Investigating the Publication of OwnVoices

Australian Picture Books in 2018

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Abstract

This paper discusses findings from the first OwnVoices count of Australian picture books, as part of a grant-funded partnership with advocacy group *Voices from the Intersection* (VFTI). The research involved the compilation of a detailed annotated list of all Australian picture books published in 2018; the identities of the characters; and demographic information of authors and illustrators, sourced from publicly available resources where creators freely self-identified as belonging to structurally marginalised communities. A book's OwnVoices status was determined from this information. Findings indicate OwnVoices picture books are significantly under-published in Australia, and contribute a greater understanding of the level of equity and access in the contemporary Australian publishing industry.

Keywords: OwnVoices; children's fiction; Australian fiction; diversity; picture books.

Introduction

Recent years have seen a variety of entertainment media increasingly challenged for a lack of diversity by critics, consumers, and advocates for industry equity like *We Need Diverse Books* (WNDB). Picture books are no exception (48). As the first literary space where children encounter representations of people outside their family, they play a critical role in

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introducing new readers to our world. Yet for many children, picture books are also the first time they experience the systemic erasure of, or discrimination against, their identities; whether it be through underrepresentation or often crudely stereotypical depictions of people who share such things as their cultural background, disability, gender, and/or class.

These are just some of the "diverse experiences" recognised and championed by WNDB (48). Similarly, this study focused on four "groups" who have been anecdotally observed to be underrepresented in the Australian publishing industry: First Nations peoples, People of Colour, Queer people, and Disabled people. Throughout this article, the terms 'First Nations' and 'First Peoples' are used to refer to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia. The term 'Indigenous peoples' is used when intending to emphasise a connection between the experiences and exclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with those of Indigenous peoples in other settler-colonial jurisdictions.

It is vital to acknowledge that all narratives written in settler-colonial jurisdictions such as Australia and the US are written on the lands of Indigenous peoples. In the words of Aileen Moreton-Robinson:

> In postcolonizing settler societies, Indigenous people cannot forget
> the nature of migrancy, and we position all non-Indigenous people as
> migrants and diasporic. Our ontological relationship to land, the ways
> that country is constitutive of us, and therefore the inalienable nature
> of our relation to land, marks a radical, indeed incommensurable,
> difference between us and the non-Indigenous. This ontological
> relation to land constitutes a subject position that we do not share,
> that cannot be shared, with the postcolonial subject, whose sense of
> belonging in this place is tied to migrancy (35, 11).

Indigenous peoples occupy a unique position that does not equate with the position of other marginalised peoples and cannot be addressed through general equity measures. As Tuck and Yang remind us, decolonization "is not an approximation of other experiences of oppression" and "is not a swappable term for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools" (44, 3). The very existence of literature that is not Indigenous literature in settler-colonial lands arises from a sense of belonging founded in the denigration of Indigenous peoples and lifeways (28, 9). This narrative of non-Indigenous people belonging to Australia was embodied into *terra nullius*, and forms part of what Kwaymullina describes as the "normalised" and "naturalised" context of settler-colonial states (28, 35).

The characterisation of First Peoples as one of many diverse groups, including within advocacy for greater equity in publishing industries, can erase Indigenous sovereignties and deny Indigenous dispossession. Therefore, while we discuss multiple marginalised groups in this study—including identities that also exist within Indigenous communities—we give primacy to First Nations representation. As Kwaymullina notes, "while the most powerful form/of Settler privilege/is White privilege/all Settlers are privileged/in relation to Indigenous peoples/because all Settlers/benefit from Indigenous dispossession" (28, 37).

This study involved counting the representation of marginalised people among the authors, illustrators, and characters in Australian picture books published in the sample year of 2018. Co-designed and conducted in partnership with local, volunteer-run diversity advocacy organisation *Voices from the Intersection* (VFTI), the findings indicate an imbalanced distribution of creator agency and access in the Australian publishing industry. They provide quantitative insight into the level of agency and access available to authors and/or illustrators in different demographics in the sample year. These insights contribute to our understanding of (a lack of) equity within the Australian publishing industry among

creators, as well as providing indications of contemporary picture book publishing practices, and local responses to diversity advocacy in youth literature.

