**Towards diversity in young adult fiction: perspectives from Australian YA authors**

## Abstract

Based on a study of Australian young adult (YA) fiction authors, this paper argues that it is necessary for publishers, booksellers, and YA librarians to pay attention to the global movement towards diversity: diversity within their own organisations, diversity among authors they publish, stock, or collect, and representations of diversity within YA fiction. The mainstream attention to diversity has particularly focused on media for young people, with advocates stating that children and teenagers from traditionally marginalised communities deserve to see their own experiences reflected and validated in the media they consume. This paper looks at diversity in writing and traditional publishing through interviews with Australian YA authors (conducted in 2016) from traditionally marginalised or unacknowledged communities, especially as it relates to their transition from reader to writer, and their experience of the publishing journey. A critical discourse analysis of the interviews point to a need for more diversity representations in YA fiction, and also the need for a change in industry practices to enable this, including publishing, bookselling, and library practices.

Keywords: young adult fiction, teenage fiction, diversity, we need diverse books, ownvoices, publishing, Australian fiction

## Word count: 7025

## Introduction

In recent years, conversations about the representation of traditionally marginalised communities in writing and other media have entered the mainstream. In light of this, the objective of this paper is to examine, through the perspective of Australian writers of young adult (YA) fiction, the importance of the representation of such marginalised communities within Australian YA fiction. This is done not through an analysis of the fictional works themselves, but through examining the experiences of their Australian YA writers from marginalised communities and their path towards publication; in essence, their transition from reader to writer, and the role of their own identity as members of a marginalised community within this experience.

High profile international and local groups such as *We Need Diverse Books* (WNDB) have used social media platforms to create sustained interest in the issue among readers, booksellers, librarians, bookbloggers, and industry professionals. In the United States, WNDB was given credit for a 4% increase in the publishing of books with “multicultural content” in 2014 by the *Cooperative Children’s Book Center* in America (Cooperative Children’s Book Center, 2018). WNDB is an American “grassroots organization created to address the lack of diverse, non-majority narratives in children’s literature...[and] is committed to the ideal that embracing diversity will lead to acceptance, empathy, and ultimately equality” (We Need Diverse Books, 2018). WNDB advocates for the need for the inclusion of “diverse experiences, including (but not limited to) LGBTQIA, Native, people of color, gender diversity, people with disabilities, and ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities” (We Need Diverse Books, 2018). The groups are collectively referred to in contemporary advocacy spaces as “marginalised communities”, in order to highlight how traditional and mainstream media have systematically pushed stories of such minority groups to the margins of stories. The WNDB definition has been embraced by diversity advocates for increased representation of marginalised communities in media at a global level, but the publishing industry in the United States has been in the forefront of this change. Progress has been made, thanks to readers, authors, advocates, booksellers, and librarians all joining the call for increased representation of marginalised communities in Children’s and Young Adult Fiction. As a result, some US publishers have responded with the creation of new publishing imprints to publish diverse authors, or with a public commitment for staff to undertake “sensitivity training”, in an effort to counter existing prejudices in all departments, from commissioning editors to marketers (Low, 2015).

The Australian young adult fiction (YA fiction) market and the Australian publishing industry, although not in the forefront of such a change, have a long history of being influenced by larger overseas markets (Wilding, 2000, p.152). This is particularly evident in the Australian community of YA bookbloggers, who can be defined as readers and online reviewers of YA fiction who share their thoughts via social media and various blogging platforms. While many of them are university students rather than teenagers, they come from all walks of life and professions including bookselling, publishing, and libraries – they may receive free advance copies of new releases from Australian publishers to review, and are a vital part of the contemporary publishing landscape. In Australia, the community is predominantly female, with YA bookbloggers ranging from people in their late teens to early 30s as evident from the *Bookbloggers Australia* website (Bookbloggers Australia, 2018). Due to the access that social media provides, there are strong connections formed between Australian YA bookbloggers and those outside Australia, enabling the influence of international publishers to be shared directly and indirectly with the Australian YA reading community.

While the influence of international publishing markets is clearly visible within the online community of YA bookbloggers and readers, it is less clear as to what the Australian YA publishing industry’s approach to diversity is. This paper is an exploration of the same area, through the perspective of published Australian YA authors from marginalised communities who write young adult fiction that draws on and represents this aspect of their identity. It also explores their experience of moving from being readers from marginalised communities, to being authors from these communities. The findings of this study have implications not just for YA fiction publishing and bookselling, but also for library practitioners, specifically for YA librarians and for readers’ advisory services.

