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Anxieties of obsolescence and transformation: digital technology in contemporary Australian literary fiction

Abstract:

When addressing the rise of mass media, literary authors of the late twentieth century often expressed an 'anxiety of obsolescence' (Fitzpatrick 2006) in their work: an acute awareness of being potentially displaced. This often led them to adopt an attitude of defiance in the face of technological change.

Many contemporary literary authors adopt a similar oppositional attitude towards the rise and encroachment of networked technology, but retreating to the increasingly peripheral territory of 'pure' print-based literature is no longer easy. Digital technology presents not only the possibility of displacement but also that of transformation, with its spread threatening to fundamentally alter the practice of reading and writing.

Possibly in response to the radical upheavals faced by Australian literary culture due to the rise of electronic publishing since 2012, recent works by three established Australian authors – *Amnesia* by Peter Carey (2014), the Wisdom Tree novella sequence by Nick Earls (2016), and *The Life to Come* by Michelle de Kretser (2017) – examine the ways in which networked technologies challenge or complicate the role, identity and practice of the contemporary print-oriented writer. The telling connection is that they present the relationship between print-based writers and networked technology as being transformative rather than simply oppositional, demonstrating the emergence of complex and nuanced responses to the rise of networked technology in Australian literature.

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Technology, literature, and anxiety

Authors of both literary and speculative fiction have offered frequent and diverse considerations of the problems and possibilities of emergent technology, from the explorations of its impact on cognition found in postmodern 'systems' novels to the modes of posthumanism interrogated in 1980s cyberpunk fiction (Shakelford 2015). However, when explicitly considering the impact that technologies of mass communication – from television to the personal computer to the internet – may have on the field of literature and the act of writing itself, literary authors often express attitudes of scepticism, fear, and resistance (Russo 2005). From the middle of the twentieth century onwards these technologies have been perceived as challenging or threatening the cultural relevance of print literature. In his essay 'The Literature of Exhaustion', John Barth identifies the fear of displacement as the 'apocalyptic ambience' that informs the most innovative and original writing of the period. Barth argues that the 'felt ultimacy' of literature in the twentieth century encourages both reflection and resistance from writers who perceive their cultural position to be marginal and eroding (1984: 67). This can be seen in the late twentieth century work of novelists like Don DeLillo, where the mass reproduction and circulation of images is consistently presented as playing a key role in the erosion of genuine meaning and personal and communal identity (Knight 2016), or where increased connectedness through technology results in disconnection at a human level (Russo 2005). Kathleen Fitzpatrick argues that an 'anxiety of obsolescence' underpins twentieth century literature, identifying it as the undercurrent of dread at the possibility of literary fiction and authors being either forgotten within a predominantly visual media culture, or absorbed into it through commodification. The threatened sphere of print literature is presented (by either direct contrast or implication) as a peripheral space within which more genuine forms of meaning and insight are created. Privileging it in this way can make marginalisation desirable for 'serious' writers, allowing a self-protective retreat from the influence of mass media (Fitzpatrick 2006).

In the twenty-first century, the increasing prevalence of networked digital technology can be understood as presenting a similar threat to print-oriented literary culture, working to further diminish its audience and cultural centrality (Russo 2005). However, the rise of this technology has also led to major shifts in the practices of reading and writing. The responsive, interactive nature of online writing complicates the traditionally distant and hierarchical relationship between writer and reader (Allan 2017), and the form and functionality of networked media encourages constant movement between disparate material, diminishing the capacity for concentrated engagement with linear texts (Kovac & van der Weel 2018; Carr 2010). Furthermore, the fluid, interactive nature of online writing allows readers more opportunities to appropriate, remix, and creatively reinvent the work of literary authors (Murray 2018). Outside of the traditional paradigm of print literature, these changes have resulted in innovative literary engagements with the non-hierarchical nature of digital text. Experimental online storytelling often deliberately invites reader interaction via its hypertextual medium, and various literary authors have, at times, utilised the unique affordances of social media and other emergent digital writing platforms to deliver new narratives (Shakelford 2015). Furthermore, the rise of this technology presents renewed

opportunities for literary forms that were considered to be unprofitable in print culture, poetry in particular (Fleming-May & Green 2015).

