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Moving between worlds: Creativity, disability and storytelling

Abstract:

In this essay, the author, using second person, considers the path her deaf body has taken to become a writer and an academic. She contrasts the strictures of the neoliberal university with the creativity that comes from deafness; a creativity that has fostered a generative movement between the disciplines of literary studies and creative writing. She considers the importance of combining the study of Australian literature with the study of creative writing and concludes by dwelling upon an architectural ethos that is predicated upon the care of deaf learners – DeafSpace.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Disability, creativity, deafness, creative writing, literary studies

Introduction

“We shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us”, wrote Winston Churchill in response to the redesign of Parliament House following the Blitz in World War II. He was arguing, as deaf writer Fiona Murphy notes, that the British parliamentary Commons Chamber be restored to an “adversarial rectangular pattern”, rather than a horseshoe arrangement. He maintained that the original shape of the chamber was “responsible” for the British two-party system and therefore essential for maintaining democracy (cited in Murphy, 2021, p. 41). Murphy wonders if Churchill’s insistence on this design may have been influenced by his increasing deafness and the need to hear in the narrow chamber. Deaf people, after all, “possess an acute architectural awareness and a sensitivity to the connection between personhood and the spaces they inhabit. These aptitudes [are] honed by daily experiences of isolation and physical barriers to communication and orientation” (Bauman, 2014, p. 376). Deaf people understand that the world is designed by bodies that hear, and that trying to fit into this world is exhausting and damaging.

As you write this essay, you stand between several worlds: between the world of the hearing and the deaf; between the disciplines of literary studies and creative writing; between the university and your desk in the kitchen [1]. Your body creates work that reflects these in-between spaces as you write, teach and research. Yet after more than a decade of trying to combine creative writing and academia, you are coming to the conclusion that there are few places for your deaf body to house itself, and to write comfortably and sustainably.

In this essay, you consider the path your deaf body has taken to become a writer and an academic. You contrast the strictures of the neoliberal university with the creativity that comes from your deafness, a creativity that has fostered a generative movement between the disciplines of literary studies and creative writing. You conclude by dwelling upon an architectural ethos that is predicated upon the care of deaf learners – DeafSpace – and consider, given the unavailability of such architecture in Australia, that the only way you can sustain yourself as a deaf academic and writer is not so much through DeafSpace, but instead through Deaf Time.

“Can I do my words?”

This is a photo of you at the start of your career. You’re on your way to preschool. While your sister – three years older – wears a light summer tunic with a jumper, you have been swaddled in thick, spongy layers. A few months before, you told your mother you weren’t feeling well. Pain spilled down the back of your neck and shoulders and the light became intensely bright. Your mother, unnerved, bundled you into the car and drove for forty minutes to the local doctor. The doctor told her to go to Tamworth Base Hospital immediately. She drove for another hour over the country roads. At the hospital, they drew fluid from your spine with a lumbar puncture. It showed that a shred of bacteria had entered your body and travelled through your bloodstream, inflaming the membrane enveloping your brain and spinal cord. They dosed you with antibiotics and hoped for the best. Your parents stayed with a family friend in town, and at three in the morning, the hospital called to say you’d had a respiratory arrest. A priest performed the last rites, but, because you’re stubborn and like to prove a point, you decided to live.



Figure 1: The author at age four. (Photo supplied)

Weeks later, after you were discharged from hospital, your parents realised something wasn't right. You were forever asking, "pardon?"

You and your father made another long drive, this one being six hours to Sydney, to visit an audiologist. After a series of tests, you were told that you had no hearing in your left ear and half hearing in your right: a diagnosis of severe-to-profound deafness.

So, on your trip to preschool, your mother was determined that you would never be ill again, and she wrapped you up tightly against the elements.

You can't remember much of what you learnt in preschool, aside from dashing paint onto pieces of butcher's paper and being forced to nap in the daytime, but you do remember your mother teaching you your letters at home. Sheaves of shiny letters lived in a long cardboard box beneath the wooden dresser. While the carrots bubbled on the gas stove, you pulled out the box and pestered your mother, "can I do my words?". She turned the carrots down to a simmer and sat with you on the camel hair carpet and took out the box. You felt the rough carpet prick the backs of your legs as you and she formed words. When you made a mistake, your mother nudged you towards the correct letter.

