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Mentorship and the Australian poet laureateship: International models and national understandings

Abstract:

A cornerstone of the Australian federal government's 2023 National Cultural Policy, *Revive: A Place for Every Story and a Story for Every Place* – the first formal federal arts policy in Australia in more than a decade – has been the establishment of the office of a national poet laureate, whose objectives according to legislation are twofold: to “promote poetry,” and to “mentor up and coming poets” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023, p. 69). Across international iterations of poet laureateships, there is a common understanding of the role as a means by which national acknowledgment can be made of an individual's distinguished contributions over time, and that the individual poet will champion the cause of poetry. The role of mentorship for a poet laureate is less clear. This paper explores the Australian National Cultural Policy's novel framing of the poet laureate role as a form of mentorship by offering a comparative analysis of international laureateship models within the context of current mentorship theory and practice to consider how it might frame or expand notions of mentorship.

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Keywords:

Poet laureate, Australian poetry, mentorship, arts policy.

Introduction

In *Revive: A Place for Every Story, A Story for Every Place* (2023) – the first dedicated national cultural policy introduced in Australia in over a decade – Australia’s federal government announced that a set of initiatives focussed on the literary sector, including the founding of a new peak body, Writers Australia, and the establishment of a Poet Laureate for Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023, p. 103). Australia has long been an outlier among anglophone nations in not having a contemporary formal role for a poet laureate or a similar national appointment focussed on championing poetry: England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, the United States, Canada, South Africa and New Zealand all have commensurate positions, along with a host of other countries globally, including Serbia, the Netherlands, Mexico, Colombia, Chile, Nigeria, Iran, Germany, Jamaica, Ethiopia and Turkiye, which each have laureate-like roles for national poets. In the absence of formalised roles, many poets have also historically assumed the status of “unofficial” poets laureate around the world because of the centrality of their work in a nation’s literary culture – such as Rabindranath Tagore in India, Li Bai in China, Matsuo Bashō in Japan, Edwin Thumboo in Singapore and Robert Burns in Scotland – or served in precursor roles such as scops, bards, troubadours, minstrels, praise poets and court poets (Panecka, 2014, p. 4–5).

According to the *Revive* policy, the Australian poet laureate will be tasked with two key objectives: to “promote poetry”, and to “mentor up and coming poets” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023, p. 69). While poet laureateships are historically founded in the aggrandisement of state power – from the Holy Roman Empire, where laureates lent glory to the emperor and other powerful figures, to the English monarchy, whose early laureates celebrated the monarch and the empire (Flood, 2007, p. 6) – the role has evolved across centuries and cultures to take multifarious contemporary forms which are nonetheless founded on a common understanding that the role is a means by which national acknowledgment can be made of an individual’s distinguished contributions to poetry over time. In addition to according an individual poet a national honour, laureateships also charge the poet with championing the cause of poetry publicly, and broadening poetry’s appeal and readership for a set duration. The role of *mentorship* for a poet laureate is less clear; in many ways, the Australian National Cultural Policy is a novel means of framing and expanding the role of poet laureate as it is understood in international contexts, and therefore worth further consideration and exploration. In this article, we consider the national and international contexts for the Australian poet laureateship, benchmark the presence or absence of mentorship in international laureateships, map the existing mechanisms by which poets in Australia access forms of mentorship and consider the implications of this novel framing of the poet laureateship as a form of mentorship.

An Australian poet laureateship: National and international contexts

In an Australian context, the relationship between poets and the state is a relatively short one, with few historical precedents available to illuminate what form a laureateship might take. Only one poet in Australia’s history – the convict and extortionist Michael Massey Robinson – has been formally recognised by the Australian state and accorded the title of “poet laureate.” Robinson’s appointment under the leadership of Governor Lachlan Macquarie was short-lived

and ended ignominiously, and ultimately served more as evidence of his success in recruiting influential colonial figures to his cause through sycophancy than proof of poetic talent. At one point a practicing attorney in London, Robinson was initially sentenced to death in 1796 for defaming a London alderman, James Oldham, as a murderer in a poem, then attempting to blackmail Oldham into suppressing its publication (Clarke, 1967). Upon appeal, Robinson's sentence was commuted to transportation to Sydney for life, but through his careful ingratiation of himself with influential figures on his voyage to the antipodes, Robinson was granted conditional emancipation, then went on to commit an array of subsequent crimes including embezzlement, perjury and forgery of permits (Mackaness, 1946, p. 7–9). Imprisoned on Norfolk Island, Robinson was ultimately allowed to return to Sydney, where he fell into the favour of Macquarie, who made him Australia's first and only official poet laureate, granted him land, enabled him to practice law again and paid him for his services with cows. While there was no formalised description of the laureate position – and certainly no requirement to mentor other poets or spur interest in poetry in general – Robinson's contributions conformed to historical understandings of a laureate as a praise poet; his main output took the form of workmanlike and sycophantic commemorative odes on the birthdays of King George III and Queen Charlotte, which were published in the *Sydney Gazette*, before he lost the favour of Sir Thomas Brisbane and his laureateship came to an abrupt end.