Despite the potential for change embodied by this technology, the perceived role, practice, and audience of a literary writer are almost exclusively informed by the standards of print culture. Digital technology and the internet are often framed as the 'enemy' of serious writers, in much the same way as television and film were previously, with many literary authors expressing (in either interviews or their work) fear of being erased by the new technology and disdain for the audience that can be reached through it (O'Hagen 2017). The limitations of these approaches are touched upon by Graeme Harper (2014) in *The Future for Creative Writing*. Harper observes that writerly responses to the rise of networked technology often focus on how it changes the economic arrangements of literary publishing, threatening (or in some cases reviving) the viability of traditional, monetised creative writing outputs like novels, poems, or short stories. Harper notes that creative writing as a practice and an educational discipline will have to adapt to the prevalence of this new technology. This means not only embracing some of the new mediums and forms that the technology gives rise to, but also reconsidering how good or successful practice as a writer is understood or conceived.

The anxiety of obsolescence that literary writers confront in the twenty-first century is therefore different to that experienced in the late twentieth century. In the face of the increasing dominance of visual mass media, twentieth-century authors were able to withdraw to the domain of 'pure' print culture, which was constructed as more meaningful and genuine despite, or perhaps because of, its increasingly peripheral status (Fitzpatrick 2006). Digital technology, by contrast, does not just draw away a portion of a previously engaged audience but also changes our relationship with text. In this sense, it presents the possibility of not only marginalisation but also infection, altering the practice of reading and writing, and thus demanding a new understanding of the role, identity, and significance of the twenty-first century literary author.

Digital technology and contemporary Australian literature

In Australia there has been some justified unease about the impact of networked technology on local literary culture. Commentators have noted that diminishing time for 'serious' reading in a digital age can potentially have a damaging effect on sales of Australian literature (Dale 2012), and that the increasingly important role of online sales and eBooks has been perceived as shifting the balance away from brick and mortar stores in ways that make local authors less visible (Zwar et al. 2015). Furthermore, one of the most significant upheavals in Australian bookselling, the collapse of REDgroup, has been frequently attributed to an inability to compete with online shopfronts (Lim 2011). At the same time, others have noted that networked technology may have positive effects on Australian literature by encouraging greater diversity and making underrepresented literary forms more viable (Earls 2016). Beyond this focus on publishing and circulation, Simone Murray's recent study *The Digital Literary Sphere* argues that digital writing platforms are becoming increasingly important to the

formation of reading communities and the performance of literary authorship (Murray 2018).

Against the backdrop of these changes, *Amnesia* by Peter Carey (2014), the Wisdom Tree novella sequence by Nick Earls (2016), and *The Life to Come* by Michelle de Kretser (2017) explore ways that digital technology may complicate, alter, or threaten the nature and perceived importance of professional writing identities. This development is notable, as while meta and self-reflective fiction frequently explores the formation and construction of writing identities, relatively few works consider the ways in which digital technology may shape or shift them. Furthermore, as these authors are not themselves 'digital natives' (Olin-Scheller and Wikstrom 2010: 42) and reached their current levels of success and status as mid-to-late career Australian novelists within a predominately print-oriented literary culture, their engagements with this theme provide useful insights into how print culture understandings of literary authorship and writerly identity are challenged or complicated by the emergence of digital/networked technology. These novels depart from the template established by the late twentieth century portrayal and perception of mass-media technologies in literary fiction, in that they do not allow for a simplistic or elitist withdrawal from the influence of digital technology and culture. These novels explore how a fear of obsolescence and 'felt ultimacy' persists in twenty-first century creative writing practice, while acknowledging that the relationship between digital technology and literary practice is not just oppositional, but also transformative. The relative smallness and precariousness of Australian literature relative to that of the United States and other countries might arguably make the need for these kinds of engagements from established authors more pressing, for both the Australian literary culture and marketplace are changing rapidly due to digital developments (Coronel 2012).

Peter Carey's *Amnesia*

Carey's *Amnesia* (2014) takes the most overt and direct approach to the challenge that digital technology presents to modes of print culture authorship. Carey's protagonist, Felix Moore, is a formerly significant journalist and novelist now fading into irrelevance. As a defiant product of print culture, Moore at least initially frames his lack of knowledge and ability concerning the internet and computers as a high-minded retreat from the polluting influence of digital culture, akin to the overt embrace of peripheral identities by literary authors identified by Fitzpatrick (2006). Furthermore, Moore's decline at the outset of the novel is attributed to both the openness of digital media, where anyone can write and publish and find an audience, and the restrictions of defamation and libel laws, which see him forced to destroy the remaining copies of his latest published book in *Amnesia's* opening pages. This premise emphasises the constrictive nature of print in contrast to emerging digital expression and discourse. Writers like Moore are constrained by the old rules surrounding accountability and identity, whereas the digital realm offers the potential for both freedom and chaos.