Your family lived in a remote rural community on Gamilaraay country and the options for your education were limited. You could either attend the small, local mainstream school with your siblings and cousins, or be sent away to board at a school for deaf children in Sydney. You were too small to be separated from your family, so you were sent to the local primary school.

In the L-shaped brick building, you sat at the front of the class so you could hear the teacher's voice. A teacher for the deaf visited you once a week to help with your speech and lessons. The school applied for funding to carpet the wooden floorboards, as they created echoes and made it hard for you to hear. As you grew up and moved through the rooms, the blue woollen carpet followed. The government also provided funding for an FM system, which included a small walkie-talkie for the teacher to wear. Your muscles, taut with the strain of hearing, relaxed instantly.

Once you could read, you fell in love with books. They transported you from your loneliness, your frustration at missing jokes that made people laugh, your desperation to join in a conversation and be one of the threads that drew a community together. Talking to anyone outside of your family was hard work. You have never overheard a conversation in your life. When you were small you couldn't understand the natural ebb and flow of dialogue, so your parents used role-playing to teach you how to have a conversation. It was easier to write. You loved stamps, stationery and anything that linked you to writing, letters and readers, because this was a way you could connect with other people.

When you started secondary school, you left behind your community of cousins on the farm who kept you safe. Most of them went to boarding school, but the school that they attended with your sister wouldn't allow you to board because you were deaf. Your mother woke you early every morning to catch the bus to school, a place where you didn't fit in. You didn't know anything about music, TV or boys, so you had no means of contributing. Instead, you kept reading and working hard, because it filled in the many hours on your own.

Eventually your parents moved from the flat plains and dark soil of Gamilaraay country to Anaiwan country in the Tablelands, where the winters were sharp and the imported trees glowed orange and claret in autumn. You were able to be a day girl at the school that had previously rejected you on account of your disability.

In your final year of high school, your parents consulted a careers adviser who thought that a creative practice might offer you help with processing the frustrations of deafness. He noted your affinity with words. As soon as he suggested the creative writing course at the University of Wollongong, you knew this was exactly what you wanted to do.

Questing

To be deaf is to ask questions. The most obvious of these is, of course, "I beg your pardon?". You're always trying to catch the beginning or the end of sentences. You end up piecing together words like a poem to try to make sense of what is happening in a conversation.

The word "question" comes from the Latin word *quaerere*, meaning "to ask" or "to seek". For you, these terms are interchangeable. To ask means to find the words you have missed – the ones you didn't hear – to complete the sentence and make meaning. At university, you suddenly found yourself in a world where you could locate the answers to questions, and where you needed to ask even more questions. You were often in the library, running your finger along the spines of books

in the literature section. For someone from a small country town, discovering so many books about writers and writing was intoxicating. You had so many more questions: Why did these people write? What was the influence of their culture? How did their communities and bodies shape their outputs? You loaded up your satchel with loans and read them in your narrow room in your residential college.

But hearing was harder in this strange, quiet town shadowed by an escarpment, where the flame trees burst with red petals when the days warmed. In order for you to hear, the people in your writing class passed around your FM transmitter to whoever was speaking. It was cumbersome and slowed down the discussion, but your good-natured peers adapted. One morning, when your hearing aid battery went flat and you didn't have any spares, you slumped in your chair, defeated by the effort you needed to engage in everyday life.

A classmate leapt up. "I'll go to the convenience store on campus for you".

You shook your head. "No, no, it's fine. I can hear some things".

"It'll take ten minutes".

"Okay". You unspooled with guilt and relief. Thirty years later, you still remember her kindness.

Your first teacher was Deb Westbury, a poet. In a hot, stuffy demountable, Deb waved a book, Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones* (1986), at the class. "Write for fifteen minutes every day", Deb explained. "Don't stop, and don't edit". You followed Deb's instructions. Every day you wrote for fifteen minutes without stopping in an A4 journal.

When you started those journals, writing into the hours after midnight, you realised the careers adviser was right. You poured into the pages the awkwardness of sitting alone at your desk in the classroom, watching fellow students chatting among themselves and wondering how on earth they knew what to say. You thought you must have been tarnished in some way, because no-one would ask you how you were, or if you were enjoying the course. You were always relieved when the lecturer entered the room, changing the mode from socialising to learning. You wrote about your pervasive sense of failure caused by not being able to master the simple mechanics of communication, and of your chronic anxiety about offending someone because you hadn't heard them, or of not being in the right place because you hadn't heard a crucial piece of information. Writing in the journal stripped away the anxiety and restored you to yourself.