## Background

The publishing industry in Australia is significantly smaller than in the United States and the United Kingdom, which means that Australian books are often overlooked in bookstores and libraries in favour of international titles (Australian Library and Information Association, 2015) – both due to the higher number of international releases, and their global publicity campaigns. This is particularly noticeable in the category of YA fiction, which has a significant and devoted readership, many of whom participate in online discussions as bookbloggers. The Library of Congress’ Children’s and Young Adult Cataloging Program (Library of Congress, 2015) describes the scope of Children’s and YA fiction as “fiction materials for young readers through high school.” While this is a broad category, this paper uses a publishing industry-based definition of YA fiction. This definition requires the fulfilment of three criteria in order for a book to qualify as a work of YA fiction: (1) the book features a teenage protagonist (aged 12-18 years inclusive) (Allen & Unwin, 2017; Walker Books, 2017); (2) the book was written specifically for teenagers, as the intended primary readership (Binks, 2014a); and (3) the novel features high levels of emotional intensity (Zorn in Freer, 2016) and characters who “live in the moment” (Tingley in Goldstein, 2011). These factors are recognised as key characteristics of YA fiction by booksellers, authors, and publishers.

Attempts to combat the international imports saturation of the Australian YA fiction market have had some success; one such attempt is the advocacy by the #LoveOzYA Committee established in 2015 (LoveOzYA, 2018), whose resources are now used by publishers, booksellers, and bookbloggers alike. However, the efforts of the LoveOzYA Committee and the broader local community to elevate Australian authors and contributions have also foregrounded the fact that there is a glaring lack of stories published by *and* about people from traditionally marginalised communities. This overwhelming absence of such stories reveals that “while there are many differences between diverse peoples and identities, there are also points of intersection, and one of them is the degree to which our young people are being failed by literature” (Kwaymullina, 2015a, 2015). Literature written by an author from the same traditionally marginalised community as the protagonist (or significant secondary character) can be referred to also as an ‘OwnVoices’ work, a term coined by YA author Corinne Duyvis on September 6th 2015 (Duyvis, 2016). The term OwnVoices has since been adopted by the YA fiction bookblogger community, and diversity advocacy groups more broadly. The OwnVoices label functions as shorthand for identifying books that fit the above criteria on platforms such as Twitter (where there is a character limit on posts), and raises the profile of works that have representations of traditionally marginalised communities written by authors from those same marginalised communities. The OwnVoices label is descriptive and not prescriptive, as its purpose is to highlight and raise the profile of certain books based on authors’ self-identification as a member of a marginalised community, and not a limitation on what authors can, should, or cannot write.

 For this paper, the OwnVoices label provided a framework with which to identify potential interview candidates whose experiences would be analysed in order to gain insight into the Australian YA fiction publishing industry. Only young adult fiction authors who fit the criteria of self-identifying as a member of a traditionally marginalised community, who had written a book in which a main character belonged to the same community, were interviewed for this study.

## Literature Review

Advocacy for greater and better representation of traditionally marginalised communities in YA fiction pre-dates the discussions prompted by groups like WNDB in recent years. When YA fiction first began to emerge as a distinct category of literature during the 1940s and 1950s in the United States, it was decided by youth services librarians that the novels they promoted should feature “main characters drawn from a variety of classes, conditions, and racial and cultural groups” (Jenkins, 1995, p.311). The failure of publishing industry professionals to commit to the same principles for YA fiction as youth librarians, despite the benefits attributed to diverse fiction and the negative effects of the erasure of marginalised identities in mainstream literature, has triggered much of the advocacy of the decades since. The ground-breaking article ‘The All-White World of Children’s Books’ (Larrick, 1965) addressed this failure of the publishing industry. In the article, Larrick examined the representation of African-American characters in youth literature from a quantitative and qualitative perspective, stating that at the time of publication, “6,340,000 nonwhite children are learning to read and to understand the American way of life in books which either omit them entirely or scarcely mention them” (Larrick, 1965, p. 63). Out of the “5,206 children’s trade books launched by the sixty-three publishers in the three-year period” (Larrick, 1965, p.64), only 349 titles contained at least one African-American character. Additionally, Larrick criticised novels for older readers which repeated the themes of “school integration, neighborhood desegregation, and nonviolent demonstrations”, often concluded with White characters being rewarded for not being overtly racist towards African-American children (Larrick, 1965, p.64). This strongly suggests that the majority of these novels were not published with young African-American readers as the target demographic, marginalising their reading experience even when they are “represented” in the literature.