Outside of this early failed experiment at a formalised poet laureateship, several poets over the course of Australian literary history have gained unofficial titles attesting to their de facto status as figures of national significance, including Les Murray, colloquially dubbed the “bush laureate” or the “Bard of Bunyah”; C. J. Dennis, whose bestselling volume *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* earned him the moniker the “Larrikin laureate”; and Henry Lawson, known colloquially as the “people's poet.” These affectionate epithets have generally been coined by the media or the poets' readers and have attained currency through repetition. Reflecting the centrality of localities, landscape and placemaking in Australian poetry, other poets yet have been broadly viewed as representative of, or speaking for, their regions: to offer a few recent examples, John Kinsella is widely recognised as a poet of the Western Australian wheatbelt, and Robert Adamson was renowned as a poet of the Hawkesbury River region. Inherent in these looser and more colloquial understandings of the term “laureate” is the idea of a popular voice representing a place and its people, and their values, concerns and mores. Less immediately prominent, though no less present in these vernacular understandings of poets laureate is the notion of a shared politics. Henry Lawson's reputation as the “people's poet” is inseparable not only from his personal experiences of impoverishment and hardship, but also reflective of his embrace of egalitarianism, his defence of the poor and his veneration of ideals of mateship and larrikinism. Likewise, the embrace of Murray as a “bush laureate” is closely linked with his championing of pastoral or “Boeotian” (Murray, 1992) ideals; the agricultural, farming communities and their values; and more broadly, his conservative personal politics and repudiation of the urban and cosmopolitan spheres. In short, these informal or de facto “laureateships” are reflective not only of the popularity and resonance of a poet's work, but their exemplification of popularly held social ideals and values, generally democratic and egalitarian in nature. The notion of mentorship is notably absent in these conceptions of a poet's function or social purpose.

This question of how poetic language might speak to commonly held Australian values was central to the only other major notable intersection of poetry and politics in Australian literary history, when then-prime minister John Howard invited Les Murray to co-author a contentious revised preamble to the Australian Constitution in 1999 (McKenna et. al., 2001). This episode might have been conceived of as a form of literary mentorship, in the form of advice and language supplied from a masterful poet to a bureaucratic edifice mindful it might not be capable of supplying the requisite poetry an alteration to the Constitution might call for. However, political expediency trumped Murray's intentions, and the poet ultimately abandoned the project out of dissatisfaction with the draft's final form, noting that his preamble "went into the political compromise machine and came out mush" (Lambert, 2003, p. 8). Howard sustained significant public and political opposition and criticism over his reworked draft, which was derided by his political peers as "thunking, clunking, unmemorizable, unsayable, lumpy porridge-like prose" (Evans, 1999), condemned roundly in the media, and ultimately defeated. As Helen Lambert argues, poetry and politics made uneasy bedfellows in the episode, opening up both Murray and Howard to criticism not only for the end result, but the appointment process of engagement and the expectations both parties brought to the endeavour:

The process was political long before Murray was hand-picked: no referendum was taken to decide between Australian poets, nor any between the many other writers and thinkers who might provide a legislative preamble. At the time, Murray recalled that an Opposition questioner enquired of the Prime Minister whether he might consider putting the preamble out to tender "among all Australian poets." ... It was clear that the poet was to be paid for his services to the government, not for his poetry. Indeed, as the process of drafting took shape it became clear that maintaining a separation between aesthetic concerns and political will would prove as difficult as delineating core values of a nation, in a nation that distrusts the very notion of core (p. 7).

Sitting at the intersection of poetry and politics, the recently-announced position of the Australian poet laureateship will operate in a similarly complex landscape, where poetry and politics risk mutual misunderstanding, not only in the narrow matter of the function of *mentorship* within a laureateship, but also in the broader functions of a laureate. The paucity of Australian precedents necessitates a consideration of international models to examine common and established understandings of a laureate's role, including the place, if any, for mentorship within the confines of a necessarily large and national position. In the following survey, we focus on contemporary understandings and iterations of laureateships rather than historical precursor roles. While diverse bardic or national roles for poets exist outside the anglophone world, the examples referred to here – chiefly laureateships or national poet roles in the USA, Canada, England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales and New Zealand – focus on the traditions which most closely conform to the Australian role as it has been envisaged in the *Revive* policy.