After a while, you weren't able to function without the journal writing. You needed to express what was happening to you if you were to survive as a deaf woman. Over the years, this expression moved from journals, to poetry, to short stories, to novels. The notebooks filled more slowly as you moved onto other modes and genres, but the mechanism was still there: without writing, you would desiccate.

Your second teacher was John Scott. In your first class – still in the demountable – he explained in his dry, lugubrious way, how difficult the publishing industry was and how few of you would make it as writers. Thinking of this now, you can't help but laugh. Economic conditions for writers are

now considerably worse. He echoed Deb's advice and added, "you know, if I practiced as much as a footballer did, I'd be an Olympian writer by now".

You practised being a writer and you wrote all summer. When you came back in second year and workshopped a story, John was impressed with the improvement in your work. He asked, "have you been drinking?"

"No!" you replied hotly. "I've been writing".

And yet, you were bored. On the evenings and weekends, you walked through the empty suburban streets which, after a coastal shower, smelled of tarmac and frangipani. The hours outside of class were long because you didn't have anyone to hang out with. The one friend you made, a girl in your residential college, returned to Sydney on the weekends.

One day your friend told you she was enrolling in an arts degree alongside her creative arts degree, majoring in literature. She thought she might become an academic, like her mother was. You listened to her in surprise: was this thing – an "academic" – something that was possible?

To alleviate your boredom, you followed her lead and enrolled in a literature degree. The synapses in your brain ignited like firecrackers as you studied 14th, 19th and 20th century female writers, the Modernists, postcolonial poets, expressions of the fantastic through the ages. You also found your grand passion: Australian literature.

You still kept to yourself, but your mind was afire with words.

As a literary critic with training wheels, you learnt to take books apart; to study character, theme, structure and setting. You researched the history of the culture in which writers worked. You considered the connotations of metaphor and simile and the shapes and sounds of sentences. You learnt how to structure an argument. You also learnt more about the craft of writing and its production in cultural contexts than you did from your creative writing degree.

Your creative writing degree still taught you how to convey your arguments in a compelling way, using the seduction of words and the precision of detail. It gave you the confidence to move out of the confines of the scholarly essay and to leap into the worlds of fictocriticism and creative non-fiction. When you reached your honours in 2000, the creative arts department didn't yet have a dedicated creative writing honours degree, so your two supervisors cobbled one together for you. Alan Wearne supervised your creative artefact in poetry and Anne Collette supervised your exegesis in literary studies, an essay on what would become your literary love affair: the letters of Georgiana Molloy, Western Australia's first female scientist.

These letters were a springboard for your debut novel, which you wrote on a scholarship for a Masters in Writing at the University of Technology, Sydney. In your share house on Alison Road in Randwick, with a view of the brick apartments opposite, you wrote like you were possessed, pushing out two to three thousand words a day. Most of it was terrible. By the time you reached 120,000 words, you realised the first half of the novel wasn't working and threw it out. You

changed the voice from third person to first, written through letters between the two female characters. You accessed a mentorship from the Australian Society of Authors to get an editor's advice, realised that the letters weren't working either, and rewrote the book in first person. In the meantime, you found a part-time job to save money because you wanted to go to England, where your brother lived, to do your PhD. In 2004, you found funding for your doctorate and packed your bags.

Even though you were permanently homesick in London, you loved your course. Offered by the London Consortium, an offshoot of Birkbeck, it pulled together researchers from the visual arts, architecture, cultural studies and literature. Your classes and meetings were not held in a permanent location. Rather, you crossed London on buses and the Tube to get to the teaching spaces in the Tate galleries and in the high-ceilinged rooms of the Institute for Contemporary Arts (and its other important location, the bar on the ground floor), to film screenings at the Architectural Association and to a lecture hall in Birkbeck. On the page, meanwhile, you had the freedom to cross disciplinary boundaries, and you wrote a fictocritical thesis, a grafting of fiction and literary theory.

Though this thesis, you came to understand that you were happiest when moving and seeking sensation, and that this was a product of your deafness. Hard of hearing rhetorician Brenda Jo Brueggemann articulates this clearly when she describes herself as being in a place between "hard" and "hearing":

As one whose life has been spent always feeling one step behind in a conversation, usually caught in the exchange between two speakers and never quite "there" at the moment any one person is speaking as I scramble to process what I have heard, to fill in the many missing high frequency consonants that I haven't heard, to attend to ways that minimize [sic] background and interfering sounds, to construct a more accurate picture from the context surrounding the conversation (reading lips, attending to body language, noting facial expressions, trusting tone) – as such a one, I do anything but stand still. (Brueggemann, 1999, p. 8)

Brueggemann inhabits a space between people and temporalities. She is always rushing to retrieve meaning from the past to bring it to the present. For her – and for you – deafness means actively seeking and creating meaning.