In the much-cited article ‘Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding-Glass Doors’ (1990), Rudine Sims Bishop used metaphor to explain the different ways representations of traditionally marginalised communities benefit different readers. For some readers from marginalised communities, inclusive books can act as mirrors to reflect someone like the reader, or they can be windows and doors for the reader to step through and briefly see what others’ lives are like (Bishop, 1990); this article is referenced frequently by contemporary diversity advocates, such as members of WNDB. Within this is the issue of who the target audience for diverse books is; Bishop’s 1982 research building upon Larrick’s findings argues that books about marginalised communities, written by members of that same community, offer the most authentic portrayal (Bishop, 1982, p.64). Despite this, recent US-based research reveals significant continued imbalance in the representation of marginalised communities, both within YA fiction and among the authors and illustrators, with only 6% of all youth fiction books published in 2016 being written by “*Black, Latinx, and Native authors combined*” (Ehrlich, 2017, emphasis in the original text).

In Australia, there is a significant lack of scholarship on the topic of diversity and representation of traditionally marginalised communities in Children’s and Young Adult fiction. While there has been a growth in attention in recent years, many of these contributions have been made by freelance writers or authors of inclusive YA fiction themselves. Such assessments of the market have provided valuable insight into the presence of Indigenous-Australian authors and authors of colour (Ayoub, 2015; Kwaymullina, 2015b; Lim, 2015; Mills, 2015), LGBTQIA authors (Binks, 2014b), and disabled authors (Binks, 2014c), as well as the representation of characters from these marginalised groups within the fiction itself. Additionally, while many of the Australian YA fiction authors from marginalised communities have actively spoken and written for the public about their support for increased diversity in the market, they had a tendency to discuss their writing in terms of their own experience as teenage readers rather than their journey towards getting published. While their experiences as teenage readers are undoubtedly part of their creative journeys, we are interested in the transition from their role as a reader to an author – an area that has been overlooked in the past.

YA fiction author Ambelin Kwaymullina has written extensively about diversity and representation in Children’s and YA fiction in Australia, with a particular emphasis on Indigenous-Australian identities. In 2016, Kwaymullina published an article on the blog *Alphareader* titled “Privilege and literature: three myths created by misdiagnosing a lack of Indigenous voices (and other diverse voices) as a ‘diversity problem’”, in which she attributed the low number of Indigenous Australian people and People of Colour being published to a “privilege problem: within the publishing industry: “a set of structures and attitudes that consistently privilege one set of voices over another” (Kwaymullina, 2016). This article strongly informed our research, leading to a number of questions about the experiences of authors of OwnVoices fiction in Australia who had been traditionally published in recent years. Guiding questions at this stage in the research included, “What level of professional support do they receive?”, “How are their works viewed by their publishers, peers, and audiences?”, and “Have they ever been challenged for their writing?”. By gaining insight into the experiences of Australian authors of OwnVoices fiction, it is believed that readers, librarians, and future researchers can better understand how to support future authors of OwnVoices fiction. Additionally, our research sought to gain an understanding of how OwnVoices authors perceive their own fiction as a part of the contemporary global diversity advocacy movements, if at all.

The Australian OwnVoices writers featured in this study are all authors of YA fiction, who also publicly identify as members of a traditionally marginalised community. This paper aims to bring the insights and experiences of these authors to the foreground of discussions about diversity and representation, and gain an understanding of the Australian YA publishing industry through investigating their personal experiences.

## Methodology

The primary approach to data collection was qualitative, with a series of semi-structured interviews of published Australian YA fiction authors from traditionally marginalised communities, who had published at least one OwnVoices novel. While a survey could have potentially provided a broader scope, we felt a qualitative format would allow us to understand the “motivations [and] feelings” of participants (Sahu, 2013, p.6) at a deeper level. Additionally, as the research investigates the experiences of those from traditionally marginalised communities, it was necessary to use a method of data collection that allowed interviewees the opportunity to direct the interview discussion to areas they considered important, which may not have been covered in the interview questions; for “if we genuinely want to hear, to understand an individual we must provide a way for her or him to speak in a genuine voice” (Cisneros-Puebla, Faux & Mey, 2004, p.3).