This potential is embodied in the novel's inciting incident, where an Australian hacker, Gaby Ballieux, releases a virus that opens cells in a number of Australian and United States prisons. Gaby turns out to be the child of Moore's old university friends, and is

threatened with extradition to face cyberterrorism charges in the United States. Moore is commissioned to write a biography of Gaby that will garner public attention and sympathy.

Due to his disdain for technology, Moore is initially doubtful of his own ability to understand and write Gaby's story, but he experiences a breakthrough upon meeting her for the first time and discovering that she is a reader. He 'thought, dear Jesus Christ, she reads books. I'm saved' (Carey 2014: 133). The realisation that there is some continuity between Gaby's life and the print culture that Moore values prompts a shift in the second part of the novel, where he imaginatively explores her childhood, upbringing and introduction to computers and hacking subcultures. With the switch to a third-person perspective in the second half of the novel, Moore is presented as being successful in establishing what we are told is a relatable and sympathetic depiction of Gaby's trajectory. Because 'she reads books' he is able to connect her seemingly impersonal and disembodied fixations with digital technology to a sense of humanity. Furthermore, in his writing of her narrative he is able to link her seemingly very contemporary anti-American online activism to aspects of Australian history: the Battle of Brisbane, the downfall of the Whitlam government, and political and artistic cliques in 1970s Melbourne.

The success of this trajectory in the novel itself is debatable, but it is presented as a reassertion of the value of the professional print culture writer. While the completed book is not published in a conventional sense (its scanned pages are converted into a pdf and distributed via download), it attracts a host of readers and succeeds in connecting past and contemporary movements into a comprehendible history, putting a human, empathic face on a digital narrative.

One of the aims of *Amnesia* is to reaffirm the role of conventional print writers in a digital age, and, in doing so, it appears initially to feed into many common anxieties about the internet and networked technology. Niall Lucy (2000) has argued that new technologies are often simultaneously threatening and alluring because they have an intimation of the future about them, presenting possibilities that we cannot anticipate or control. According to Lucy, media that engages with the dangers of new technology often presents it as escaping human control and erasing or overwriting past histories and cultural practices. In *Future Without a Past: The Humanities in a Technological Society*, John Paul Russo expresses this fear directly, arguing that 'autonomy' is a distinct characteristic of technology as a paradigm (2005: 29). The 'amnesia' of Carey's title refers to Moore's initial alignment with this view – his fear of being swept aside and erased – but also to what he perceives as the more general lack of interest in history in Australia, and an inability or unwillingness to connect the past and the present. After overcoming his resistance, Moore's reception and retelling of Gaby's online history and activism ultimately provides him with a space to rediscover lost Australian narratives. His engagement with digital history and culture reinvigorates him as a writer, rather than tarnishing or distracting him, as he had previously feared.

The final movements of the novel engage with the common fear identified by Lucy and expressed by Russo, with Moore losing control over his own creation to some extent, as his downloadable book is used to distribute an online virus – but this unexpected

development is not presented as invalidating what he has accomplished. In the late twentieth century works of writers such as Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon, losing control to technology is typically characterised as a dispersal of individual selfhood, or as succumbing to a kind of catatonia (Fitzgerald 2006). In *Amnesia*, however, Moore is made to serve – unwittingly – the interests of Gaby's hacking collective and the program that they have developed, but he is still able to retain and even validate his identity as a writer through the work he creates. This movement in Carey's novel suggests that while authors cannot resist the unpredictable directions and developments of networked technology, engagement with it will not necessarily result in erasure, obsolescence, or thraldom. As Joseph Tabbi argued shortly after the launch and widespread adoption of the internet:

> New technological achievements do not have to mean the forceful displacement of old media; their recombination is at least as likely, as the pressure of new media is sometimes necessary to push the old toward the higher complexity of a new evolutionary level. (1997)

Moore's ultimate success in the novel can be taken as a successful response to this challenge, asserting the continued necessity of traditional writing identities in an increasingly digital world.