Literature Review

Though many adults consider the images in a picture book secondary to the written word, due to the dominance of verbal communication between adults in everyday life, this hierarchy is currently being destabilised by contemporary "generations [who are] raised on television and now computers" (38, 2), and are increasingly visual as a result. It is therefore critical that scholarship reflect this shift, as all books for young people "are expressly marketed to a particular intended audience and hold particular explicit and implicit agendas" (30, 10). In children's picture books, where illustrations are frequently used to quickly establish a character's identity with the readers, it is crucial that we examine what these agendas in picture books promote to their audiences. This is especially important in Australian picture books, which are noted for their minimalistic backgrounds (36, 300), making illustrations of characters even more prominent on the page.

Individual books fall in different places of the "word/picture spectrum", in terms of the priority given to the story's words or pictures by the creators (37, 227). However, it is the attributes shared between picture books that shape and reinforce young people's "belief system" (23, 221) and how they will go on to interact with the world. The representation of characters, groups of people, and society as a whole is therefore pertinent, particularly in the wake of WNDB's advocacy. The over- and under-representation of certain identities can lead to a skewed perception of society and the self, through the construction of a singular "normal" child in picture books (33, 110) who adheres to certain "socially accepted hegemonic norms of beauty, gendered roles, age, ethnicity, ability, and status" (11, 71).

Children's books showcasing the diversity of human identities and experiences can counter these skewed perceptions of self. They can do this by facilitating the child reader's

development of empathy for people different to themselves (21, 39), and by enabling stronger reader engagement with a story, when the reader and characters share the same marginalised identity (19, 18). Past studies have also demonstrated that young people's reading of books about marginalised communities can lead to a decrease in homophobic views and behaviours (41; 6), a reduction in their acceptance of sexist "rape myths" (such as women desiring sexual assault) (34), and a decrease in ableist views in readers as young as 5-10 years of age(12).

But for these books to be accessed by readers, they must first be available for bookstores and libraries to stock. Bishop has noted the US publishing industry's over-representation of children from privileged demographics and denial of representation in books to marginalised children (5, 9), and growing mainstream recognition of the value of diversity has prompted action. Prominent US advocacy group WNDB, formed in 2015 and taking their name from novelist Aisha Saeed's 2014 hashtag, have bolstered these conversations in public and industry spaces (48). Using the quantitative data gathered annually by the librarians at the Cooperative Children's Book Center, School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison (CCBC) on author, illustrator, and character identity (13; 48), WNDB has been credited with driving the growth in representation of marginalised communities in children's and young adult fiction in the US (16).

Similarly, Lee and Low's 2016 Diversity Baseline Survey investigated the representation within the US publishing industry of professionals from marginalised communities (17), providing data to advocate for more inclusive industry hiring practices. The quantitative data produced by these diversity counts of authors and illustrators, representation in books, and industry staff, is being used to drive change, and as a result, some growth in the representation of marginalised communities is observable in these areas of children's and young adult fiction in the US (18).

Australia's publishing industry has, historically, promoted this same demographic inequity in its representation of marginalised authors, illustrators, and characters. Despite significant growth in the production of children's books since the post-WWII period in Australia, marginalised communities have been "defined (and tolerated) by the mainstream" rather than being granted an equal place in society and the publishing industry (43, 129). This publishing industry "privilege problem", made up of "a set of structures and attitudes that consistently privilege one set of voices over another" (27), is one that ultimately views— however baselessly— "intercultural and minority culture books as unprofitable" (42, 51).

The result over time has been the production of a relatively homogenous body of children's books that are effectively "telling [marginalised] kids to aspire to a life that can *never* be theirs" (32)—they are not, and can never become, the "normal" child (33, 110) in the books. Further, it maintains the Australian publishing industry's state as an industry with limited access and opportunity for authors from marginalised communities to write about their *own* experiences and identities (10, 9-10). This denies marginalised creators the ability to influence the narratives that are promoted about their identities, while outsiders to their community gain profit and reputation from writing about a marginalised community's experiences. As a result, there can be real-life disadvantages for marginalised creators when outsiders write their narratives, such as a loss of potential income, irrespective of whether the outsider's representation is harmful or not.

Short and Fox argue that marginalised authors writing about their own communities, and outsider authors writing about different (marginalised) communities from their own, produce different stories (20, 17). While outsiders write marginalised characters to educate other outsider children about difference and prejudice, insider authors do so to "enhanc[e] the self-concept of children" from their own communities, and these "differing intentions result in different stories for different audiences" (20, 17). Thus, authorship also plays a significant

role in determining whether books are an experience of "cultural imperialism versus self-affirmation" (4, 11) for readers from marginalised communities.

