness. Lists like this support white supremacy. Lists like this mow their lawns.

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Want to know what it's like to battle this all day?

Here is Jennifer Tamayo speaking about white gatekeepers using people of color to do the labor, reap all the benefits, then keep us all outside the walls, and the damage all of this causes on our bodies and minds.

Want to see what can be done without permission from Whiteness?

Here are Eunsong Kim and Gelare Khoshgozaran with an incredible new project disrupting white hegemony.

We can do this.

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Whiteness isn't intellectualism.
Whiteness isn't indigenous.
Whiteness isn't anything.
Whiteness is just that blank space where a theft has occurred.

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