Nick Earls' Wisdom Tree

Where *Amnesia* questions but ultimately reaffirms the need for print-oriented writers, Nick Earls' Wisdom Tree sequence of novellas examines the possibility of their obsolescence. However, where the late twentieth century authors studied by Fitzpatrick cast this obsolescence in a wholly negative light, the Wisdom Tree novellas explore some of the ways in which the function or role of the literary author might still persist or manifest itself through engagements with networked technology, even if the identity or occupation is no longer sustainable.

The Wisdom Tree consists of five novellas connected through references to characters, settings, objects, and artwork, as well as recurrent themes surrounding family, anxiety, and disconnection. The third novella in the sequence, *Vancouver,* explicitly explores questions of writerly identity, and it is telling that it alone is set in the past while the other novellas take place in the present. *Vancouver* is narrated by a recently published novelist, Paul, and deals with his brief reunion with an old family friend, Knut Knutson, an author of micro-fiction. The events of the novella take place in 2001, in the immediate wake of 9/11 and on the cusp of the digital revolution, where the conventional print-based writing lives of the narrator and Knut already seem to be under threat.

This exploration of writerly identity is bracketed by the other novellas, which feature various forms of digital technology playing subtle but consistently important roles in the lives of their characters. Earls plays with some of the conventional anxieties that surround digital devices – with a celebrity who immediately switches from a genuine conversation to glib, shallow performance when a digital camera is produced in the first novella, *Gotham*; a four year-old child with an insular fixation on his iPad in the second

novella, *Venice*, and a teenage boy on a constant hunt for free WiFi in the final novella, *NoHo*. When coupled with what we learn about Paul's and Knut's later careers (that Paul never achieves literary success is established in *Gotham*, while Knut is described as being long out of print by the events of the fourth novella, *Juneau*), this suggests that conventional print culture forms of writerly identity have diminishing relevance in a contemporary digital landscape. From this perspective, the novella sequence presents this movement as the kind of 'technofear' identified by Lucy, with the contemporary focus on networked technology erasing or supplanting the relatively recent past depicted in *Vancouver*.

However, Earls also recognises the potential that digital and networked devices offer for genuine moments of connection and profundity, as opposed to just isolation, triviality, and erasure. The same digital camera in *Gotham* is used at the end of the novella to capture and enjoy a powerful and unaffected moment; the iPad in *Venice* also becomes the focus for a musical discovery that links the child with the history and passions of his uncle, and the teenager's search for WiFi in *NoHo* is revealed to be not just a retreat from an unsatisfying reality, but an attempt to locate family, knowledge, and fixed points of meaning. The literary lives and preoccupations depicted in *Vancouver* are not necessarily presented as being more valuable or authentic than the contemporary narratives that bracket them, as Earls acknowledges that digital technology can be used to create its own meaning, value, and historical sensibilities.

Similarly, while the contemporary narratives in the Wisdom Tree reveal the eventual failure or deflation of the literary lives or ambitions of Paul and Knut in *Vancouver*, the themes and preoccupations that they grapple with as writers persist. Knut's only novel is resurrected from obscurity in *Juneau* via an Amazon search on an iPhone; it is quickly connected with a deep history of location and family. While Paul fails as a novelist, the themes that he explores in his work – particularly his Gatsbyesque fixation on the pull of the past – manifest in the contemporary lives of the protagonists of other novellas, as they search, link, connect, and orient themselves through the use of digital technology.

In *Amnesia*, the contemporary role and relevance of the print culture writer is repeatedly questioned, but ultimately the character of Felix Moore emerges as something akin to an aging gunslinger in a late period Western: a man whose skills appear no longer to have a place in the modern world, but who manages to reassert their value by being the only one capable of rescuing the damsel-in-distress. By contrast, Earls' work does not assert the continued need for the print-culture ideal of a writer in order to create continuity with the past and genuine memory, but suggests this capacity can also be found in the digital technology that threatens to eclipse conventional writerly identity.