Internationally, the position descriptions for laureateships tend toward brevity, and none of the countries surveyed in this article mention mentorship within the laureate's designated duties, though some incorporate the idea of encouraging the writing of poetry through workshops or

other programs, and individual laureates may elect to undertake mentorship of others; many will likely already be engaged in this process due to their seniority within their fields. In England, where bardic traditions have existed in various iterations for thousands of years and where the laureateship used to be for the duration of a poet's life, the role still presently comes with no formal position description at all, and the laureate's activities – now limited to a ten-year appointment – are entirely discretionary. Nonetheless, the poet laureate role of England has evolved with the times; contemporary laureates tend on the whole not to see their role as one requiring commentary on the monarchy, though some poets – the present UK Poet Laureate, Simon Armitage (2019–2029), included – have seen fit to write poems for major national events such as Queen Elizabeth II's Platinum Jubilee, and her subsequent death. Recent laureates have tended to view the post as an opportunity to celebrate the work of their peers and generate opportunities for poets and poetry more generally, and to engage with poetry's readerships nationally and internationally (Motion, 2009). Poets laureate have commissioned anthologies of work by their peers, generated major public art projects including collaborations with environmental and mental health charities, as well as written poems commemorating major news events or responding to key environmental and social issues of the day. There is no requirement that English laureates partake in mentorship of emerging poets; however, Poet Laureate Simon Armitage has developed a national scheme that recruits twelve younger poets from primary and secondary schools across England to have the opportunity to take part in poetry workshops and masterclasses led by a team of mentor poets, who visit UK schools during Young Poets Week (Literacy Trust, 2025, n.d.); while the poet laureate himself is not one of the mentoring poets, his creation and oversight of this scheme offers a possible helpful interpretation in an Australian context for a future laureate to enable the mentorship of emerging and younger poets at scale.

Likewise, in the United States, the US Poet Laureate – appointed for a one- or two-year term, with the possibility of renewal – has few required duties and a succinct position description: “The work of the laureate is focused solely on championing poetry” (Library of Congress, n.d.). Laureates must also undertake a few key tasks: they must give a reading or presentation both to inaugurate and close their term. There is no requirement that poets participate in mentorship, and laureates have tended to focus instead on larger-scale projects aimed at engaging new readers and writers of poetry. Poet Laureate Robert Hass (1995–1997) – a distinguished environmental poet – sponsored Watershed, a conference on nature writing, during his laureateship. This initiative subsequently morphed into an ongoing not-for-profit organisation, River of Words, focussed on environmental literacy, which holds a free annual environmental poetry and art competition for children, as well as an array of other environmental activities, including creek clean-ups and restorations, student poetry clubs, oral history projects, school gardening initiatives and other forms of engagement (River of Words, 2026). Many US laureates' initiatives have been convened online, to capture the maximum number of readers: at the advent of widespread uptake of the internet, laureate Robert Pinsky (1997–2000) created an online *Favourite Poem Project* in 1997 that enabled Americans to recognise and discuss their favourite poems; in 2001, Billy Collins (2001–2003) followed on from this effort with his *Poetry 180* project, which focussed on engaging high school students with poetry by presenting them with a daily poem for each school day; subsequently, Ted Kooser (2004–2006) created

American Life in Poetry in 2005, a project that provided newspapers with a free weekly column highlighting the work of contemporary US poets, and in 2009, Kay Ryan (2008–2010) followed this with *Poetry for the Mind's Joy* to focus on poetry written by university students (Armenti, 2012). Other laureates have chosen to hold community workshops, such as Maxine Kumin (1981–1982) who offered poetry classes to US politicians or found novel ways to engage the general public. Tracy K. Smith (2017–2019) travelled the country, engaging in oral storytelling and conversation with rural communities including in New Mexico, Kentucky, Alaska, South Dakota and South Carolina, and gifting those communities a poetry anthology she edited to spark conversations about the value and power of poetry during her travels; Ada Limón (2022–2025) developed the *You Are Here* project which also resulted in an anthology of environmental poetry and the inscription of poems by celebrated poets into picnic tables at national parks including Saguaro, Mount Ranier and the Florida Everglades. Juan Felipe Herrera (2015–2017) invited Americans to contribute to a crowdsourced “epic” poem, *La Familia*, which spanned the duration of his laureateship. While these activities are not traditionally thought of as forms of mentorship, they can be interpreted broadly as mentoring the community at scale in acts of reading and writing poetry. Many of these laureates’ activities in commissioning and publishing their peers in anthologies and on other platforms may be viewed as forms of “active sponsorship” (Barner-Kowollik, 2020, pp. 2–4) – a term increasingly preferred over “mentorship” in research contexts – given that they entail not only offering advice or guidance but generating material opportunities for their fellow poets by sharing the laureate platform.