We used semi-structured interviews to enable us to speak at length with the authors without structural limitations, and asked “relevant follow-up questions” to gain deeper insight into the authors’ experiences (Sahu, 2013, p.65). While reviewing the literature and conducting preliminary research, we observed that it was significantly less common for authors to discuss their publishing experiences with regards to their OwnVoices novels, though comments on their experiences as readers and their writing process were touched upon. Therefore, the interview format also gave participants “appropriate outlets through which their experiences and thoughts can be shared with others in meaningful interactions” (Cisneros-Puebla, Faux & Mey, 2004, p.2), allowing authors to speak directly to this part of their experience, and challenge any misconceptions that may have existed around their work or publishing journey. The core guiding interview questions were:

1. How would you describe yourself and your book to potential readers?
2. Who do you consider to be the target demographic of your book?
3. At the time of writing your book, did you go through any changes in how you saw yourself, or how you perceived your experiences as a teenager?
4. How would you describe the reactions you have had to your book from teenage readers?
5. Where do you think your book fits in the Australian young adult fiction market?
6. Do you believe there is an expectation of you to write about characters from your community?
7. What would be your response to someone who classified your book as an “issue” book, or you as an “issue” author?
8. When you look back on your experience of being published, do you see any ways in which you could have been supported more by industry professionals?
9. Have you noticed any differences in how outsiders to your community write characters from your community?
10. What would you like your future novels to contribute to the Australian young adult fiction landscape?

In order to identify potential participants, we created a spreadsheet that contained all relevant information about eligible authors and their works. In the US, there are substantial resources available that could be used for this purpose, such as the *Cooperative Children’s Book Center*, which was founded by the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1963, or articles published by prominent and reputable online hubs for readers, such as *BookRiot*, who regularly post features on new OwnVoices fiction releases. However, Australia does not have any equivalent organisations or platforms, so we created a spreadsheet of Australian YA fiction authors who have published at least one novel that can be considered an OwnVoices work as at October 2016. This spreadsheet was compiled through a combination of methods, including searching the *AustLit Database* (https://www.austlit.edu.au/) for authors whose books fit the OwnVoices criteria, to other investigative methods that involved following the trail of information left by authors on their blogs, in promotional interviews, and in publicity materials made available by publishers. As a matter of ethics, only authors who had publicly and freely identified themselves as members of a traditionally marginalised community were included. As at 2016, we found 30 Australian authors who fit the OwnVoices criteria, of whom around 20 are alive and currently writing in Australia. The list included authors who are People of Colour, identified themselves as part of the LGBTQIA community, Indigenous-Australian authors, and authors with experience of mental illness. After obtaining human research ethics clearance from the University of Technology Sydney’s Research Ethics Committee, we contacted seven authors whom we could get contacts for, and all agreed to be interviewed; each of the previously mentioned marginalised communities were represented among the interviewees. With a qualitative study such as this one, this provided us with enough rich data for our discourse analysis.

Interview questions covered topics such as industry support for their work, audience responses (both positive and negative) to their representations of traditionally marginalised communities, their writing process, and their own perceptions of diversity and representation in Australian YA fiction. Out of seven interviews, five were spoken interviews, while two interviewees submitted written responses. Follow-up questions were asked where appropriate, making use of the semi-structured format. Of the five spoken interviews, two were conducted face-to-face, and three via telephone due to geographical limitations. Interviews were roughly 45 minutes in length, though two of the interviewees opted to speak for significantly longer, despite being made aware of the 45-minute mark. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with the written consent of the participants, with permission to publish from the research. Two of the interviewees responded to questions in a written form due to various personal constraints, resulting in questions taking the form of a “structured questionnaire” (Sahu, 2013, p.67). Rather than limiting their responses, both interviewees used this format as a means to provide us with supplementary information that could not have been provided in a spoken interview, such as links to previously published writing that expanded on their thoughts, or excerpts from fan mail that demonstrated the reader responses they have received.