Most techno-utopian perspectives on the obsolescence of labour posit that it will only be non-creative or 'miserable' forms of occupation that will become subject to automation (Atanasoski & Vora 2015). The idea of technology taking on functions associated with creative practice has generally been treated with dread in fiction, such as the development of a writing machine that reduces letters to numbers signalling the end of literature in John Barth's *LETTERS* (1979), or as a way of reasserting the value of humanism, where the example of 'human-like' A.I. pulls us back from the brink of

posthumanism in popular science fiction (Fitzpatrick 2002). Over the course of the Wisdom Tree, however, Earls subtly examines how outcomes and processes typically associated with individual human creativity – particularly the creation or discovery of meaning – may become absorbed into the functions of digital devices and systems, without presenting this as either the annihilation or reassertion of traditional literary values and methods of sense-making. This is demonstrated through the contrast between the forms of sense-making and historical awareness associated with print culture in the middle novella, and those that build out of digital technology in the novellas that bracket it. Paul's and Knut's writings, thoughts, and approaches to memory in *Vancouver* are depicted as focused, consistent, and structured. The connections made in the other novellas are sudden and epiphanic. They emerge from the fluidity of digital culture, the rapid intermingling of numerous spheres and histories, and sometimes appear to result less from conscious human agency and introspection than from the algorithmic adherences of artificial programs – the movement that Russo identifies as the 'subordination' of the human to the technological (2005: 30). Russo argues that the autonomous characteristic of emergent technology works to devalue the 'literary language' that connects us to the past (35), but Earls explores the ways in which it may help us to create new histories out of unexpected associations. Digital technology does not threaten to erase the past in the Wisdom Tree, but it does change our relationship to it; it requires, at least some extent, new modes of thought, association, and expression. The themes, values, and preoccupations that inform the literary lives depicted in *Vancouver* do not vanish, but re-emerge in other ways and in other media elsewhere in the sequence, detached from the ideal of the print culture creative writer.

Another significant difference between Carey's and Earls' work is the emphasis and importance that they give to the imperilled status of literary fiction and conventional writerly identity in a digital world. In *Amnesia,* the focus on Moore's uncertainties and tribulations makes the status and role of print writers a central question in the narrative. While the novel ultimately concludes with a reaffirmation of the importance and skills of writers like Moore, in this regard it arguably offers a similar understanding of the 'anxiety of obsolescence' that is identified by Fitzpatrick in late twentieth century fiction. In the novels Fitzpatrick examines, the potential erosion or erasure of print literary culture is often presented as being of primary or singular importance. Its loss or absence – and the corresponding loss of conventional writerly identities – is generally characterised as resulting in silence, meaninglessness, entropy, the end of genuine interiority, and individuality and/or relationships (Fitzpatrick 2006). In the Wisdom Tree, however, Earls examines the marginalisation of print-based literary authors alongside a range of other professional and personal identities that are also being eroded by technological, economic, and material conditions. As well as the creative writers in *Vancouver*, Earls also turns his attention in the other novellas to journalists, students, actors, engineers, historians, and managers whose roles and skillsets are questioned, threatened, or challenged in an increasingly digital environment. The events of these intersecting narratives require characters to adopt different viewpoints and mindsets, and to find reward and insight in unexpected connections. This perhaps mirrors the flexibility that is allowed and increasingly demanded by the digital landscape, and it stands in contrast to the ambitions and outlooks of Paul and Knut in *Vancouver*, which may appear fixed and static by comparison. Where *Amnesia* ultimately attempts to

make a case for the continued relevance of a print culture ideal of writerly identity in an increasingly digital, networked world, the novellas of the Wisdom Tree suggest that we may need to move beyond it, in order to appreciate new forms of meaning and memory.

Michelle de Kretser's *The Life to Come*

While Carey explores the ways in which print-based conceptions of writerly identity might persist in a digital landscape, and Earls considers how, after marginalisation or obsolescence, some of the functions and preoccupations of literary writers/culture might be fulfilled through the technology itself, Michelle de Kretser (2017) examines the use of networked technology in literary practice in *The Life to Come*. One of the principal writer characters in de Kretser's novel uses this technology constantly, both as a component of her professional practice and as a means of articulating and performing her writerly identity. This narrative element of *The Life to Come* concedes that the writerly identity projected into an online space may be heavily curated, disingenuous, or artificial, but ultimately questions whether this is any different from the manipulation and exploitation of reality that goes into the creation of print literature.