Additionally, from the years 1998 to 2017, the US Poet Laureate was also charged with selecting and awarding the Witter Bynner Fellowships, awards of \$10,000, granted to one or two other American poets who the Laureate wished to recognise for their achievement and promise. While not required to mentor the Wittner Bynner Fellows, US Laureates were required to introduce the fellows and their poetry at a public event, suggesting that a form of mutual support and recognition for the work of other poets was central to the position, if not mentorship. Like England’s, the US Poet Laureateship is complemented not only with a national Young People’s Poet Laureate – awarded to a poet who has “a career devoted to writing exceptional poetry for young readers while working to instil a lifelong love of poetry among developing readers” (Poetry Foundation, n.d.) – but also state-based and in some cases city-based laureates to enable greater engagement with aspiring, emerging and younger poets at scale.

Other international poet laureateships in the anglophone world have slightly more fulsome position descriptions, but none mentions or requires mentorship. The Ireland Chair of Poetry, while not a laureateship in name, comes closest: established in the wake of Seamus Heaney being named the Nobel Laureate for Literature to recognise “a poet of honour and distinction,” the Ireland Chair upholds many similar objectives to a conventional laureateship while being largely focussed on academic environments (Ireland Chair, n.d.). The Ireland Chair serves for a period of three years and spends a period of eight weeks per year at three universities across Ireland – Queen’s University Belfast, Trinity College Dublin, and University College Dublin – with their duties including giving an annual lecture, alongside delivering informal workshops or readings, working with students, and performing outreach work. In Scotland, the Makar is

charged across a three-year, non-renewable term with the imperatives to “create new work and promote poetry throughout the country” (Scottish Poetry Library, n.d.); the Makar’s required duties include producing poems in response to national events, encouraging “the reading and writing of poetry particularly by young people” – which arguably might be seen as a form of mentorship, albeit in very general terms – and reading his or her poems publicly and commenting on poetry and the arts (Varty, 2022, pp. 25–26). The Wales National Poet’s duties are similar in scope, entailing writing commissioned poems to mark occasions, taking part in public events and literary festivals, “taking a leading role in literary projects and campaigns” (Llenyddiaeth Cymru 2026) and running workshops across a three-year term. The Canadian and New Zealand laureateships share similar position descriptions as both roles are embedded within libraries: the Canadian Parliamentary Poet Laureate’s two-year term encourages the poet laureate to write poetry, especially for use in parliament, to sponsor poetry readings, and to advise the Parliamentary Library on the library’s collection; the New Zealand Poet Laureate is likewise not required to mentor but across their three-year term must participate in poetry-related activities, create new work with a view to publishing a new volume of poems, contribute to a Poet Laureate blog and archive agreed material into the National Library’s collections.

While all these international laureateships and cognate positions share many common areas of focus and some points of difference, mentorship is not specified in any of the international duties for poets laureate, raising an array of questions for the Australian poet laureate, whose specified duties, according to *Revive*, entail mentoring “up and coming poets” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023, p. 69) in some as-yet-unspecified capacity. Even in a country with a relatively small population such as Australia’s, the demand for mentorship from a poet laureate will radically outstrip any laureate’s individual capacity to meet it, irrespective of whether a narrow interpretation of “up and coming poets” is taken (meaning, poets aspiring to professional careers in the field), or a broader one (encompassing any hobbyists, community practitioners and interested amateurs). Likewise, as this article explores later, various existing positions and organisations in Australia are already engaged with the mentorship of aspiring and emerging poets (both young and older), so it is important to map and explore both the nature of poetic mentorship as it is currently understood and practiced, and the existing pathways to poetic mentorship in Australia.

Conceptions of poetic mentorship

Aside from the complex logistical questions about mentoring on a national scale, the requirement for the Australian poet laureate to mentor up and coming poets may otherwise initially appear to be relatively straightforward. As Lee (2016) notes, informal mentoring relationships between writers have existed since at least the 18th century, when a marketplace for writing first emerged, while mentorship’s currency in business, psychology and education means that “[e]veryone knows (or thinks they know) what a ‘mentor’ is” (p. 1). In the Australian publishing sector, formalised mentorship – first piloted by the Australian Society of Authors (ASA) in 1995 – has continued to be a “remarkably popular” practice (Krauth & Baranay, 2002). The Australia Council for the Arts’s guidebook for arts mentors, mentees and arts organisations (Australia Council for the Arts and AltusQ, 2016) defines mentoring simply as “a partnership between a more experienced person (the mentor) and someone less

experienced (the mentee), to foster personal and professional growth” (p. 3). However, as will be explored below, poetry is a specialised area of the literary field with unique structural conditions to creativity (Webb & Carroll, 2017, p. 6). Before considering how the Australian laureate might interpret the imperative to mentor on a national scale, further investigation of the practice of poetic mentorship is necessary.