As you thought more about questing and questioning, you wondered if your choice of form emerged from your body. In your doctoral thesis, you put yourself into the text as a fictional character and asked questions of the critics you met on the pages of books. In a part of your exegesis that was later published, you mused, "everything I write is an amalgam of fact and fiction, because I hear some things and make the rest up. Deafness influences the way I process and write about the world, so it seems I can't avoid my body when I write" (White, 2010).

When you finally finished the PhD and said goodbye to your brother, you decided against moving back to Sydney. It was too expensive and you were flat broke, with a tooth that needed root canal treatment. Instead, you flew to Brisbane where your sister lived, because your skin craved sunshine

after four years of England's muted light. You took the first job you could find: a research assistant role at a not-for-profit that supported people with autism.

Although you liked the work, you were soon bored again. You missed the intellectual community of readers and writers who had nourished you as a student. To meet fellow academics, you dipped into your pockets to attend Australian literature conferences as an independent scholar. You sent your curriculum vitae to local universities. It took a couple of years of trying, but you found tutoring in Australian literature. You were paid to deliver your first ever lecture, but you were so knotted with anxiety – while also recovering from the flu – that you fainted in front of 120 students. *At least they wouldn't ever forget that lecture*, you consoled yourself.

The teaching was, and remains, exhausting. To hear in the classroom, you used your ageing FM, the wires taped up with sticky tape. But as there were several people speaking, not just one, you needed to remain on high alert. In tutorials, you asked the students to raise their hands when they wanted to speak, because you couldn't locate where their voices came from. Although the conversation was slower, and the students, waiting for the microphone, had time to think before they spoke, you still had to be quick on your feet. You asked a question, located a hand, moved towards the student and gave them the microphone, listened to their answer, thought of a response and asked another question, all the while doing your usual cognitive processing – lipreading, matching the sound to words, checking the context to ensure you've heard the right words and piecing sentences together. By the time you reached home, you were white with fatigue.

You figured, then, that while you were too deaf to be a teacher without obliterating yourself, you could be a researcher. You applied for postdoctoral applications at universities, sending out eight in all. You didn't know at the time (because you had neither networks nor community) that postdoctoral candidates need a champion or mentor. Nor had you heard of the Australian Research Council. It was only when you were at a conference on Patrick White and you ran into Jeanine Leane, a Wiradjuri scholar and poet, that you learnt you could apply for a Discovery Early Career Researcher Award. Through a combination of luck, hard work, your skill with creating narrative and the support of an established, female scholar, your application was successful. You were installed in a university with jacaranda trees that released clouds of purple blossoms each spring. And then you began to understand what it was like to be a disabled academic.

Institutions and institutionalisation

Research is emerging on disabled academics' experiences in the United Kingdom and United States, but evidence of their experiences in the Australian academy is "sparse and opaque" (Rodgers et al., 2023, p. 1483). A pilot project surveying the experiences of disabled academics in Australia, which included interviews with eight participants, revealed three key themes: the expectation of the "ideal worker", which is impossible for disabled participants to achieve except at a huge physical and mental cost; expectations of work performance and output have intensified in the neoliberal university, which is challenging for disabled academics; and a disjunct between the policy and practice of inclusion (Humphrys et al., 2022, p. 710). You relate to these findings on multiple levels. For example, a number of stories narrated by participants noted how "the disabled

academic pushes themselves to achieve the norm of the ideal worker by extending the hours of work and working more intensely within their standard hours. Participants managed their lack of capacity to meet this norm – or their fears around this – by pushing themselves, often beyond capacity” (Humphrys et al., 2022, p. 707).

As you were concerned about making yourself employable, you took on teaching, even though you knew it would be difficult. Your body became so run-down from the strain of hearing that you were constantly beset by colds and flu, but you were too exhausted to think your way out of the problem and too busy to rest properly. All you could do was write to the next deadline, prepare the next class, try to sleep as much as possible, take cold and flu pills and strain with your whole body to listen to your students. Your coughing kept your partner awake at night and you spent most weekends in bed in recovery. Eventually, one of your colds resulted in an ear infection that ruptured the membrane in your ear with some hearing, leaving you completely deaf for a month. You realised that something had to change. The only adjustment you could make was to take a pay cut and reduce your hours, to give your body more time to heal from the sickness and strain.

