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In the Skin of the Other: Diversity and The Australian Publishing Industry

Abstract:

This essay is concerned with the lack of diversity in the Australian publishing industry, especially in relation to race and ethnicity. It traces the limitations I faced in creating and administering the 2016 Stella Diversity Survey and discusses my own fraught position in this role, given my racial and ethnic background as well as my privileged position within academia. Because of the lack of statistics on the race/ethnicity of writers and others working in the Australian publishing industry, the essay will draw on work that has been done in the US around issues of diversity within their publishing industry. While there are differences between the two countries some comparisons than can be made. This essay postulates that due to a lack of racial and ethnic diversity within the decision-making bodies in the Australian literary industry, canonical ideas about ‘great’ writing continue to be aligned with the work of white male writers. This leads to a situation in which writing by writers of colour must be deemed to be suitably exotic to be considered for publication, let alone be reviewed, win literary prizes or be included in other canon-forming processes. This continues to marginalise and exoticise writers of colour in Australia and leads to a lack of diversity within the Australian literary industry.

Biographical note:

Natalie Kon-yu is a Senior Lecturer at Victoria University and her critical and creative work has been published to nation and international acclaim. She is a commissioning editor of *Just between Us: Australian Writers Tell the Truth about Female Friendship* (2013) and *Mothers and Others: Why not all Women are Mothers and not all Mothers are the Same* (2015). In 2016, Natalie was the co-director of the Stella Diversity Count and she is currently researching gender bias and diversity in Australian literary culture.

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Creative Writing, diversity, The Stella Prize, The Australian Publishing Industry

Stella, Diversity and the Australian Publishing Industry

As part of my research sabbatical in 2016, I volunteered to work with The Stella Prize on their annual Stella Count. Established in 2013, The Stella Prize (the name under which the Stella Count sits) aims to redress the gender imbalance within the Australian literary industry. Named for Stella Miles Franklin, Stella is best known for The Stella Prize which is a \$50,000 award for the best book of fiction or non-fiction by an Australian woman writer during the previous year. Thus Stella tackles the problem of women and writing in two distinct ways. Through the count it examines and makes public how women are disadvantaged in the industry and through the prize it seeks to redress that disadvantage. This places Stella in tricky territory. For some Australian women writers, Stella may seem like both the problem and the solution: an organisation devoted to critiquing the industry (through The Stella Count), as well as a gatekeeper to that same industry (through The Stella Prize). This tension has become increasingly evident in the last few years. Like *VIDA: Women in the Literary Arts* in the US, Stella had concentrated its early counts on the male/female binary without paying attention to the ways in which white, heterosexual women writers were already privileged in comparison to female writers of colour and LGBTIQ female writers as well as gender queer or non-binary authors. And as in the US, this focus on gender exclusively began to anger women whom the industry defines not only by their gender, but also by their race or ethnicity. This played out publicly and privately; both on social media, but also in direct feedback that Stella received from writers of colour. Stella decided to undertake work on expanding their count to take into consideration the additional hurdles faced by women writers who are non-white, queer, gender diverse and differently abled.

In addition to the criticisms about The Stella Count, on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, and in private chat groups populated by writers of colour, women writers were increasingly voicing their frustration at the whiteness of The Stella Prize longlists up until 2017, and the fact that a woman writer of colour was yet to win the award. This placed The Stella Prize in the same territory as the Barbara Jefferis award (an Australian women-only prize), that is yet to be awarded to a woman writer of colour, and similarities can also be drawn with the UK based Women's Prize for Fiction, who only awarded their first prize to a writer of colour in the prize's ninth year. Through both the count and the prize, Stella, like many other organisations run primarily by white women, appeared to be primarily concerned with how women's work is valued compared to male authors, without considering the privileged position that white women have over women writers of colour in the Australian literary industry. This is a criticism that is commonly levelled at feminist organisations which have been established by white feminists, and as Kimberle Crenshaw has written 'ignoring differences *within* groups contributes to tensions *among* groups' (Crenshaw 1991: 1242). This has certainly been the case with The Stella Prize and the Stella Count. The Count, which had, up until 2015, focussed solely on gender, implies that all women's experiences of bias within the literary industry are the result of sexist discourse only. As Crenshaw writes, 'The failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of colour' (Crenshaw 1991: 1252) and this certainly seems to