The Life to Come consists of five largely self-contained narratives, each featuring a different protagonist, but linked by recurring characters and elements. Like Carey's *Amnesia*, a writer is a point of focus in the novel, with the novelist Pippa Reynolds being the only character to appear in all five sections. We are introduced to Pippa as a young aspiring writer in the opening section of the novel 'The Fictive Self', told from the perspective of George Meshaw, her former English tutor and flatmate. George is also a novelist and his career serves as a point of contrast to Pippa's. Pippa is characterised as an author of 'mid-list' fiction, where George becomes acclaimed as an author of 'intelligent' and 'serious' literary fiction. The work and trajectory of both authors are subjects for satire. While Pippa claims to write in a spirit of total honesty, her works are presented as being slight and trivial, and often exploit the lives and experiences of others. On the other hand, George's 'intellectual' novels garner critical acclaim but not widespread popularity, being more focused on exploring the mechanisms and devices of fiction than on providing pleasure. One of the traits used to signal George's 'seriousness' as a literary writer is his general aversion to technology. He has no social media presence and, in his practice, imposes a strict division between the literary and the technological/digital, preferring to write his fiction by hand, spurred by 'an instinct that mingled superstition and veneration' (de Kretser 2017: 12). In this sense, he exemplifies the attitude towards technology described by Fitzpatrick, holding himself and (literary) print culture apart from its perceived corruption and banality. Pippa, however, as an aspirant mid-list author, is immersed in contemporary digital technology, both by choice and professional necessity. As James Ley writes in the *Sydney Review of Books*: 'He is the kind of serious author who disdains publicity and shuns social media; she carefully curates her online persona, styling herself as a supporter of other writers and all good causes' (2017).

While Pippa's use of networked technology is not necessarily depicted in a positive light, de Kretser's awareness of the difference in the status and treatment of writers like George and Pippa means that she avoids characterising the relationship between

literature and networked technology as simply oppositional. George's lofty removal from much of the action of the novel, and his ability to separate his literary pursuits from the taint of either technology or 'the world' more generally, can be taken as an indication of the relative privilege he is afforded as a male novelist who writes on 'intellectual' subject matters, as opposed to a female author whose fiction is based on experience. This kind of withdrawal is possible and even expected for George, whereas for Pippa engagement with both the world and the technology that drives it is vital to her work.

As Andreas Huyssen (1986: 53) argues, the desire to divide and protect 'high' art and culture from movements in mass culture that are identified as inauthentic or depraved tends to be implicitly gendered. 'High' cultural works, literary and artistic, remain the providence of a small elite, usually white and male, whereas works associated with mass culture are often feminised and devalued. The tendency to dismissively categorise the works of female novelists (like Pippa) writing on the subject of families and relationships as 'chick lit', while the works of male authors on similar topics are received as 'serious' literature, can be viewed as an example of this (Ryan 2010). In artistic movements it is easy to see how mass culture is implicitly feminised as a way of isolating it from the 'high' or elite forms. This is demonstrated in the sometimes arbitrary divide between literary and popular fiction (Fitzpatrick 2006), or the designation of television as a lesser 'feminine' medium than film (Petro 1986: 17), and with some of the forms of writing and communication that have emerged out of adoption of networked technology. Flegal and Roth have observed that forms of writing which have emerged out of the digital revolution (fan fiction in particular) are often viewed as being of a lower status, due in part to a predominantly female authorship and readership, as well as their placement within a feminised 'gift economy' of writing (2014: 1094). We can even see this trend perpetuated, to a degree, in the plot of Carey's *Amnesia*, where Moore takes the online and digital life of a young woman as his subject, but is able to retain his 'purity' as a (masculine) print author by avoiding the use of the technology itself. This tendency is robustly critiqued in *The Life to Come* as the careers of George and Pippa are repeatedly compared and contrasted. George's removal from both the world of the novel and from social media and other forms of digital culture can be taken as a willing embrace of isolation and solipsism. As Pippa notes, George's removal manifests itself in a refusal to support or promote the works of other living Australian writers. By contrast, her use of social media and blogging connects her to a literary community, both locally and internationally. Where George's status as an author is conferred through the print culture hierarchy of publishers and critics, Pippa's is developed and constructed out of the horizontal relationships that have become increasingly important to the performance of authorship in digital spaces (Murray 2018). Reciprocal online exchanges with other aspirant authors – links and sharing, likes, conversations and retweets – signal her affiliation and help to establish her 'brand' as an author. In this sense, the contrast between George's and Pippa's respective attitudes towards networked technology reveals another common (literary) gender stereotype. George's rejection of it signals a conventionally masculine isolation, while Pippa's embrace and use of it signals a traditionally feminine orientation towards a collective and community-focused spirit.