By law, employers are required to make adjustments that accommodate their disabled employees, but as Murphy has written in her *Overland* essay “Reasonable Adjustments”, this is by no means a given:

After dedicating years of scholarship to workplace accessibility, in 2015 David Baldridge from the College of Business at Oregon State University summed up all the available research: “Simply put, people with disabilities appear to face a straightforward yet troubling question, ‘if I ask for a needed accommodation, will I be better or worse off?’” This question, I realise, has become so innate, so reflexive, that I can’t even imagine what it would be like to not have to calculate risk. My fear feels corporeal, so full of consequence. (2019)

Part of the pleasure of connecting with other deaf writers is reading how they validate your experiences and make you realise you are not alone. You, too, have been frightened of asking for accommodation for your disability, and some of your chronic anxiety about your role stems from your research into the relationship between institutions and disability, as you wrote in your hybrid memoir about Maud Praed, *Hearing Maud*. Maud was born approximately one hundred years before you, in 1875. Her mother was the famous expatriate Australian novelist Rosa Praed, who discovered Maud was deaf just before the family moved to London. Maud was born at a time when eugenics, as promoted by Charles Darwin’s cousin Francis Galton, endorsed the belief that deaf people could be assimilated into hearing populations by encouraging them to interact, marry and procreate with hearing people. Alexander Graham Bell, as well as inventing the telephone, was head of the Eugenics Section of the American Breeders Association. Bell, whose wife and mother were deaf, believed that deafness could be bred out of the population. In 1883, he published *Memoir Upon the Formation of a Deaf Variety of the Human Race*, in which he suggested that the science behind the selective breeding of animals could be applied to humans, producing “modifications or varieties of men” (1883, p. 3). This was necessary because “the intermarriage of congenital deaf-mutes through a number of successive generations should result in a formation of a deaf variety of the human race” (p. 4). Bell thought that sign language should be discouraged because it enabled

communication between deaf people who might otherwise fall in love and have deaf children. By contrast, oralism – teaching deaf people to lipread and speak – encouraged deaf people to mix with and marry hearing people, thereby minimising the risk of congenital deafness. However, as H-Dirksen L. Bauman, a scholar at Gallaudet University, points out, fewer than four per cent of deaf children are born to one or more deaf parents (2008, p. 11).

Maud was assimilated into the hearing world and sent to a school that taught her to lipread and speak. For someone with no hearing, this is a debilitating mode of communication – you have some hearing, and lipreading is constant, hard work. Like you, Maud wrote many letters to her family to communicate because talking was hard. People would laugh at her if she got her words wrong. When she was a young woman, her parents separated, and then her mother Rosa met Nancy Harward, an aspiring writer and medium. Nancy moved in six weeks later and became Rosa's lifelong companion. Maud, feeling resentful, went to stay with her father. However, a year later, he died suddenly of a cerebral haemorrhage. Maud, already destabilised by the rupture in her family, whom she depended upon intimately, had a breakdown. Her mother, not knowing what to do and preferring to spend her time with Nancy, placed Maud in an asylum. Maud stayed in the institution for 39 years, outliving her entire family (White, 2019).

You know that one of the reasons you work so hard is because of a lifelong, ingrained fear of being cast-out for your disability, as Maud was. Your curriculum vitae is an insurance document. So why do you stay in a place that forces you to confirm to able-bodied notions of productivity at a huge cost to your health and wellbeing? Aside from the need for money and a terror of boredom, it's because a university is a place of learning and education. It's a place where you hope to change the narratives about disability.

Disability and creativity

Dr Rhonda Galbally AC, a commissioner in the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, reflected as the commission's findings were handed down after four-and-a-half years, "I have also been told that there is fear – fear that disability is contaminating, infecting the lives of the non-disabled community with sight, sound, and behaviour that might disturb and interfere with non-disabled lives" (Young, Edwards & Campanella, 2023). This fear has a long history, stretching back to the mid-19th century with the emergence of eugenics.