Books which are authored or illustrated by a creator who shares the same marginalised identity as the protagonist, can be labelled with Duyvis' term "OwnVoices" (15). Unlike outsider narratives, they have a unique capacity to speak directly *to* young readers from marginalised communities in an authentic, engaging way, rather than to an outsider audience for "educational" purposes. Further, the publication of OwnVoices books enables marginalised creators to have creative control over the narratives promoted about their community, and also to be financially supported by the success of these narratives.

Australia has historically been influenced by the US publishing industry's trends (49), and some mainstream Australian publishers have indicated an awareness of the contemporary conversations occurring online and internationally about diversifying publishing industries. Some publishers have even made explicit requests for diverse and/or OwnVoices books on their submission pages (47; 1). Yet anecdotal observations of publishers' outputs indicate Australia has not seen the same surge in inclusive publishing practices (3; 29; 32). As Australia has no equivalent organisation to the US's CCBC to track the representation of marginalised authors, illustrators, and characters, progress cannot be measured and advocacy is limited.

This paper presents the findings of an original research project to create an initial dataset that can act as this baseline. The study was co-designed and conducted in partnership with local, volunteer-run diversity advocacy organisation *Voices from the Intersection* (VFTI), Australia's closest equivalent to WNDB, to ensure it supported the interests of diversity advocates in the Australian context. This study sought to identify how many Australian children's picture books published in 2018 held OwnVoices status—that is, how

many were written and/or illustrated by *and* about people from the same marginalised community as the characters depicted.

An understanding of the identities represented by 2018 OwnVoices picture books, and presence in the broader context of Australian picture books published in the sample year, provides insight into the current priorities of Australian publishers: what they consider profitable and worthy of their limited resources. Further, it creates the grounds for future diversity research in this and other literary categories in Australia. It also allows readers, librarians, industry professionals, and scholars, to better evaluate the authenticity, accessibility, and creative diversity of the contemporary Australian picture book market.

Partnership and Research Questions

This project was co-designed between the researcher and community partners, VFTI. VFTI is run by Dr Ambelin Kwaymullina and Rebecca Lim, who are both authors of OwnVoices children's and young adult fiction. They formed VFTI in 2016 "to support the creation of Aussie Own Voices" books (31), and have undertaken several initiatives to do this since then. This includes organising events for emerging authors of OwnVoices books to pitch their manuscripts directly to Australian publishers (7), and releasing an anthology of young adult OwnVoices fiction, poetry, and non-fiction (*Meet Me At The Intersection*, 2017). However, without the benefit of any data on OwnVoices books that are published annually, supporting the growth of these books in the industry has proved challenging for VFTI and other diversity advocates.

The researcher, Emily Booth, approached VFTI and proposed a partnership, inviting VFTI to identify an area in need of research which would support their needs and interests. Quantitative data on the rate of publication of books by Australian authors from marginalised communities immediately emerged as a priority during correspondence, with international picture books reprinted for the Australian market excluded.

After some discussion and consideration of project feasibility, the final research question was, "How many OwnVoices picture books written by Australian authors were published in Australia in the calendar year 2018?". The calendar year 2018 was nominated as a sample, as it was the full finished year closest to when the project was proposed in 2019.

Method and Analysis

Research aims were identified by VFTI, and VFTI collaborated with the researcher on all areas of the project including the application for funding, except for the data collection process. Data collection commenced following receipt of the project's grant from the University of Technology Sydney's Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion, with funds used to financially support the researcher during the data collection process. VFTI's time was given on a purely voluntary basis.

This project used a methodology that combines bibliographic retrieval, content analysis, and quantitative analysis first designed by the researcher on this project in 2016, as detailed in other publications (8; 9; 10). It has previously been used for another project researching equity into the Australian publishing industry in the field of young adult fiction (8; 9; 10). As this project uses only data that is publicly available in specific contexts (detailed below), no ethics approval was required by the university or funding source.

Collection of demographic data on publishing professionals, including the creators, is typically done through surveys that collect anonymous personal information. This method is used successfully for Lee and Low's Diversity Baseline Survey (18), however, has been demonstrated to be less effective in the Australian context. The 2015 Stella Count Survey, conducted by The Stella Prize, distributed surveys to 370 authors and received only 59 responses, with the count co-ordinator describing the low response rate as "disappointing" (24). The CCBC in the US, having been established for several decades, receives its data through direct submission of books from publishers (13).