Findings were coded and analysed using critical discourse analysis (CDA), a “socially committed [form of] research” (Lin, 2014, p.214) that allowed for the analysis of discourse authors drew upon when they discussed their experiences in the industry. CDA has historically been used as a method of analysis for dealing with “the discourse dimensions of power abuse and the injustice and inequality that result[s] from it,” (van Dijk, 1993, p.252). The term ‘discourse’ is a broad term with significant history, and can refer to,

…anything from a historical monument, *a lieu de mémoire*, a policy, a political strategy, narratives in a restricted or broad sense of the term, text, talk, a speech, topic-related conversations, to language per se. (Wodak & Meyer, 2008, p.2-3)

The discourses selected for this research were those invoked in speech and written responses. The CDA method was particularly well-suited to the analysis of these author interviews, as all of them publicly self-identified as members of traditionally marginalised communities and spoke about their experiences in terms of being marginalised readers and writers within the mainstream discourse, and the process of this transition. As the research drew inspiration and influence from contemporary diversity advocacy movements, CDA enabled us to analyse the discourses authors drew on to communicate their personal and professional experiences within this broader social context. CDA has also been used in the past to examine Australian teenagers’ reactions to how local YA fiction depicts adolescent identity (Bean & Moni, 2003), providing further connections between CDA and the present study. Furthermore, as all interviewees came from different communities, a study of the discourses each used allowed us to examine how they “represent the same area of the world from different perspectives or positions” (Fairclough, 2003, p.26).

The focus of the coding was on areas where power came into play, for example between the author and external forces or people, such as publishing industry figures, audiences (including teenage readers, librarians, school staff and other groups). Also examined were the broader societal expectations of the authors and their books, including whether they faced different expectations or pressures than Australian YA authors from non-marginalised communities.

A total of four major discourses emerged from the interview data: experience of barriers to publication, of the pressure to educate readers who were “outsiders”, an insider view of outsiders writing from the perspectives of traditionally marginalised communities, and the use of global language of diversity amongst Australian YA OwnVoices authors. However, for the purposes of this article, only the last discourse is discussed.

Out of respect for the privacy of the interviewees, and due to the personal nature of some quotes, all findings from the interviews have been anonymised and de-identified for publication. Out of the seven authors interviewed, one author requested that they not be quoted directly; however, their interview informed the aggregate data analysis.

## Findings

One notable observation throughout the interview process was that the interviewees –

Australian authors from traditionally marginalised communities – borrowed language patterns from global diversity advocacy movements in order to describe their personal goals and experiences in the Australian publishing industry. Due to the high profile nature of this language, and the regularity and intensity with which it manifests in discussions about YA in online and offline spaces, all authors would have been previously exposed to these language patterns. These language patterns were present in the language of six of the seven authors interviewed, despite the authors having varying levels of direct engagement with diversity advocacy. Some interviewed authors engaged heavily in online discussions about YA fiction, or at writers’ festivals where the topic of representation was raised, while others have had very little participation in these spaces. The global language of diversity advocacy manifested in two ways: the first was through a discourse of the authors’ OwnVoices books creating “place and possibility” for teenagers from marginalised communities, and the second was the use of a “language of visibility”, which was used to describe the authors’ goals. Using CDA helped us to understand that discourses such as “place and possibility” and the “language of visibility” were manifested predominantly where power dynamics were present, as will be discussed in the following sections.

 ***“Place and possibility” and “language of visibility”***

The discourse of “place and possibility” was invoked by six out of seven authors interviewed. The joint concept of “place and possibility” was something these authors believed their books provided for teenage readers from their respective communities: the books themselves were described as objects that indicated the validity, value, importance, and normality of their identities and experiences, either through the book’s literal “place” in the market or through the positive representations the book contained of what is “possible” for those who belong to marginalised communities. In some cases, the authors themselves *embodied* the sentiment of “place and possibility”, with their own careers illustrating the possibilities for young members of their community. In this way, the creation of “place and possibility” was a means of empowerment for the authors and their readers alike and closely related to the language of visibility.

We define the “language of visibility” as a phrase that draws upon sight or vision-related language in order to articulate how readers interact with or respond to representations of marginalised communities in fiction. We attributed the prominence of the “language of visibility” to Bishop’s influential 1990 article ‘Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding-Glass Doors’; three out of the seven authors used this language during the interviews.

The notion of “place and possibility” and use of “language of visibility” were combined numerous times by authors during interviews, such as in the following quotes by three interviewees about their goals for their work:

Author 1: [I want to write books that] young people can connect to, *that they can see themselves in*, that speak to them in terms of their interests and their passions and you know, the issues that they’re going through in their life. (Emphasis added.)