Francis Galton coined the term "eugenics" in 1883, in a footnote in *Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development*, where he suggested that "we greatly want a brief word to express the science of improving stock" (1883, p. 25). He proposed that, in a race, "there should be some ideal typical form from which the individual may deviate in all directions, but about which they chiefly cluster, and towards which their descendants will continue to cluster" (1883, p. 9), and believed that science could be used to speed up and make nature's processes of natural selection more efficient (Cryle & Stephens, 2017, p. 229). In *Essays in Eugenics*, Galton argued that "what Nature does blindly, slowly, and ruthlessly, men may do providentially, quickly and kindly" (1909, p. 42).

Such a proposition is ironic given the apogee of eugenics in Nazi Germany. As Henry Friedlander opens *The Origins of Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to the Final Solution*, “Nazi genocide did not take place in a vacuum” (2000, p. 1). The hierarchies which deemed some bodies more worthy than others contributed to the Nazis’ belief that there were inferior types of humans. Friedlander suggests that three groups in particular were targeted: disabled people, gypsies and Jewish people. The murder of disabled people, which would come to be known as Aktion T4, was preceded by enforced sterilisations from 1933, to ensure that the descendants of disabled people would not, to use Galton’s words, “cluster” (the term also evokes the earlier attempts to dissuade deaf people from reproducing via the introduction of oralism). The Nazis’ Aktion T4 program effected the deaths of more than 300,000 disabled people.

Eugenic thinking persists in contemporary culture, through genetic screening for conditions such as Down syndrome. It “continues to reinforce the underlying assumption that a life with disability is inherently less ‘worth living’ than a ‘normal one’” (Knittel, 2015, p. 22). Yet your experience shows you that disabled peoples’ lives are inherently creative, rather than something to be feared. Disabled people require lateral thinking and problem-solving skills to survive in a world that isn’t designed for them. Ravel’s “Concerto for the Left Hand” was commissioned in 1930 by the pianist Paul Wittgenstein, who lost his right arm during World War I. Disability scholar Michael Davidson observes in *Concerto for the Left Hand: Disability and the Defamiliar Body* (2008) that works for the left hand were often created to strengthen it, as this hand usually accompanied more complex material than the right. Less commonly known, he notes, is that these works were commissioned by pianists who had lost the use of one hand through repetitive stress disorders, arthritis or injury. In this sense, Ravel’s concerto “could be linked to the work of artists whose disability, far from limiting possibilities of design or performance, liberates and changes the terms for composition” (Davidson, 2008, p. 4).

This is what deafness did for you. It led you to writing, and not just any writing, but one that traverses the disciplines of fiction and creative non-fiction, of scholarly and public writing. It liberated your sense of form and structure, leading to the hybrid mixture of biography, memoir, literary criticism and history which formed *Hearing Maud*.

You are not alone in the way that your disability shapes your style. Deaf writer Patricia Carlon published 14 crime novels. Her deafness did not become known until the end of her life, as she communicated with her publishers via letter, refused interviews and did not disclose her impairment. Deafness shaped Carlon’s choice of genre. Fiona Murphy notes that secretiveness and deafness have strong associations, particularly as some deaf people can hide their deafness and “pass” as hearing. When she was young, Murphy hid her deafness for as long as she could. Desperate not to give herself away, she hid the “fierce mental focus” needed for lipreading and attentiveness “behind a soft, neutral expression” (Murphy, 2021, p. 29). As she progressed through school, her “fear of being found out intensified” (p. 30). Given these associations, you are not surprised to find that a number of Carlon’s crime fiction novels revolve around secrets and silence. For example, the protagonist of *The Whispering Wall* (1969) has been immobilised through a stroke and cannot communicate her tenants’ plans to kill her. The effect is a sense of silent horror, where

the reader is locked in with the protagonist in a passive state, awaiting the direction of the author. It compels them to understand what it might be like to experience a stroke.

You identify with Murphy's fear. When you were her age, you wanted to blend in as well. After all, less than a century ago you might have been murdered for it. In later years, you, like Murphy, were no longer afraid to disclose your deafness, but because people forgot that you were disabled within minutes of telling them, you only bothered to mention it when you could no longer follow a conversation. Indeed, one of the reasons you wrote *Hearing Maud* was to educate readers on the nuances of deafness, particularly when it is invisible.

Education and literary activism

To educate readers about disability and draw attention to writers with disability in Australia, you also assembled the "Writing Disability in Australia" dataset in *AustLit* (2019), the Australian literature database. Readers can search the dataset according to disability or genre and find books that illustrate what it is like to inhabit the world in a radically different way. This project is important because, as you and Amanda Tink highlight, omitting references to disabilities such as deafness in Australian literary culture creates the impression that "writing is something disabled people can't do" (Tink & White, 2023).