This task is made difficult by the “strange” absence (Lee, 2016, p. 1) of scholarship about mentoring in literary studies, which is compounded by a scarcity of research examining mentorship in relation to the “more precarious and less formalised world of creative careers” (Taylor & Luckman, 2024, p. 253). While there is considerable scholarship on the question of aesthetic influence in poetry stretching back to Bloom’s foundational work *The Anxiety of Influence* (1997), and a vast body of instructional literature on how to write and read poetry as a form authored mostly by poets, there is little academic scholarship on the practice and theory of poetic mentorship. The accounts that exist are mostly poets’ reflections on particular mentoring relationships and writerly friendships (Greenberg & Zucker, 2008; Liontas & Parker, 2025; Smith, 2023; and Jaussen, 2015); literary analyses of poetic coteries, schools and networks and the cultural and social dynamics between poets (Dewey & Rifkin, 2013; Craig, 2007); or pedagogical explorations of mentorship in the context of teaching environments, especially within primary and secondary schools (Certo, 2018).

In this absence, certain dominant theories and stories of mentorship have come to overdetermine our understanding and expectations of its practice. Many mentorship theories derive from corporate or governance fields, emphasising progress within professional hierarchies and structures, while recent research on arts mentoring is predominantly instrumental, focusing “largely on the practical benefits that mentors can offer to mentees” (Taylor & Luckman, 2024, p. 254). These perceived benefits include constructive feedback on work in progress, time management advice, gate-opening to professional networks – particularly for writers who have been geographically or culturally excluded from industry – and modelling resilience (see, for example, Hope et al., 2020, Bacon, 2016, Haugesevje et al., 2021; and Ruprai & Janmohamed, 2019). Within the literary field, Surkan and McGill (2018) argue that the institutionalisation of mentorship as a cornerstone of creative writing’s postwar entry into the American academy during the “program era” (McGurl, 2009) has put into cultural circulation a powerful body of stories or repeatedly rehearsed “lore” about literary mentorship “that is liable to influence people’s notions of how literary culture operates, who has power and authority in it, how success is achieved, what forms mentorship should take, and what to expect of such relationships” (Surkan & McGill, 2018, p. 1). American writing programs established as “paradigmatic” (p. 1) a “Telemachan” (p. 7) model of literary mentorship that is hierarchical, dyadic, individualist, in which a charismatic mentor, *in loco parentis*, uses their influence to facilitate the mentee’s transition from academia into a career in the publishing industry.

However, it is also important to recognise that literary mentorship practices are not static or uniform but dynamic. Within academia, the last decades have seen the emergence of a more self-reflexive body of theory in creative writing around the pedagogy of higher degree supervision, which explores mutual knowledge creation by the supervisor (who is usually also

an established writer) and student, peer-to-peer learning, and mentor-mentee lived experience. (see, for example, Whitelock et al., 2008; Kroll & Finlayson, 2012; Batty & Sinclair, 2014; Bacon, 2016; and Ellison et al., 2025). While lamenting that the overemphasis in the American academy on dyadic mentorship ignores or diminishes the significance of other relationships of care, Surkan and McGill also identify as a “notable counter-example” (2018, p. 14) Syracuse University faculty member Arthur Flowers’s approach to mentoring African American writers. For Flowers, best practice mentoring is a long-game (Liontas & Parker, 2015, p. 243) that is not defined by the success of individual writer-mentees but a “collective project” of “liberation” and of “trying to keep the culture, the tribal soul, healthy” (p. 242).