be the experience of women writers of colour, who have felt excluded not only by the Stella Count, but also marginalised by The Stella Prize. The Stella prize was won by a woman of colour for the first time in 2018. I would hasten to add that as a prize, Stella is in its infancy, awarding the prize only seven times, and their judging panels have always included writers of colour. As well, Stella has performed much better than the Miles Franklin Literary Award in terms of rewarding writers of colour – the first non-white author to win the Miles Franklin was Kim Scott in 1999 – a full 32 years after the prize began. As Michelle Cahill has written:

Lucrative literary prizes are governed by a handful of adjudicators appointed from elite coteries who all too often reinforce the superior status of white readings. It is extremely rare that a culturally diverse writer or Aboriginal writer is recognised within one of the mainstream categories. (Cahill 2015)

Cahill raises the issue of how work gets judged within the Australian context, and suggests that judges are still using canonical measures of defining writers' work. That is, that all writers, regardless of race and cultural identity, are still being judged against a criteria which has deified the work of male writers over women, but also of white writers over writers of colour.

There are many reasons why the Stella Count concentrated on women as one group, rather than looking at the complexities of how women who are 'othered' by discourses of race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality and ability have been treated by the reviewing practices in Australia. Chief among them is the fact that gender is a lot less complicated to account for than some of these other cultural markers. By which, I mean that the author's name is usually a fairly good indicator of the author's gender (this of course is not always the case – particularly for non-cis or transgender authors). But when it comes to race, we encounter much more ethically fraught terrain. As Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young, write in their essay 'The Program Era and the Mainly White Room':

Racial data is hard to get ... We have been reluctant to collect our own data around race because we do not want to impose a racial identity on anyone. One cannot read bio notes and find a pronoun that easily indicates one's racial identification as one can do with gender. (Spahr and Young 2015)

The Subjective Researcher

There are natural synergies between the work that Stella does on exposing the gender bias in literary prizes and reviewing culture in Australia and the qualitative work I've done on literary prizes and women's writing throughout my career. When I approached Stella in 2016, they suggested that I could help them establish a Diversity Count. When I began working with Stella it became obvious, very quickly, that the real diversity issue that Stella was facing was around the intersection of race or ethnicity and gender. That is, the most criticism they had received had been from female writers of colour. In working with Stella, I became concerned that the reason that Stella had invited me to work on the Diversity Count, was because I am, a minority woman writer. That is, my ethnic or racial mix is non-white and as such I might be a more meaningful conduit to the other non-white writers who had been

feeling disenfranchised by the organisation. I want to be clear that this is *my own* assumption. It is not something which has been communicated to me by The Stella Prize, and it is not something I have sought clarification on either, as I wouldn't know how to begin having that particular conversation. Imposter syndrome is rife amongst academics, and so this kind of questioning is all too common for me. At the same time, I also felt inauthentic in my ability to speak on behalf of a non-white writing community, which was what my work with Stella frequently entailed. There are a number of reasons why. Firstly, I am very aware that I was communicating with female writers of colour on behalf of an organisation that was perceived to be run by white feminists, so I already felt partisan in my responsibilities. Secondly, my position as an academic also placed me at a remove from writers in this instance – I wasn't participating in the Stella Count as a woman writer, rather, I was participating as someone who wanted to study writers. And lastly, and most challenging for me, I am aware that I am privileged above certain categories of non-white writers. I am not an Indigenous writer, nor am I someone who is obviously 'black'. By that I mean my skin is not the most obvious indicator of my racial or ethnic background. I am very aware that my mixed-race, comprised of both European and Asian ancestry, as well as my position as an academic, allow me privileges which are not afforded to all female writers of colour. As Suki Ali writes, 'a person of "mixed-race" may indeed pass as white, or in some way become an "honorary white" if the rest of their social credentials fit in with that of the hegemonic discourses of cultural and national acceptability' (Ali 2003: 13). While Stella might have not viewed me as white, it is not certain that female writers of colour viewed me as *not-white*.

