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Editorial

We need to talk about identity politics…

In an interview with Junot Diaz at The New York Public library in 2013, Toni Morrison said:

> I tell my students … when I begin a Creative Writing class I say I know you've heard all your life " write about what you know ". Well, I'm here to tell you, you don't know nothing. So write about something you don't know, think up something else. Write about a young Mexican woman working in a restaurant but can't speak English, write about a famous mistress in Paris who is down on her luck… (Morrison & Diaz 2013)

I sometimes play that clip to my students in writing classes when I want to challenge them to think outside their own lives and experiences, to break the 'writing rules' and take risks, when I want them to play and experiment and imagine themselves into the lives of people different to them. This is one of the pleasures of writing fiction, isn't it? And one of the rewards?

Toni Morrison taught Creative Writing at a number of universities in America including Princeton. The sentiment she expresses in this interview is one, I think, many Creative Writing teachers would share.

When I read the transcript of Lionel Shriver's keynote speech at the Brisbane Writers Festival, I remembered this Morrison interview and I went back to it. Lionel Shriver warns the audience of her intention to be controversial from the beginning: 'inviting a renowned iconoclast to speak about "community and belonging" is like expecting a great white shark to balance a beach ball on its nose,' she said (Shriver 2016).

Before she had finished her speech, writer Yasmin Abdel-Magied had walked out in disgust and the criticism had already hit social media. A few days later Abdel-Magied wrote in *The Guardian:*

> The kind of disrespect for others infused in Lionel Shriver's keynote is the same force that sees people vote for Pauline Hanson. It's the reason our First Peoples are still fighting for recognition, and it's the reason we continue to stomach offshore immigration prisons. It's the kind of attitude that lays the foundation for prejudice, for hate, for genocide. (Abdel-Magied 2016)

Many of us would agree with Lionel Shriver: 'trying to push the boundaries of the author's personal experience is part of a fiction writer's job…' But this is not why Yasmin Abdel-Magied and others were so angry. (In the days that followed numerous articles and blogs were published online and in newspapers in Australia and America.)

If Lionel Shriver had been in one of Morrison's Creative Writing classes (and it's unlikely as Morrison did not teach at Columbia where Shriver did her MFA) she might have heard other advice from Morrison about the challenges and responsibilities of writing. In her book, *Playing after dark*, which I think should be compulsory reading for Creative Writing students, Morrison argues that language is full of 'hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive "othering" of people and language' (Morrison 1992: xiv). She shares her own struggles 'to learn how to manoeuvre ways to free up the language from its racially informed and determined chains' (1992: xiv).

One of the problems for me with Shriver's speech was the way she performed appropriation on stage, with a kind of belligerent defiance. 'Cultural appropriation is a fad,' she said, and identity politics, threatening 'our right to write fiction at all'. There was a failure and unwillingness to recognize her own privilege; a failure to recognize that telling stories is a political act and that some groups are constantly misrepresented, and have very little access or opportunity to represent themselves.

When I read novels or stories in which Italian migrant women are represented as the cliché uneducated mother who loves to cook and manipulates her children, it makes me angry. Angry and sad for the way it stereotypes women like my mother and my aunts, and creates this one dimensional view of them. My mother left school in grade 5, she loved to cook, and she had ways of getting my brother and me to do things we did not want to do even as adults but she was also irreverent and funny, her favourite restaurant was Golden Leaf on a busy yum cha Sunday, she had an artist's sensibility and an eye for design and tentacles out across her community. She could bring a room of women together with a couple of phone calls… The Anglo-Australian prejudice against Italians especially in the 1950s and 60s made her angry but she countered it at home with stories of the rich Sicilian culture and history she wanted us to be proud of… It is sad to see representations of Italian migrant women reduced to simple stereotypes. Whoever the writer, this is lazy and clichéd writing. I want to yell at those writers – I want to throw their books across the room. I want to tell people not to read them. It is made worse by the fact that there are so few Italian migrant women writers countering these representations with their own voices.

Identity politics is the recognition that some groups (women, black people, the working class, people from particular ethnic groups, gay people) are marginalized and oppressed and that there are advantages to working together to fight oppression. There are criticisms of identity politics from those on both sides of the political spectrum and I agree that identity politics can sometimes be factionalizing and depoliticizing, can oversimplify accounts of power and ignore the complexities and intersectional nature of identity, but we don't have to look too far in Australia to see that identity is political.