Among the formalised mentorships offered by arts organisations and publishers in Australia, there has also been a distinct shift away from the ASA’s “foundational” model (Krauth & Baranay, 2002) – in which a “senior” writer gives feedback on a manuscript-in-progress – towards more “hybrid” practices (Falconer, 2026) in which one-on-one guidance from an established mentor is often only one element among a suite of supports designed to build mentee resilience and strong communities of practice. Literary mentorship may be delivered to small groups – a practice that was already in place by 1996 (Krauth & Baranay, 2002) – and most programs now incorporate elements such as financial aid, internship opportunities, facilitated networking, peer-to-peer feedback, industry Q&As and even masterclasses (Falconer, 2026). Recent surveys of the British (Cateridge et al., 2024) and Norwegian (Haugsevje et al., 2024) creative industries support these observations: the authors report that professionalised and structured programs often include additional activities such as “networking and skills development” (Haugsevje et al., 2024, p. 2), peer, reverse, reciprocal, or virtual mentoring (Cateridge et al., 2024, p. 178), or community building “beyond the dyad” (Cateridge et al., 2024, p. 187). Shaffeeullah (2020) identifies community arts practice – in which professional artists collaborate with communities to recover old and create new cultural practices – as another form of “radical mentorship” (p. 29) that offers a particularly transformative pathway to equity for artists and communities that have been historically disenfranchised from cultural sectors.

These changes suggest that a process is underway of reconfiguring and adapting traditional literary mentorship’s understanding of authors’ professional growth to better equip them for a precarious twenty-first century industry in which few achieve a living from their writing alone. Authorship has long presented definitional challenges to professional categorisation compared to work within “institutionalized universes” (Lahire & Wells, 2010, p. 443), despite the arts bureaucracy beginning around the turn of the century to categorise authors into career stages as “emerging,” “mid-career” or “established.” In a post-COVID Australian industry in which 70% of authors rely on other work or partners’ incomes to support their writing (Crosby et al., 2022), it may make increasingly less sense to view the end goal of a successful mentorship as the commercial publication of a book, or even facilitating an author’s progression from one career stage to the next. This tentative conclusion appears to be supported by Taylor and Luckman’s research into Australian visual arts mentoring, which finds that its chief value may lie in entangled “affective labour,” with mentorship acting as a “site in which creative experience, including its ‘felt’ aspects, can be affirmed and reinforced, assisting mentees to

take up new ‘affective positions’ around creativity and carry these forward” (2024, p. 254). Similarly, Haugsevje et al. (2024) argue for holistic approaches to mentoring people in “hybrid” careers that build social resilience and social capital.

Tensions around questions of professionalisation are especially acute for poets, who – unless they are also academics – “would be foolish to think that the practice of poetry could support them financially” (Craig, 2007, p. 37)._Examinations of poetic practice in Australia emphasise poetry’s outsider relation to the already precarious literary marketplace. Mostly published by boutique, small, micro and independent or university presses, poetry is not viewed as a commercial prospect by most major publishing houses, except in the rarest cases._The loss of concerted public platforms for poetry in Australia, such as the national broadcaster’s now-defunct dedicated radio program *Poetica*, Webb and Carroll (2017) argue, means that poetry “tends to operate as a pop-up, disrupting the space of café or bookshop or bar, and then disappearing again” (p. 5). As Etherington notes, this leads to Australian poetry operating as a relatively closed system where traditional boundaries between publishers, critics, readers and writers collapse:

poets themselves constitute just about every aspect of their world: they are the writers, the publishers, the editors, the event organisers, the critics, the audiences, the anthologists, the scholars, and sometimes even the printers and distributors (Etherington, 2015).

Indyk (2015) makes the positive case that this insularity makes poets less reliant on professional gatekeepers such as bookshops, literary agents, publishers or managers, and more likely to play a decisive role in shaping their own culture. By contrast, Kindley (2017) has observed in the context of American poetry, across the twentieth century, as literary culture evolved away from old models of aristocratic patronage and towards universities and writing programs, power and influence have become increasingly concentrated in poet-critics operating within the context of academia and tertiary writing programs, whose influence tends to shape the careers of other poets and become key determinants of taste and literary value. Within this relatively closed circuit, poets not only develop coteries, circles and schools of practice, but also tend to operate in deeply responsive and referential ways, consolidating the cultural power of their peers through criticism, citation, homage and other forms of intertextual referencing. Lauterbach (1996) critiques the homogenising and limiting role of these power networks:

The aspiring young poet begins to write in such a way as to invite certain critical attention, to “fit” her work into one or another critical category. That is the main function of being identified with a group or school, to draw critical attention that individual poets, not affiliated with a movement or group, cannot easily attract... Those not so identified are left out, often understandably embittered or confused, as the idea of an individual iconoclastic poet gives way to collaborative and tribal identities. Thus the marginalised world of poetry begins to imitate other identity formulations which increasingly govern contemporary academic, cultural and political life (p.152).