So, much of my research experience felt like an exercise in bridging two frustrated camps. One an underfunded organisation run by well-meaning, primarily white feminists and another a community of writers who have been perpetually ignored, marginalised and undervalued by the broader Australian literary community - by agents, editors, publishers, publicists, reviewers, prize-givers, educators and funding bodies. The experience made me question my authenticity as a non-white writer, and to an extent, as a non-white person, and increasingly I found that my ability to create meaningful dialogue with writers of colour was severely limited. As Ali, writes:

A person may take on 'white' middle-class culture and it is that aspect that can cause rejection on the basis of 'authenticity' from black communities. Simultaneously, they may still suffer racism from whites, which cannot be based on cultural difference, but is about the colour of their skin. (Ali 2003: 8).

I am aware that my ability to pass is a privilege that is not afforded to many writers from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) or Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds. There are many people who, unlike me, experience racism constantly, primarily those from groups that Australian culture has deemed dangerously 'other' – Muslim, Indigenous people and those with very dark skin. I am patently aware that as a person and writer I do not suffer from racism on this scale – that the taunts I have endured in my lifetime cannot possibly match the racial slurs, social hostility and political cruelties that this group of people still face. And I am also aware that no one has, so far, tried to make a big deal of my exoticism when it comes to my writing. I don't describe, nor have I ever been described as a Eurasian writer or

migrant writer. And I don't know if I've avoided these descriptors because I don't want to pigeonhole myself as a writer or due to the latent racism within my own family, which comes from the experience of colonisation. The history of Mauritius is rife with slavery (the Africans were enslaved by the French) and indentured servitude (the Indians were brought over by the British). To come from this background is to learn to privilege the white parts of your identity and castigate the dark parts. In my experience of working for Stella, I found that I had very little engagement from women writers of colour. Part of it, I was told by a friend was that people in the community viewed Stella with hostility and suspicion. But I wonder if my ability to pass also had something to do with it. After all, what could I, as relatively privileged person, understand about writers who are constantly stereotyped because of their racial and ethnic backgrounds? As Sara Ahmed has written on identifying as a black feminist:

I feel as if I am passing. I worry that I will be caught out or detected, that I will be found out to be an inauthentic or improper black feminist. Of course, such a sense of being inadequate to the identity one assumes (either consciously or unconsciously) involves phantasies about who is the real or authentic subject (in my case, who is the 'real' black feminist). (Ahmed 1999: 97)

Yet the work I did for Stella matters to me. It matters to me both as an academic who doesn't want to teach my students the same old texts by the same old authors every year and it matters to me as a creative writer who would like to get my work published. It matters to me as an activist too, who believes that words are power and that whose words we read and whose stories we hear positions us into the boxes of 'self' and 'other.' I was committed to the Diversity Count working, because I believe that Australia's literary industry is still too white and too male.

The Diversity Count

I was working on the Diversity Count with The Stella Prize co-ordinator, and together we administered the Stella Diversity Survey to female authors who had work reviewed in 2015. We spent a long time labouring with the language around gender, sexuality and race/ethnicity so that all groups would feel like they could self-select their identity descriptors on the form. The Survey went out and came quickly back in. We sent out 370 surveys and received 59 responses – a response rate of just under 16%. This was disappointing. Out of 56 respondents who engaged, 18 identified their race or ethnicity as other than English/Irish/Scottish. As you can see there are no categories for 'writers of colour', CALD or ATSI in this iteration. We were basing racial/cultural categories of the model provided by VIDA and the United Nations. Of our respondents who did not identify as English/Irish/Scottish:

- 6 described their race/ethnicity as German.
- 3 described their race/ethnicity as Greek.
- 3 described their race/ethnicity as Jewish.
- 2 described their race/ethnicity as Chinese.
- 2 described their race/ethnicity as Sri Lankan.

1 described their race/ethnicity as Croatian.

1 described their race/ethnicity as North American.

1 described their race/ethnicity as Polish.

1 described their race/ethnicity as Ukrainian.

1 described their race/ethnicity as Slovenian.