You and Tink, both disabled literary critics, have identified that disability is massively disregarded in Australian literature. For example, Judith Wright (1915–2000), one of Australia's most loved poets, began to lose her hearing from otosclerosis in her twenties. This condition causes the three tiny bones in the inner ear to harden, which means they cannot transmit sound to the brain. Wright observed in a conversation recorded towards the end of her life, "I don't remember any interviews in which [my deafness has] been regarded as something that people ... wanted to know more about" (Rusden, 1990, p. 27). Thirty years later, you find that little has changed, even though the loss of her hearing affected Wright for 63 of her 85 years and, as she acknowledged in the same interview, deafness has "really reached into all the interstices of my life, it's been part of the conditions I live under" (Rusden, 1990, p. 21) and was a reason for her becoming a writer. It also reached into Wright's writing, shaping her style and themes. Silence, for example, is prevalent in her poetry, as is her awareness of the limits of language. Wright knew that meaning could easily break, because a person would only need to turn their head and she would not be able to lipread. She also knew that conversations, whether between humans or non-humans, occurred beyond her hearing, and that she could not access them. In addition, having lost one sense, Wright's perception of the world through her other senses was heightened, as becomes evident through the sensory detail in her poetry (White, 2020). Yet, despite the evidence that deafness shaped Wright's writing, out of some 540 entries of literary criticism in *Austlit*, only three refer to her deafness (White, 2021, p. 243). Of these entries, only one contemplates the impact of deafness on her writing in any depth.

One argument for studying Australian literature is that literary critics examine not just the style and content of works, but also the culture in which those works are created (Dale, 2020, p. 164). The lack of attention to disability, particularly by non-disabled scholars, is an indication of the more general disregard for disability in Australian culture. It is your hope that, by educating scholars

about the representations of disability in Australia's pages, you change the culture to become less fearful and derogatory, and more inclusive and appreciative.

It makes you sad, then, to witness the decline in the study of Australian literature in institutions over the past few decades. Where, in 1975, Bruce Bennett "claimed that 14 of Australia's 15 universities offered subjects in Australian literature", in 2020 "just over half of the 43 larger institutions offer subjects, only 17 consistently" (Dale, 2020, p. 167). Dale suggests that it is likely that "not many more students are studying Australian literature in 2020 as were doing so 45 years ago, notwithstanding that the number of students in Australian universities has increased some 20-fold since then". She further observes that "in the 21st century the centre of gravity in Australian literature has shifted decisively from consumption (reading) to writing (production)" (2020, p. 168).

You wonder if something is being lost in the attenuation of the study of Australian literature. Creative writing scholar Paul Dawson, in *Creative Writing and the New Humanities*, suggests that reading in the creative writing workshop is not dissimilar to the close reading undertaken through the analysis of texts in literary studies. However, rather than focusing on the discussion of "works of literature and their critical commentaries" (Dawson, 2005, p. 87), "'reading as a writer' operates by approaching the text as a series of artistic choices made by the author" (p. 115). You acknowledge that the close focus on the construction of a text, although critical to the development of one's craft as a writer, does not allow a great deal of room for analysing the circulation (or not) of that text in a culture.

Some scholars see these two elements – the analysis and production of literature – in opposition to one another. Two decades ago, Dawson referred to the "institutionalisation of the traditional rivalry or animosity between writers and critics" which "perpetuates an intellectual and theoretical division between the creative practice of writing and the scholarly or critical study of literature" (2005, p. 2). You see this as a pointless opposition and agree with creative writing scholar Kim Wilkins' observation that "creative writing and literary studies have much to offer each other. They are complementary disciplines that can 'rejuvenate and replenish one another' if they are taught side-by-side" (2009, p. 26). Your own experiences of learning about writing through literature, and of using writing to convey your ideas about literature in engaging ways, confirm this. You explain to your students that writers unconsciously absorb and express what is happening in a culture – look at the proliferation of Anthropocene fiction, for example – while literary critics diagnose what is happening in that culture through the analysis of those texts.