However, although poetry is a “prosumptive” sector of publishing (Stinson, 2016), often merging production and consumption, this does not mean that poetry is an invisible or dying practice. Far from it. With thousands of poems published annually in addition to anthologies

and single-author volumes and the popularity of slam and performance poetry rising in recent years, alongside the emergence of social media phenomena such as Instapoetry, Australian poetry publishing is “positively burgeoning” (Holland-Batt, 2017, p. 82). Indeed, McCooley (2005) suggests that poetry’s “nonconforming agency” – its uncertain professional status, its operation outside commercial imperatives and its enrolment in debates about poetry and poets’ public role in national culture – is key to its robustness. He makes the case that poetry’s role in public culture is “to personify marginality, to remain as a trace of the premodern that can be neither rejected nor incorporated.” Poetry is strengthened, rather than weakened, by its status of being, in the public national discourse, in “continuous revival”.

Given that “the career of poetry falls short of usual understandings of what a profession is or should be” (Craig, 2007, p. 36) and is more commonly framed as a vocation than a career, one might be tempted to imagine that mentorship is less practiced within this literary field than others. However, the literature suggests that poets are the most likely writers to depend upon helpful professional networks and mentors. Webb and Carroll’s (2017) study of creativity and community in Australian poetry applied Collins’s (1987) work on philosophers, suggesting that poets similarly rely on contemporary connections, especially of the master-pupil sort, to achieve eminence. The poets Webb and Carroll surveyed rejected the “master-pupil” label, preferring to use terms like “elder-initiate,” “apprenticeships,” or “mentor relationships,” noting that “relationships in poetry are less about dominance and more about philanthropy and generosity” (p. 8). Craig (2007) also found that the more successful a poet is, the more they are expected to mentor:

Far from being a static accomplishment, being a poet is a continual commitment and achievement based in social interactions. In fields of poetry production, cultural, symbolic, and social capital trump economic success as poets compete for legitimacy, recognition, and ongoing reputation. The work of the poet includes not only writing poetry but also contributing to the field of poetry as a whole by participating in mundane practices that re-create the field as a dynamic space of formative tension and struggles (p. 51).

In addition to the histories of informal and formal mentorship above, it is important to note the crucial place texts themselves hold as “mentors” within this marginal and highly intertextual field of practice, and the common understanding among poets of the pivotal role that reading poetry plays in any poetic apprenticeship. This form of mentorship can take place in the absence of any direct relationship between poet and mentor. Webb and Carroll (2017) observed that the poets they surveyed also understood themselves as part of a wider community “that extends back to Sappho and the Psalmists, and looks forward to poetic practices not yet imagined” (p. 5). Many felt these reading relationships to be deeply personal, and to have had a “profound effect” and influence on their practice (p. 11): they had developed direction, voice, and evaluative judgment from their imagined relationships of affinity with poets they had never met. Relatedly, most poetic mentorships where there is a personal relationship between mentor and mentee also entail as a central feature of the relationship significant encouragement, guidance and recommendations about the reading of poetry; guidance in the practice of reading

and interpreting poetry and the introduction to poetic canons and communities, are central to most poets' conceptions of mentorship.

Drawing on the history above, it is tempting to suggest that poetic practice has to some extent preempted recent developments in academic and policy-led mentorship, which already takes multifarious existing forms in the poetic field. However, the emergence of multiple poetic practices (such as performance and slam poetry), with their own distinct communities, aesthetics, and networks of influence largely outside of those supported by small publishers, also complicates the notions of eminence, core literary values, and chains of influence that are envisaged by many theories about the aims and work of mentors. Some poets express ambivalence about the value of "mentorship" as a concept in relation to poetry and reject it as a term, including US poet Eileen Myles, who has said, "Mentorship is totally hierarchical as a reigning reality. It suggests that someone has the keys to the kingdom. I think your own horizontal friendships are way more important and really are the future" (Nelson, 2014). Other poets, particularly those who have felt excluded from authorial canons, may also feel a deep sense of kinship and affection for trailblazers with whom they share similar cultural experience, who have "guided" them by serving as inspirational models by creating openings in a field they have felt was previously closed to them. This, too, is a form of mentorship through modelling: as American Poet Laureate Rita Dove (1993–1995) observed of her own appointment, "You can't underestimate the impact that just seeing someone in a position as this can do for all sorts of people...for a black woman to represent all of the poets in the country" (Dixon-Williams, 1995). Any mentorship practices that are developed by Australian laureates must navigate a lively but fragmented and dynamic field in which consensus about the value or authority of mentors is by no means guaranteed.