[\(http://thestellaprize.com.au/the-count/stella-count-survey/\)](http://thestellaprize.com.au/the-count/stella-count-survey/)

As is evident from this data set, not one writer respondent identified as Indigenous Australian. There was also space on the Stella Diversity Survey for further comments or criticism, but apart from one English/Irish/Scottish respondent who claimed that they couldn't see how the categories in the survey had much to do with any writer's ability to write a book, no one gave any feedback on race or ethnicity in the text boxes provided by the survey.

Given the low response rate it was difficult to gain a clear understanding of how things stand in the reviewing industry for ATSI and CALD writers in Australia. And though I was left with more questions than answers, my hunch is that things are still terrible for non-white writers in the industry. I think there are a number of issues at play. Firstly, I believe that non-white writers are being published at lower rates compared to their white colleagues, and our survey indicated that the numbers were very low. But there is no hard data on the percentage of non-white writers being published in Australia. In a Senate Inquiry to the Arts in Sydney 2015, Eleanor Jackson from *Peril* stated that the:

(P)rofessional artist populations are less diverse than the rest of the Australian workforce. People from non-English speaking backgrounds account for 8% of the professional artist population, as compared with 16% of the overall workforce, according to the Australia Council's research in the 2015 Arts Nation report. Similar trends can be seen in terms of participation and access to the arts, which concerns us for a nation that purports to have a 'reputation' as 'sophisticated and outward looking' (Jackson in Cahill 2015)

And while these are interesting statistics, it is important to note that they cover the whole of the arts sector and not just creative writing. But I have a couple of ideas about why the rates of publication are low (according to our figures anyway) for non-white writers in Australia. Firstly, I believe that there are too few non-white people of power within the Australian industry – editors, agents, publishers, academics, reviewers. Again, there is no hard data on the race/ethnicity of gatekeepers within the literary industry (which in and of itself is a problem). But as Emily Collyer writes, there have been preliminary statistics recorded by Theatre Network Australia (TNA) which sampled its networks and noted a staggering drop off of CALD artists in career progression. Collyer quotes that '34% of "Emerging" respondents identified as Culturally & Linguistically Diverse, more than twice the 15% of "Established" respondents' (Collyer 2018). Within the TNA report, this drop-off is blamed on chronic under-funding within the Arts sector, and as we will see in the next section, this under-funding tends to effect those from more racially/culturally marginalised

backgrounds for a variety of reasons, but one can surmise by this trajectory that the numbers of CALD artists who make it to gatekeeping positions must be very small. It is also my contention that non-white writers are exoticised and fetishized within the industry, which makes only a small number of stories from this category of writers seem commercially appealing. But given the lack of current research in this area, I had to look further afield.

The US Publishing Industry

In 2011, American writer Roxane Gay and a fellow researcher examined the book reviews in the *New York Times*. They found that out of the 742 books that had been reviewed that year:

655 were written by Caucasian authors (1 transgender writer, 437 men, and 217 women). Thirty-one were written by Africans or African Americans (21 men, 10 women), 9 were written by Hispanic authors (8 men, 1 woman), 33 by Asian, Asian-American or South Asian writers (19 men, 14 women), 8 by Middle Eastern writers (5 men, 3 women) and 6 were books written by writers whose racial background we were simply unable to identify. (Gay 2011)

There is much to draw from in Gay's survey. Primarily, the data points out that when it comes to categories of colour, male writers of colour are far more likely to be reviewed than female writers of colour giving validity to Crenshaw's arguments about how anti-racist discourses are more likely to benefit men rather than women. In her article, 'Why 88% of books reviewed by *The New York Times* are Written by White Authors', Amanda Hess suggests that:

The whiteness of *The New York Times Book Review* represents the structural inequality of elite journalism stacked on the structural inequality of elite publishing stacked on the structural inequality of income and education in this country. But for women, the system is breaking down at an advanced stage of the game. When female graduates don't end up in newsrooms, female MFA program stars don't get book deals, or female editors are not promoted up the chain, publications can be held accountable for that problem. When writers of color are disenfranchised at every stage of the process, everyone is to blame, so no one is. (Hess 2012)