Author 1: I just want young people to feel connected to stories and *to see themselves in Australian stories* […] I want my *books to have a place so that they can show young people that they have a place*. (Emphasis added.)

Author 2: People [from my community], *when they see [characters from our community], they see their place in the world*. And they understand that their experiences have value… (Emphasis added.)

Author 3, while not invoking the “language of visibility” in this instance, did clearly draw on the notion of “place and possibility” when asked about the goals of their writing:

Author 3: I want them [their books] to be kind of like, an example. You know like some—*an example of what… is possible*, and just knowing that these are just […] there’s so many stories about [my community], and there’s so many different experiences. (Emphasis added.)

The authors framed their OwnVoices books as a message or a sign to teenage readers, that their readers’ identity has a place in Australian society, and in the world more broadly. In the minds of the authors, the books are more than permission to exist for the teenagers; they are encouragement to exist, without changing to fit society’s expectations.

***Books as evidence, and the impact of erasure***

The framing of books as a message to young readers is notable as there were some parallels between the authors who evoked these statements, and the authors’ own experiences as a young reader. Three of the six authors who used the discourse of “place and possibility” explicitly mentioned that during their own childhood and teenage years, they had *never* come across a novel that represented their own identity or experience. This absence is reflective of the power imbalance in the Australian publishing industry, and reduced access for authors from traditionally marginalised communities, that was present when the authors were teenagers themselves – something that most felt continues to this day. One author stated that when pitching their own novel, they put particular emphasis on the identity of the character from their own community. This is done to convey to potential readers – especially those from their own marginalised community – that the character’s identity is an important characteristic in the novel, and not a tokenistic or stereotyped inclusion.

Author 2: The pitch isn’t disingenuous because it is, you look at a book and *you see your own experience as reflected back at you* and things like that. […] When I pitch it like that, it’s because I know that’s what’s going to speak to them, and at the end of the book […] that’s what they’re going to have a lasting experience with. (Emphasis added.)

The validation that a marginalised teenage reader would get from reading the novel was framed as the “lasting experience” the book offers; something which is significant enough that it can surpass the standard entertainment value of the story. As this author had been deprived of the opportunity to “see [their] experience as reflected back” at them in YA fiction when they were a teenager, the intensity of their belief in the “lasting experience” of representation was indicative of the misrepresentation of communities and identities in mainstream fiction for young readers. The absence of books that depicted their community and experiences when they were teenagers conveyed to these authors that they themselves did not have a “place” in Australia, nor have the same “possibilities” as their peers. For some authors, this erasure had such a significant impact on them as teenagers that it influenced their desire to write for young people, and specifically write about young people from their own communities; Author 1 expressed that when writing their OwnVoices novel, “[a] good 95 per cent of it was drawn from my own personal experience”.

Author 1, about their experiences as a teenager: [My] sense of belonging was um … you know, probably diminished by the fact that *I never saw myself in any stories* … [it] triggered so many of the you know negative um associations I had, or you know my anxieties and things like that as a teenager. (Emphasis added.)

Author 1, about their experiences as a teenager: I never had anything to support me, or I never had anything that I could um share like *anyone that I could look up to*, and share my experiences with. (Emphasis added.)

Another author commented on the diversity of Australia’s population, and the comparatively homogenous range of stories available in the mainstream YA fiction market:

Author 4: Australia has such an immigrant population […] and that means the majority of Australians have stories outside the Australian cultural content within their genetic memory and I kind of want those stories to be woven into the Australian tale as well.

This statement highlights the way in which people may share the identity and label of “Australian”, yet many will still find parts of their identity or experience excluded from “the Australian tale.” In the most literal sense, this takes the form of their stories being excluded from shelf space in bookstores and libraries. The lack of “place” for the books leads to a lack of “possibilities” evident to young readers.

***The impact of negative “representation”***

For other authors, their communities were at times represented in Australian media more broadly, but the depictions were either inauthentic or offensive. In such cases, the author’s venture into creative writing was designed to be a deliberate counterpoint to these damaging representations. Author 1 was motivated to begin writing their novel due to the media coverage at the time depicting their community as a whole negatively in response to crimes committed by a small number of people. Author 1 stated that they “just wanted to put it [in] print, that this is happening and that, as a community, we’re all being shamed for the actions of a minority” of people from their community. They continued,

Author 1: I wanted people to know that we existed, that we valued [our] cultural identity, that we um were proud of who we were but at the same time that we had a very positive contribution to make to our Australian society, we were proud to be Australian.