As writers living in Australia, as for Shriver in the US, we are free to write what we want to write without threat to our lives or our freedoms. But being free to write does not exempt us from having responsibilities, from moral and ethical obligations. Some of us are more privileged, some stories are more likely to be published, some voices more likely to be heard. What should we do about this? On one side of the argument there are those who, for example, say that white writers should not write indigenous characters and stories, that this is a form of cultural appropriation, especially as it is more likely that white writers will get published, leaving less room for Indigenous writers to tell their own stories. On the other side some, like Marcia Langton (1993: 24), have argued that making the other invisible, not writing about them, is also problematic and a form of racism.

I don't think we should stop writing, or put restriction on who can write which stories, but also I don't think we should waste time and space mounting arrogant defenses for a freedom that is not at risk. As writers and as teachers of creative writing there are other ways we can make a difference: we can make sure we support programs that give writers from diverse backgrounds opportunities to write and be published, we can read widely ourselves and make sure that the readings we set for our students represent the diversity of Australian voices, we can speak up when we are invited onto writing panels that are all white or all male, and we can make sure our writing students 'develop the critical and analytical tools necessary to understand structural features of oppression and their own socialization within oppressive systems' (Adams & Bell 2016: 4). We can interrogate our own writing and our motives and makes sure we don't use our privilege to speak for or stereotype marginalised groups. We need to recognize, and teach our students to recognize, that writers are like everyone else and we can and do get it wrong sometimes. 'This kind of worklife means vigilance,' Adrienne Rich argues:

> for the old definition[s] … still lurk in me and I feel the pull of false choices wrenching me sometimes this way, sometimes that. But if we hope to mend the fragmentation of poetry from life, and for the sake of poetry itself, it's not enough to lie awake ... listening only to the sound of our own heartbeat in the dark. (Rich 1995: 53)

If we believe that fiction has the capacity to create empathy, to change the way we see the world, then we should care that some voices and stories are not being heard or that they are being represented in ways that perpetuate stereotypes and prejudices. It has been encouraging to read the diverse voices entering the debate and discussion following Shriver's speech and Abdel-Magied response. We need to acknowledge Australian literature is not diverse enough. We do need to talk about identity politics and cultural appropriation and what it means to be a writer in Australia today. We need to talk about privilege. These might be difficult conversations but they are important ones.

Dr Natalie Kon-yu and I will be editing a special issue of *TEXT* on identity politics and writing for publication next year. The call for papers will be out later this year.

--Enza Gandolfo

This issue

This issue of *TEXT* brings readers another chapter in the ongoing dance of research, personal reflection, imagination and critique that characterises the journal.

In the opening article of this issue Sophie Masson cuts to the core question for Creative Writing PhD candidates: why are you doing this? Dr Masson spoke with a small number of established writers and creative-writing academics about motivations for enrolling in PhDs. Masson asked whether the PhD scholarship has become a form of literary grant. Is the prospect of teaching creative writing in an academic institution attractive to writers whose income base in royalty payments has evaporated? Do some writers go to the PhD to pursue an intellectual inquiry? Does the PhD offer the experimental writer a safe and financially viable few years of practice? Is the PhD an opportunity to explore commercially unviable forms of writing – the novella, verse novel, long personal essay, family histories? From here Dr Masson explores with her

small group the question of what effect doing a PhD might have on a writer. These are questions every prospective student is interested in, and every past student must spend time reflecting upon. There is no doubt that the PhD can be a profound and unpredictable experience, and more than that, the experience will be inflected by the larger historical, intellectual, commercial and social context of the PhD. This 'snapshot' article will still be insightful and fascinating reading in years to come.

Enza Gandolfo begins her reflections on a long-standing writing project with reference to Gerry Turcotte's observation that 'humans, in the end, are ghosts' – an assertion that illuminates the haunting 2013 novel by Professor Andrew Cowan (UEA), *Worthless Men*, and Tracey McGuire's 2016 novel, *Rabbit Heart* (reviewed by Enza Gandolfo in this issue). The ghosts, for Gandolfo, are the thirty-five men who died in 1970 when Melbourne's Westgate Bridge collapsed while under construction. For Gandolfo, setting herself the task of producing a work of fiction based around this traumatic event, she has become aware of how those ghosts inhabit the present despite their lives and their deaths being now all but forgotten. Questions about heroism, what makes one working class, who owns a story in a work of fiction when it is based upon recent history, how a writer achieves authenticity. Taking up Linda Hutcheon's term 'historiographic metafiction', Gandolfo finds a path through the many issues that could entangle and strangle her fiction project.