Here, Hess points to the fact that white women are far more likely to be reviewed than women of colour, which also confirms Crenshaw's assertion that feminism has privileged white women over women of colour. It is at the intersection of gender and race that we see how little women of colour are represented in the data compared to white women *and* men of colour. There has also been some work done in the US on the publishing industry and its inherent whiteness. In January 2016 Lee & Low Publishers released the results of the Diversity Baseline Survey, which was completed by publishers and reviewers. The survey yielded a response rate of 25.8 percent, and as Lee & Low points out 'This is on par with the average for online surveys and actually a bit higher than the norm, given the sensitive nature of the questions' (Low 2016). It is certainly significantly higher than the 16% response rate for the Stella Diversity Survey. The Lee & Low results are broken down into six categories: Industry Overall, Executive Level, Editorial Department, Sales Department, Marketing

and Publicity Department and Book Reviewers. The Industry Overall shows that 79% of the respondents identify themselves as White/Caucasian and 78% of respondents identify themselves as female. Interestingly the number of White/Caucasians increases to 86% at the Executive Level while the number of female participants at this level drops to 59%. This is consistent with *Publisher's Weekly's* annual survey of the salaries in the industry, which found that across the industry,

men earned an average of \$96,000, compared to an average of \$61,000 for women. Furthermore, 72% of men reported that they earned \$70,000 or more compared to only 41% of women. The most common salary range for women was \$40,000–\$69,999; 42% of women in publishing had salaries in that bracket. (Milliot 2016)

This is important as those people who act as gate-keepers to the publishing industry, that is those people who writers must engage with (editors, agents, publishers) are more likely to be women, yet those that are in decision-making positions in the same industry (the executives) are more likely to be men, and both the men and women in these positions are more likely to be white.

To return to Australia, the relative power of gate-keepers was discussed at the Diverse Women Writers Forum organised by Writers Victoria in September 2016. The publishers on the panel explained that one of the biggest factors for them in taking a book to their acquisitions meetings was thinking about the book in terms of possible commercial success. It's a rubric applied, or so it seems, to all literary fiction, despite the fact that the numbers suggest that literary fiction and commercial success are antithetical concepts in the Australian industry. For example, in 2015 Brooke Davis' *Lost and Found* was the best-selling debut fiction in Australia. Her publisher, Hachette, estimates that the number of copies sold was 35,000. After Davis' book, the next best-selling debut fiction sold 6,000 copies, the one after that sold 4,000 copies. This is a huge margin of difference and one which seems to suggest that publishers are aware that they are playing a numbers game which they are bound to lose. If we are looking strictly at sales, then there is little to no imperative to publish debut literary fiction in Australia. There'd be no reason at all to publish poetry or anthologies either. In 2017, out of the top ten selling fiction books by Australian authors, three were by debut authors. Two of these authors, M L Stedman and Craig Silvey, have been in the best-seller lists for some time with *The Light Between the Oceans* (2012) and *Jasper Jones* (2009). Jane Harper's *The Dry* was the only book published in 2016, and is characterised as crime, rather than as literary fiction. In fact, of the top ten selling fiction books by Australian writers in 2017, only two, *The Light Between the Oceans* and *Jasper Jones* would be characterised as literary fiction. It is also concerning to note that none of these books was written by an Australian author of colour (Books + Publishing 2017).

I'd hazard a guess that the gate-keepers in the Australian literary industry, like the US industry, are overwhelmingly white and predominantly female and the decision makers are overwhelmingly white and male. This extends throughout the entire literary sector –reviewers, critics, judging panels for literary prizes as well as those of us who work in higher education.