For you, a literary activist, the creation of writing and its analysis cannot be divorced from one another. You want to highlight how "we, as contemporary Australians, imagine ourselves, our ambivalent and contested history, our changing identities and our national or international futures" (Rooney, 2009, p. xxiv), particularly in relation to disability and its representation in Australian literature. At the same time, as a writer, you are committed to telling stories about your experience of disability and how it shapes your world. You are just not sure, as a deaf academic, how long you can stay in the neoliberal university to effect this.

Deaf space and time

Hansel Bauman, an architect at Gallaudet University, one of two universities for deaf people in the United States, asserts that “Deaf experiences offer a unique insight about disconnection and connection with others and with the physical environment that parallels – and in many ways foreshadows – society’s broader cycle of a lack and a desire for connection” (2014, p. 376). Bauman, in his design of spaces for deaf people at Gallaudet University, took notes on architectural conditions that enable deaf people to function well: conversation circles that allow clear sightlines so that everyone can see one another’s lips and hands; diffused light sources that minimise contrast and backlighting (which make it difficult to lipread); soft corners that allow deaf people to see who is coming, rather than banging into them because they can’t hear an approach.

Bauman draws on behaviour in deaf groups to demonstrate that a building can act as a third person – someone who looks out for and cares for deaf students. If deaf people are having a conversation, someone will look out for the traffic that they may not otherwise see because they are concentrating on people’s faces and hands (and you have fallen in the gutter before, because you were lipreading rather than watching where you were going). DeafSpace is, Bauman writes, “empathy translated into built form” (2014, p. 398).

You work now in a place that, although you had only visited once before you moved, is familiar to you because of your childhood of dry air and country towns. You miss the sound of whipbirds in the rainforest and you long for your partner, whom you had to leave behind, but you have a position that allows you to continue your work on creativity and disability, and to snatch pockets of time for writing. You have also won Australian Research Council funding for a project, “Finding Australia’s Disabled Authors”, to continue your research on disability in Australian literature. Through this funding, you will continue to educate readers about disabled writers in Australia and help emerging disabled writers learn their lineage.

You still recognise, however, that universities are hostile to people with disability. What is a demanding job for the average person is even more demanding for someone who is severely-to-profoundly deaf. As you cross the campus lawns, looking for snakes and the resident koala, you wonder what DeafSpace means for you, a partly deaf and partly hearing person who is constantly traversing worlds. Australia does not have the population to support a tertiary institution for deaf people, and as such you have to make do with what you have. The only aspect of your role that allows you to manage is the flexibility it offers in your working patterns.

As the expectations of academia are impossible to meet without burnout, you need “Deaf Time”, a term that you arrived at in a conversation with Fiona Murphy. It’s when you come home, take out your hearing aid and collapse on the sofa. It’s the time when you don’t have to listen to anyone; you just rest and be deaf, not hearing. Home is a place for Deaf Time and for restoration. In the wider context of disability, this is known as “crip time”. Unlike linear time, as denoted by a clock, crip time “moves beyond traditional markers that instantiate the social organisation of success” (Rodgers et al., 2023, p. 1485). It can mean slowness, for example, in terms of taking longer to do activities, or quickness, for those who are neurodiverse and have swift thought processes. In short,

“crip time is about flexible time” (Rodgers et al., 2023, p. 1485). The university, even as it extracts all the energy you need for hearing, does at least allow you the flexibility needed to restore yourself.

Once you have recovered from the strain of trying to fit your body into the university’s neoliberal architecture, you settle at the kitchen table to write. It’s a beautiful table, reconstructed from recycled messmate that was once a warehouse in Melbourne. Here, writing on your blank pad of paper on the wood’s swirling golden and black grain, you have the space and energy to write and create from your deaf self.

Perhaps this is the best you can hope for as a deaf academic: moving between stress and repair, between your belief in the value of studying Australian literature as well as the study of crafting words, and between the unyielding walls of the university and the comforting space of home. Perhaps innovation comes from the energy of movement, not from remaining housed in one particular location, building or discipline. For now, you are where you need to be: in a place that allows you to educate readers about disability in Australian literature, and to write stories that resist the stereotype of disability as a deficit, representing it instead as a condition of creativity and plenitude.

Notes

[1] It is sometimes customary use upper case “Deaf” to refer to those who use sign language and identify culturally with Deaf communities, and lower case “deaf” to describe deafness as a medical condition. In line with the argument in this paper, which is about moving between communities and disciplines, this paper uses the lower case “deaf”. This usage has been proposed by Kusters, et al. (2017), who challenge this late 20th century convention as it simplifies what is an increasingly complex set of deaf identities and language practices.

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