Owen Bullock and Niloofar Fanaiyan argue that the concept of time is central to the experience of poetry. In this, they bring together two forms of thought and experience about which there is little agreement among philosophers, scientists or artists. Beginning with the proposition that there are two ways of understanding time – as a personal, psychological experience and as a cosmological phenomenon – they weave through the ideas of Augustine and Bergson to arrive, as nearly all those who contemplate time seem to do, at a slightly mysterious and even mystical sense of the momentary moment that is the present. They go on to discuss representations of time in a poem by the New Zealander Alistair Paterson, demonstrating that this poem moves us from relatively linear psychological time to the vast potentials of cosmological time. This article manages, superbly, to handle potentially ineffable and inchoate ideas about the present, the past, the future and the broad coherence of what we call time. It is no surprise that poetry makes some of these aspects of time perceptible in the present.

Rees Quilford returns to the question that Masson raised in the opening article, reviewing debates on the effects of encounters with critical theory when a writer undertakes a PhD in the academy. Do these encounters stimulate or inhibit the practising creative writer? For Quilford, this has been a dialogue (and sometimes a confrontation) between the poetic and the critical. It is fascinating to see here the evidence of the effects of Althusser, Bakhtin, Barthes, Cixous and Genette upon the practices and attitudes of one writer.

Danielle Clode and Christele Maizonniaux examine the original French text of *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* (1870) and find that Verne's story can be seen as part of 'a flow of knowledge' from journals, exploration narratives, scientific accounts, through popular travel and natural history publications to fictional stories – an ongoing process of adaptation that continues today into computer games, comics, graphic novels and movies. This meticulously researched contribution to global Verne studies is also an instructive account of how closely entwined fiction and nonfiction can be. More broadly it raises questions about fiction's indebtedness to reportage, the validity of claims to originality, sources of verisimilitude in fiction, where the line might be between plagiarism, paraphrase and reframing another's text within one's own. Clode

and Maizonniaux make an excellent case that despite the extravagances available in fiction, it still puts on show for its readers the limitations of any one writer's imagination.

An edition of *TEXT* is not complete without a ficto-critical experiment. Taking inspiration from Joana Russ's *Female Man* (1975) Lily Robert-Foley takes us on a parallel-text journey in French and English through parallel worlds in search of a work of Slash fiction based upon *Female Man*. Does 'L'auteure (née en 1937) aussi habite un de ces univers inventés dans le livre' translate 'In another one of these universes lives the author of *The Female Man* (deceased in 2011)', and if it does in what sense does it, and where between the worlds created in these languages/by these languages, is the reader? This work of speculation, imagination, what-ifness, linguistic and scientific playfulness, and category-busting analyses, seems to revive the ghost of Jules Verne most unexpectedly.

Stuart Bender and Mick Broderick remind us that creative writing is forming closer and closer ties to screen writing, screen studies, cinema studies and other visual forms of narrative-making. Firstly, sit back and watch the festival release version of their video. Bender and Broderick take a critical approach to accounts of mass school shooting in the United States. Their aim is to problematise the audience's view of the killers by focusing upon the lives and characters of survivors and victims.
The discussion of the performative nature of school mass shootings, in the light of film's historic fascination with guns, is riveting and alarming.

--Kevin Brophy

New special issues

This issue of *TEXT* includes three Special Issues: Number 35, *Writing Death and the Gothic*, edited by Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Donna Lee Brien; Number 36, *Shakespeare 400* edited by Dallas John Baker and Laurie Johnson; and, Number 37, *Crime Fiction: The Creative/Critical Nexus*, edited by Rachel Franks, Jesper Gulddal and Alistair Rolls.

Individually, these special issues, comprising 38 new academic and creative reefereed works, bring together a wide range of writing – scholarly, reflective and creative – around areas of significant interest to researchers, writers and readers: the topics of death, the Gothic, William Shakespeare, and crime writing. Each editorial team has penned significant introductions to these issues, so please ponder the issues they raise and enjoy the research and creativity displayed in the works these hard working and diligent guest editors have put together.

--Donna Lee Brien

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