Junot Diaz states that in his Masters of Fine Arts class:

Race was the unfortunate condition of nonwhite people that had nothing to do with white people and as such was not a natural part of the Universal of Literature, and anyone that tried to introduce racial consciousness to the Great (White) Universal of Literature would be seen as politicizing the Pure Art and betraying the (White) Universal (no race) ideal of True Literature. (Diaz 2014)

This may be the result of canonisation, but it is just as likely to be caused by the low number of professors from minority backgrounds in the US, and I would add in Australia. In their article, Spahr and Young write that:

A report by the American Federation of Teachers notes that ‘underrepresented racial and ethnic groups are even more likely to be relegated to contingent positions; only 10.4 percent of all faculty positions are held by underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, and of these, 7.6 percent — or 73 percent of the total minority faculty population — are contingent positions.’ (Spahr and Young 2015)

It should be evident that we live in a culture in which ideas of great writing have been conflated with writing by white male authors. There is ample evidence of this in the texts we as a culture have canonised; those on university and school reading lists; in literary prize culture (Kon-yu 2016) and in reviewing culture. As Cahill writes ‘Consider how cultural capital is distributed and how authority is assigned. Consider the imbalance in remuneration for editing and media reviewing. Look closely at the literary prize industry – at arts administration, at the privileged and powerful hubs of academia’ (2015). She goes on to argue that:

In its networks, establishments and canons, Australian literature operates as a white settler narrative. It claims a material and discursive space disproportionately over Aboriginal and other ethnicities, racialising their differences from the presumed universality of its own. Debates over gender and genre tend to overlook the marginalisation of non-dominant ethnicities. Yet it’s clear that superiority is assigned to the Northern European ideal of whiteness, through which difference is organized and ultimately appraised. (Cahill 2015)

As Cahill clearly articulates, the cultural capital and authority within the writing industry in Australia perpetuates a standard of literary excellence as the criteria against which the writing of non-male or non-white writers have been judged, and found wanting. As Amy King writes:

When one group’s voices—white people’s—ride roughshod as the predominantly “best” work to publish, read, teach, and sell as a complete history, that is a violence that editors must meet directly, head on and actively—even aggressively—in order to counter the force of history that denies voices and positions their words as less than, even untrue, in the face of other stories privileged as the “best.” (King in Aiello 2015)

The exotic other

Given the whiteness of the literary canon, and the esteem in which we still hold historical white writers, we can see that writers of colour have to counter what has been written *about them* by white writers. Ambelin Kwaymullina writes that:

inaccurate representations of Indigenous people are a problem for us (in) that our own works are judged against how well they measure up to stereotypes of the ‘authentic’ Indigenous experience produced by others. Lakota Sioux thinker Vine Deloria perhaps captured this phenomenon best when he wrote: ‘the more we try to be ourselves, the more we are forced to defend what we have never been.’ (Kwaymullina 2015)

Within Australia, and the US, writers of colour are aware that their works exist within a mostly white context – that they have been trained to see themselves and their work as an exotic other within the homogeneity of the publishing and literary industries. There is much evidence from Australian and US authors to suggest that the publishing industry only wants certain narratives from writers of colour (or about people of colour), and this is reinforced within prizes, reviews and panels, as well as on University and high-school text lists. It has serious ramifications for writers of colour within the current publishing industry. African American publisher Lulu Martinez thinks that the way in which publicists label authors is problematic. Her publishing company, Dafina, publishes African American authors but ‘too often those books sit on shelves surrounded only by other black authors, ghettoized to an "African American Literature" corner of a bookstore or library’ (Martinez in Masad 2016). Writing in the *New York Times* Christopher Meyer talks of an ‘apartheid in literature’ which he categorises as the situation in which ‘characters of color are limited to the townships of occasional historical books that concern themselves with the legacies of civil rights and slavery but are never given a pass card to traverse the lands of adventure, curiosity, imagination or personal growth’ (Meyer 2014). US writer and editor Morgan Parker states that people of colour ‘often find ourselves... being asked to “emphasize” (read: exoticize) our identities (“I love your writing about race,” one editor told me. “Do you have anything else like that?”) (Parker in Aiello 2015). As Jenny Zhang notes, this bias in the literary industry goes hand in hand with living in places that have been colonised.