De Kretser is not necessarily suggesting that Pippa's trajectory constitutes a good or ideal literary practice – at the end of the novel both Pippa's and George's literary outputs are judged as equally disposable. George's work is not more honest or valuable due to his rejection of digital technology, and, tellingly, Pippa's print outputs do not reveal truer or more genuine thoughts and insights than her online writings. The self that Pippa constructs and presents online is carefully cultivated and curated – we see, for example, how her deeply ambivalent and complex feelings towards a peripheral acquaintance are flattened out and simplified in a social media expression of concern that she posts to generate likes and comments – but *The Life to Come* also emphasises the ways in which her prose fiction exploitatively distorts reality for her own benefit. Towards the end of the final section of the novel – 'Olly Faithful' – Pippa's neighbour Christabel reads and recognises a version of herself in Pippa's latest work, and is appalled to see how Pippa has misrepresented a key relationship. Interestingly, this moment has a parallel earlier in the novel when Celeste, a friend of Pippa in France, reads Pippa's blog post and recognises a description of a private moment they had shared. She is reduced to tears: 'Now something precious that had belonged to Celeste belonged to the world – to everyone and no one' (de Kretser 2017: 125).

Where *Amnesia* looks for the place of print-based writers in a digital world, and the Wisdom Tree sequence explores the ways in which their roles and skillsets might persist after their obsolescence, *The Life to Come* draws a blunt equivalence between print and digital cultures. George's rejection of the technology does not make his work any better, and Pippa's embrace of it does not make hers any worse. Shallowness, exploitation, and self-regard persist through these various forms of story-telling regardless of their medium.

Anxiety without obsolescence in contemporary Australian literature

These three works by well-established Australian authors help to demonstrate how literary anxieties around new and emergent forms of technology have become more complex and ambiguous in the wake of the digital revolution. The oppositional relationship between print culture writers and mass media explored in late twentieth-century literary fiction no longer applies as easily in the twenty-first, as the production and consumption of literary fiction is not only potentially marginalised by the spread of digital, networked technology, but also transformed by it. Writing on cybernetics and posthumanism, Katherine N. Hayles argues that it is not always necessary to perceive literary texts and technical innovations as being at odds with one another. Literature reveals, and sometimes works to shape, the 'complex cultural, social, and representational issues' associated with emergent technology (2008: 24).

Carey, Earls, and de Kretser have, in different ways, explored parallels and points of connection between digital technology and literary practice, and it is telling that this should come as developments in digital technology exert a profound impact on Australian literary and publishing cultures. The commonly expressed fear of losing control or agency to technology, or even of being replaced by it, is explored with complexity in the recent work of Carey and Earls. Carey's Felix Moore is able to fulfil his role as a print culture writer and assert its importance, even as he is instrumentally

used by, or subordinated to, the technology in order to spread a virus. Earls explores the danger of obsolescence that digital technology presents for literary writers (and a host of other professions), while also acknowledging that some aspects of the role of a print culture writer can be absorbed and accommodated by the technology itself. Michelle de Kretser's literary satire critiques the distinction that is drawn between 'serious' literary writing and apparently disposable online writing, noting the often gendered privilege that permits the rejection of digital spaces and communities. In their own way, each of these works demonstrates that the peripheral space embraced by twentieth-century literary writers in opposition to mass media technology cannot be so easily occupied in the twenty-first. As Donna Haraway writes in her seminal text on the relationship between humans and technology, 'A Cyborg Manifesto': 'The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment. We can be responsible for machines; *they* do not dominate or threaten us. We are responsible for boundaries; we are they' (1991: 180). Our use of digital networked technology is indisputably changing how we read and write, and how we define, produce, circulate, and respond to literary texts – while this may threaten the profession of a writer as it has been understood through print culture, it does not necessarily follow that the function and value of literature will be lost in this process. These recent works by Australian authors serve to demonstrate that the relationship between literature and emergent technology can no longer be easily characterised as one of simple opposition and self-protective marginalisation.

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