Conclusion: Current and future mentorship practices in Australia

While the very idea of poetic mentorship may be complicated by the lack of clear professional pathways in poetry and the barriers to pursuing a poetic "career" in the conventional sense, it is nonetheless also a formalised offering from a variety of poetic and literary organisations in Australia, ranging from cohort-based models to one-on-one editorial feedback and manuscript development. Organisations such as Red Room Poetry, Sweatshop, *Kill Your Darlings* and the ASA offer a range of either cohort-based or individual fellowships, mentorships, and user-pay options for poets that incorporate elements of career development. Some organisations have focussed on underserved cohorts: the Arts Queensland XYZ Prize for Innovation in Spoken Word award comes with career development opportunities for performance poets; Bankstown Poetry Slam offers mentorship for school students through its REAL TALK program; and the South Coast Writers Centre has offered a mentorship program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers that includes poetry. Until recently, in addition to its user-pay mentorship offerings, Australian Poetry offered a fellowship specifically for older emerging poets, in recognition of the overwhelming orientation of mentorship opportunities towards younger poets. In the context of the Australian laureateship's requirement to "mentor up and coming poets," this serves as an important reminder that emerging poets exist at all ages and that there are many pathways to becoming a poet. In addition to these programs, many literary awards incorporate mentorship in the form of manuscript development, including the Arts Queensland

Thomas Shapcott Poetry Prize and the Oodgeroo Noonuccal Prize for Indigenous Poetry. State-based writers' centres including Writing NSW and Writers SA also offer mentorship, some in the form of user-pay services, and some individual poets also offer direct user-pay mentorship services too. Aspiring, hobbyist and emerging poets may also access forms of mentorship through paid writing programs and workshops offered through writing centres, or through organisations such as the Faber Writing Academy, which ostensibly offers writing courses, but in practice incidentally offers elements of professional development and career mentorship too. In addition to these industry pathways to mentorship, many debut poets in Australia write their first volumes as the creative component of an academic research thesis, where they receive supervisory mentorship and support from an academic mentor that generally entails not only advice on their manuscript but also career support and mentorship into a writing career too, as well as expert support and guidance in the research field that informs their creative practice.

These existing formalised mentorship programs and opportunities in Australia take varying approaches to the cohorts they seek to serve and operate under differing business models, but fundamentally they are united by being aimed at poets who already see themselves *as* poets, no matter the career stage or age. This raises an obvious possible provocation for Australian poet laureates of the future: the question of how to *create* new “up and coming” poets – or, in other words, how to mentor readers and writers *into* poetry. Such a focus on initiation into the artform is aligned with contemporary international understandings of a laureate's role as a champion of poetry to new audiences, and a conduit to democratisation of a form that can erstwhile be perceived as elitist, difficult, or closed to newcomers. As Australian poetry continues to diversify and arts organisations seek to empower geographically, linguistically and culturally diverse communities from within, forms of mentorship in the future may have an enhanced focus on identifying emerging leaders with deep connections to their area and community and writing in languages other than English. As Middleton (2005) argues, poetry's readerships can be diffuse and require development, mentorship and initiation “to be brought into being as economies of affect, memory and interpretation” (xv), and as most poets begin as dedicated readers of poetry, a focus on mentoring poets both into the reading and writing of poetry would not only offer a pathway for emerging and “up and coming” poets, but also generate new interpretive communities and readerships for existing Australian poets.

Like their international compatriots, contemporary Australian poets have diverse understandings and practices of mentoring, ranging from the formation of more traditional intensive dyadic relationships of the master-apprentice kind to the development of literary friendships, communities and circles of practice; the initiation into reading and writing practices; inspirational modelling; to active sponsorship of other poets through writing commissions; and democratic crowd-sourced and community engagement activities that invite all comers to consider themselves poets or poetry readers. In other words, poetic mentorship is as various as the poets who practice it, even among those who do not think of these activities as mentorship or would prefer alternative nomenclature. However, in its broadest and most encompassing definition, mentorship *can* be aligned with international understandings of the functions of a poet laureate, particularly when it is viewed democratically as a form of initiation into the reading and writing of poetry. Likewise, the mentorship needs of poets and poetry

readers of all kinds are as various as poetry's audiences: young writers or children being introduced to poetry for the first time have different needs to poets who are on their way to the publication of their first books, and mid-career poets will have different needs again. Additionally, each successive laureate will naturally bring their own experiences to bear on how they interpret this requirement of the role, and will also almost certainly already bring existing mentoring relationships and practices to the position, too.

The Australian poet laureateship may be the first of its kind in the anglophone world to explicitly frame a laureate's role as a "mentor," but as we have established, poet laureates internationally are already engaged in highly diverse and effective forms of mentorship. As successive Australian poet laureates approach the position and harness its potential, they will no doubt continuously expand and redefine mentorship further. Approached with a sense of amplitude and possibility, and alert to the vital charge to encourage future generations of poetry's readers and writers, mentorship has a rightful place with the laureate's purview.

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