White supremacy tries to reduce people of color to our traumas. Resisting white supremacy means insisting that we are more than our traumas. One quick perusal through the shelves of world literature in any bookstore confirms just what the literary world wants to see from writers of color and writers from developing nations: trauma. (Zhang 2015)

The situation is no different within Australia where both migrant and Indigenous writers find their work pigeonholed by difference. Australian writer Robert Wood writes that racially or ethnically specific labels of writing are limiting for authors. He asks, ‘why can’t “Asian Australian” stories be “Australian” stories? Or why can’t “Australian” stories be Keatingly “regional” or even “universal” precisely because of their particularity? This though is not a new question, but an ongoing concern that needs be addressed again and again’ (Wood 2016). He goes on to state that ‘To

constantly be pigeonholed is to undermine the potential reach of specific identities. It says, in other words, you are welcome here but play your role; thanks for coming but we will not accommodate you' (Wood 2016). Wood is writing as someone who is often labelled a migrant writer, but the situation is no different for Indigenous writers in Australia. Indigenous writing is still marginalised within our literary industry. Speaking at the Diverse Women Writers Forum, Indigenous writer Jane Harrison argued that given our Indigenous heritage, Australian Indigenous writing ought to make up a substantial percentage of our national literature, which, currently, it does not. Tony Birch has also pointed out that 'In recent years, the wider literary community in Australia has celebrated Aboriginal writing, although it also continues to be received and consumed defensively, within a mindset stuck in the colonial imagination' (Birch 2013). Certainly many Indigenous texts that have received national attention, are focussed on issues of contact with White Australia. Only two Indigenous authors, Kim Scott and Alexis Wright, have won the coveted Miles Franklin Literary Award, and tellingly the books which have won the prize (*Benang*, *Carpentaria* and *That Deadman Dance*) are narratives about first contact. Indigenous writers and scholars have raised a number of issues: the lack of editorial expertise (Kwaymullina 2015) and the lack of mentoring and financial support (Birch 2015) being key among them.

Conclusion

This lack of diversity in both the industry itself, and what the industry expects from non-white writers, has appalling effects on writers. It limits their imaginations, shapes their words into something palatable to an industry who remains intent on othering them. Just as the label of 'women's fiction' is given to almost any text written by a woman, so the idea of exoticised fiction clings to the works of writers of colour. In 1998 veteran journalist Jana Wendt asked Toni Morrison when she was going to start to write about white people. Wendt wasn't only asking for white characters, she was asking for Morrison to write books that didn't require any *work* from white readers. Then there are the material costs faced by non-white writers. As Cahill states:

At present, migrant writers work hard for recognition but rarely benefit from the rewards offered by literary institutions to their white counterparts. This compromises their family lives, their physical and psychological health and their employment. Some of our most outstanding poets, writers, and editors have publicly withdrawn, leaving behind only parts of themselves chronicled in the canon. (Cahill 2015)

This lack of non-white writing has serious ramifications for both writers and readers. UK author Malorie Blackman has written that 'Books allow you to see the world through the eyes of others' and that reading is 'an exercise in empathy; an exercise in walking in someone else's shoes for a while. So this is not about writing certain books for certain people, they should be read by everybody' (Blackman in Cain 2014). At their best, books literally enable us to walk around in someone else's skin.

What my time working on the Stella Diversity Survey has highlighted is that the under-representation of female-identifying writers of colour in the Australian industry has deep and complex roots. A lack of racial, ethnic and gender diversity at the top of

the industries that make decisions about the merits of literature has trickled down through our education and publishing industries and has deemed that only certain kinds of novels can be called great Australian novels. This pigeonholes the work of all non-white, non-male authors in the industry, and narrows the scope of what these writers can write about. It points to a need for a proper demographic survey, similar to those carried out by Lee & Low and *Publishers Weekly* in the US to examine who is in key decision making positions in the industry, and I would hasten to add that this should include higher education.

The lack of commercial success of literary fiction in the Australian industry can be used as leverage here. That is, if we only expect debut Australian fiction to sell few copies, then doesn't that mean agents, editors and publishers can take greater chances in the books they publish and promote? Maybe, just maybe, if people aren't buying enough debut literary fiction in Australia, that's because there might be a certain homogeneity to the work being published. There seems so little to lose, and so much to potentially gain if editors, agents and publishers use low sales to their advantage to expand their lists. It seems to me a risk worth taking.

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