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Introduction: Identity, politics and creative writing

This special issue of *TEXT* explores issues related to identity, politics and creative writing from the perspective of creative writers and creative writing academics. The question of who can speak and what stories can be told is central to any discussion of contemporary writing and writers, and to the literary industry including publishing, reviewing, awards and education.

At the 2016 Brisbane Writers Festival, Lionel Shriver created controversy with her speech on identity politics in which she argued that cultural appropriation was a fad and that identity politics threatened the freedom that is essential to writing fiction. Whose freedom to write was Lionel Shriver concerned about? Certainly not the freedom of writers of colour, or writers from marginalised communities, because these writers have fewer opportunities to write and to be published, and once published are less likely to be reviewed and awarded prizes. As Maxine Beneba Clarke pointed out during her keynote address at the opening of the Melbourne Writers Festival in 2016, there is a lack of diversity in Australian literature, and this renders many Australians and their stories invisible.

The problem with Shriver's speech and her later commentary around these issues is not that she is advocating for writers to have the freedom to write stories about characters whose lives are different from their own. The problem is her failure – is it blindness or unwillingness - to recognize her own privilege. Shriver failed to acknowledge that telling stories is a political act. She does not recognise that some groups are constantly misrepresented in narratives, and that these same people have had limited opportunity to represent themselves, to tell their own stories.

A study performed by researchers at Macquarie University in 2015 found that in Australia 65 per cent of literary fiction authors, 76 per cent of genre fiction writers and 87 per cent of children's authors in Australia are women, yet the figures from Stella Count for the same period shows that women's writing only commands 39% of reviews in Australia's largest publications. The Miles Franklin Literary Award has been awarded to women novelists 17 times, and has been won by male authors 41 times, and only two Indigenous writers have won the prize in its 58 year history. The Stella Prize, set up by women to counter the discrimination against women writers, has had its long and short lists scrutinized for not including enough diverse women writers, with Alexis Wright being the first Indigenous writer to win the Stella Prize in 2018.

These debates beg the questions: Is Australian literature diverse enough or is it still predominantly white, middle class, heterosexual and male? Does it matter? 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. And what can writers do about it? Should we do

anything? Should white writers steer away from writing Indigenous characters and stories? Should heterosexual writers write gay characters and stories? Should women only write about women? What is the role of writing academics and writing programs in this debate?

The articles in this special issue offer some ideas on where this bias comes from, how it is perpetuated and offers suggestions of how we can counter it. We see in these essays that creative writing courses are not benign; that as educators and researchers what we do within the academy shapes the literary landscape beyond academia. The work we tell our students is exemplary, the voices we place on our reading lists, the authors we devote our research time and effort to all act as a powerful reinforcement of literary excellence. They also reiterate whose voices should be the most prominent in our literary culture and in the case of marginalised writers, shapes what these historically non-canonical voices can say.

As Merlinda Bobis and Amelia Walker remind us it is not enough to stack our reading lists with writers who have long been deemed 'other', but we must also critically reflect on our teaching practices – we must think about how our syllabi encourages, or discourages (as the case may be) us to, in Bobis' words, 'meet the other.' Bobis tells the story of a creative reading-writing workshop that she piloted at the University of Wollongong in 2009 with three students responding the poem 'The Story I would Have Wanted To Tell you You Had I Met You Yesterday' by Philippine poet Lina Sagaral Reyes. In this workshop the students come towards Reyes, they spend time in his world, they have empathy for him, while remaining aware of their own positions both before and after the workshop.

In *Meeting Ms. Logos*, Walker discusses a narrative penned five years earlier, about teaching offshore in Singapore for an Australian university. She uses it to map her experience of coming-to-awareness of privilege. Walker's process highlights the importance of this kind of reflective work for all of us. Alayna Cole works with video games and she establishes categories that can be used to inspire the creation of diverse characters with nuanced identities, arguing that plot-lines about romantic love are overused in games which feature non-heterosexual characters. In creating games with characters who challenge heterosexist norms and the binary of gender identity, Cole is creating worlds in which marginalised characters can occupy the centre.

Through slices of memory, Nigel Krauth examines how politics and identity have been integral to his work as a writer and academic. From launching Helen Demidenko's *The Hand that Signed the Paper* and watching the hoax start to reveal itself at that same launch, to standing up to bullies with Tim Winton, to judging literary prizes, Krauth explores the ways in which politics and writing cannot always be separated from each other.

Tresa LeClerc uses her essay to argue about the importance of telling stories of those in our culture who have been censured, in this case refugee communities. LeClerc outlines her process, which includes interviews, for telling these stories ethically, and of trying to empower those who are constantly disempowered.

And in her essay, Natalie Kon-yu points to the impact of academic valorisation of certain texts in the community. For Kon-yu it is no accident that literary prizes go to writers who are primarily white and male, no coincidence that our review pages are stacked with the words of these same authors, that interviews, panels and university courses are dominated by them. This means that the work of writers from marginalised groups continue to be sidelined, and that authors writing from the margins have to work hard against existing tropes dictated by a conservative industry.

It seems that we are at a frightening cultural point in Australian history, where the language of the other is employed openly in political discourse. We have seen a renewal for calls to change the date of Australia Day so that it is less painful for our First Nations people, and the typical discrimination parading as patriotism in the push against this (entirely reasonable) request. It is evident in how the Australian government treats those looking for asylum, which has become enshrined in the brutality of our offshore detention policy, and in the wake of the Victorian state election we hear fearmongering over the idea of 'African gangs' when in fact it is white men who commit the majority of crimes in every state in this country. This cultural moment calls for us to be vigilant about the perceived borders of our country, and to recognise that the voices speaking from the centre are refusing to place themselves, even temporarily, in the position of those they are othering. In these times, then, it is critical to make sure our national literature is robust with voices from those that have been pushed to the peripheries of our community. In this issue, the authors probe ideas about voices and visibility, about who gets to speak and how. They question the ways in which academia and the literary industries in Australia have historically worked to silence certain voices and argue against this silencing. This special issue reminds us that as editors, writers and academics, we have certain privileges within these industries, and how we use these privileges has far-reaching consequences.