Similarly, Author 3 stated that “the real impetus for me to write was to address [prejudice]…”, because “there was a disconnect between the way that […] a lot of the mainstream saw [my community], and *how I saw my own family and the broader [marginalised] community*.” (Emphasis added.) The media had assigned the author’s community a “place” in the media, but it was a consistently negative role, as opposed to positive and authentic representations that give young community members a future to aspire towards. Instead, negative depictions convey a sense of inevitable failure that could disempower young readers. Author 3 reiterated that even today, when it comes to depictions of their community in news reports or journalism, “*we only ever see*, in the mainstream media, the bad press.” (Emphasis added.) Author 3’s books can therefore be understood, in part, as a direct counterpoint to the negative depictions that “mainstream media” makes visible, at the expense of positive and accurate representations.

***Books as encouragement to future writers***

Three writers particularly emphasised that they saw their books as not just an object that indicated to teenage readers that their experiences and identities have a place in contemporary Australian society, but that the books also demonstrate to young writers that there is a place for their stories in the market. In this way, the books are framed as a form of “proof” to young writers from marginalised communities that success is not impossible, and that they can and should give voice to their experiences through writing. As Author 5 said of their OwnVoices novel, “It gives them an opening.”

The discourse of place and possibility was one of inclusion, offering hope to young readers and writers. It equated the physical presence of the books, and the representations of marginalised communities within them, as something that indicated the value and validity of these identities. In some cases, this was extended to the authors themselves, who had a position similar to that of a role model. This was strongly linked with the use of the language of visibility, in which the ability to see particular identities being represented in stories was considered a powerful statement made to the readers. Out of the seven authors interviewed, six felt this need for representation of their community very strongly.

## Discussion

The findings provide significant insights into the way Australian authors of OwnVoices YA fiction perceive the market they are working in, through their own use of the global language of diversity advocacy. In October 2016, searching material from a period over four decades, we found that only 30 of 1359 published Australian YA fiction authors catalogued on the *AustLit Database* had published works that could be classified as OwnVoices YA novels. These numbers reveal that for every OwnVoices novel that is lauded as progress towards diversity, the market is still overwhelmingly imbalanced toward mainstream, often-stereotyped narratives.

While the publication of works by authors from traditionally marginalised communities should be celebrated, the stark reality of the numbers also requires action. The imbalance in the industry can no longer be considered “traditional” or a “neutral” way of being. That the language of visibility was used by three of seven authors to indicate the impact they felt their books had on the market and for readers *just through their existence,* is a sign of this imbalance. For two out of seven authors interviewed, their novels were the only Australian YA fiction novels that have ever been published about their respective communities. That these authors still consider a single literary acknowledgement of their existence in the YA fiction market to be a sign of progress for the Australian publishing industry is a sign of how slow such progress is.

The absence of positive representations of marginalised communities was perceived by the interviewees as actively perpetuating harm against young readers. Four out of the seven authors interviewed had negative experiences with books as teenagers, either due to the total absence of representations of their own community in fiction, or the existing representations being harmful. The imbalance among the demographics of authors published is not accidental; rather, it is replicated due to the “privilege problem” described by Kwaymullina (2016). Voices from marginalised communities were and are overlooked by those who have power in the industry, in favour of voices that conform to the traditional view: voices from authors who are considered writers of “good” literature: authors who are White, heterosexual, cisgender, and non-disabled. The authors interviewed for this study were able to use their experiences of prejudice in the media as motivation to create their own literature that could challenge this erasure or stereotyping. However, this knowledge does raise the question of how many talented writers the Australian fiction market has been deprived of, because these potential authors may have received negative messages in their youth. The use of diversity advocacy language from around the world by six of the seven interviewees indicates that they are aware of the discussions taking place in other literary markets, and that they consider their own work to be a part of this discourse.

A third finding – perhaps the most significant of them all – is that six out of seven authors interviewed were consciously choosing to challenge the lack of representation of their respective communities with their writing in the YA fiction space. While it was not the sole reason for their work as an author, all six were aware that their books did not conform to the patterns of expectation in the mainstream market. Additionally, some had engaged in discussions about diversity in media in public forums. This included publishing their thoughts online, or participating in writers’ festivals where they spoke about the importance of representation of marginalised communities in YA fiction, all echoing the sentiments of “place and possibility”. The authors themselves can, by being public about their identity and experiences, make their community visible in a literary space. This active challenging of the market’s ‘status quo’ reinforces that these authors are not victims of the publishing industry, and that viewing them this way would be a misrepresentation of all they have accomplished due to their skill and persistence.

## Conclusion

Our study has a number of implications for those who work with literature and young people; whether they are members of the publishing industry, booksellers, librarians, or researchers. What must be acknowledged, based on these findings, is that the industry has not made anywhere near enough progress to balance the substantial erasure that marginalised communities have been subjected to in the mainstream YA fiction market. This means that young Australian readers are still being taught that only certain stories, identities, and experiences are worth telling and hence have a place in the Australian YA fiction market and broader literary community. Our findings challenge us to call for those working in publishing to actively challenge the patterns of privilege that are embedded in this industry, and create opportunities and safe environments for people from marginalised communities to write, be published and read about themselves within the world of Australian YA fiction. We recommend that the Australian publishing industry, in addition to employing more people from diverse backgrounds, also actively seek out authors and stories that more accurately reflect the background and experience of contemporary Australian teenagers.

Those who work outside of the publishing industry, but are in roles that connect young readers with literature (such as booksellers and librarians) must, in the meantime, put pressure on the publishing industry to grow a more inclusive roster of creators and stories from all different communities. This will minimise the potential harm to young readers on account of privileging the traditional canon of YA fiction, which frequently marginalises and stereotypes representations of diversity or erases their presence altogether. The simplest yet most powerful means of doing so, as shown by the findings, is to use the tools we already have access to in order to create a place for OwnVoices fiction in the spaces around us. This means actively selecting books by Australian authors from traditionally marginalised communities, and promoting them in a variety of ways: booksellers can do that through handselling, compiling displays, writing staff recommendations and developing diverse stores; YA librarians can do so through proactive collections management policies and readers reference services that take cognisance of the diversity within their own communities.

Librarians can use readers’ advisory services to be mindful that the diverse young adult fiction in Australia that is already available could inspire future writers, as well as enrich the reading experience of non-marginalised young people who are exposed to an excess of homogeneity in storytelling. Supporting such diversity can be achieved by developing cultural competencies for youth and public library services which “pursue diversity, currency and relevancy in the children’s/youth collection; seek input from child/youth…” (Australian Library and Information Association, 2014.). In the words of the Young Adult Library Services Association, we need to “reflect on the privileged positions and perspectives that many librarians possess and consider how those standpoints inform the work with teens from non-dominant backgrounds” (Young Adult Library Services Association, 2014, p. 10), so that “libraries that serve teens [can] affirm teens’ constantly shifting hybrid multicultural identities by adopting inclusive policies, practices, attitudes, and dispositions” (Young Adult Library Services Association, 2014, p.20). Additionally, reaching out to local authors from marginalised communities through their publishers and organising author visits can create opportunities for young readers to connect with writers who may share experiences with them.

In addition to demonstrating to publishers that OwnVoices fiction has an audience which deserves a greater commitment from industry professionals, such events also provide excellent opportunities for supporting and encouraging future authors of Australian OwnVoices fiction by creating opportunities for them to connect with current writers. Without access to the literary “windows, mirrors, and sliding-glass doors” of inclusive books, young readers will find it harder to achieve their own potential as Australians and as writers. In 2012, Bishop reflected on her research, stating,

My assessment was that historically, children from parallel cultures had been offered mainly books as windows into lives that were different from their own, and children from the dominant culture had been offered mainly fiction that mirrored their own lives. All children need both (Bishop, 2012).

That the global advocacy language, and the experience such language conveys, has found a home and expression with Australian authors from marginalised communities despite their varying degrees of engagement with the movement, reveals that the call for greater diversity and inclusion in YA fiction is not just a matter of numbers – it is a deeply personal issue that continues to impact teenagers and authors, particularly those from traditionally marginalised communities. The first step towards fixing the imbalance embedded in this reading experience for Australian young adults is to give their stories a home too.

## Acknowledgements

Emily Booth is currently supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship, and the UTS Doctoral Scholarship.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors. Notes on contributors

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