The timeline of this project did not allow for the establishment of such strong connections with Australian publishers, and the low response rate to the Stella Count Survey suggested that the survey method would likely be unsuccessful. Therefore, this study used the alternative method previously designed by the researcher in 2016 for the aforementioned research project into diversity in contemporary Australian young adult fiction publishing.

This method involved three stages. The first was the extraction of the 2018 picture book dataset from *The AustLit Database*. The search terms that generated the initial dataset nominated the form of the work as "picture book", the publication year of "2018", a "yes" to "exclude international works" not by Australian creators, and a "yes" to "ignore manuscripts", as the study was only interested in final works. The search produced 519 works on August 22 2019, the date the dataset was retrieved. This included separate listings for every traditionally published book, each series, self-published books, books by Australian authors that were only published in international markets, and some duplicates and miscategorised books (e.g. activity books) as a result of system errors.

To ensure a data set that accurately reflected the Australian picture book market in 2018, data relating to series, duplicates and miscategorised books, boutique- and self-published books, publisher anthologies of "classics", franchise tie-ins, and books by Australian authors that were only published in international markets, were removed from the dataset. This brought the number of picture books that comprised the basis of this study to 284. Book details were then cross-referenced with their listings on the National Library of Australia's *Trove* records to ensure the bibliographic information was correct.

The second stage was a content analysis of each creator's professional materials to ascertain their demographic information; and of the books themselves. This stage involved completing a comprehensive review of all professional, publicly available information on the authors and illustrators. This included press releases and teaching materials for their books,

professional biographies, interviews with media and reviewers, posts on the creators' professional websites, and publicity materials from publishers. Excluded from this process were sources where personal and professional lines were blurred, such as social media. This is an ethical consideration made to ensure the research reflects how each creator articulates their identity in solely professional spaces, as authors and illustrators may be selective about where they declare such personal information. (For further discussion of this consideration, please refer to (8; 9; 10)

In the third stage, all 284 books were evaluated through a visual analysis of the characters' attributes that extended the criteria used in Kurz's study of diversity in picture books (25). This process involved examining their covers and blurbs, the publisher materials released about them, metadata on the *AustLit Database* and in *Trove*, and reader reviews on community-generated sites such as *Goodreads*. Some examples of visual markers of a protagonist's marginalised identity included, but were not limited to: "skin tone, clothing, hairstyle, race/ethnicity of protagonist(s), setting, overall race/ethnicity of the book…" (25, 133-134), as well as illustrations of or references to disability aids or physical disability, and depictions of same-gender romantic affection. Information on books, characters, authors, and illustrators was collected in a detailed annotated list and organised to identify books that fit the OwnVoices criteria.

Books that fell into grey areas, due to their illustrations or publishing circumstances not clearly meeting the identified criteria, were individually discussed with VFTI, to ensure all members on the project were in agreement about how books should be interpreted against the methodology. This process also allowed VFTI to provide the researcher with greater insights and knowledge about how the relationship between representation and authorship should be understood within the specific context of this research project. Finally, the data on

the annotated list was organised into relevant categories (detailed below), and analysed quantitatively.

A Note On Method

The researcher acknowledges that there are several risks involved in using the method described above for this project, with the most significant being the potential erasure of identity of authors from marginalised communities, due to information not being listed in professional spaces, or due to errors in the interpretation of existing information. All efforts were made to mitigate this through consultation with members of VFTI, and the rigorous data collection and analysis process necessitated by this method.

However, this method also had benefits. Unlike a survey, it does not risk being an unusable dataset due to a lack of respondents. Further, it does not burden individuals with the task of responding to a survey, which could be a sensitive exercise due to the topic of personal identity. Rather, this method relies on existing information that creators have *already* provided within the context of their place of work. Therefore, this information has already been freely provided to the public, and this method is understood as the consolidation and organisation of existing and available knowledge. In this way, the project reflects the ethos of OwnVoices within a research context, as in Duyvis' own words:

> Nobody is under any obligation to disclose any part of their
>
> identity. Safety and privacy are essential. We're just
>
> working with the information we have; it's all we can do
>
> (15).

Findings: The Distribution of Diversity In 2018 Australian Picture Books

This study found that only 13 of the 284 Australian picture books published in 2018 were eligible for OwnVoices status. We note that books by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

creators that contained narratives about The Dreaming are included within the category of OwnVoices, regardless of the physical form of the protagonist.

Of these 13 books, nine were by First Nations creators, three books were by creators of Colour, and one book was by a Disabled author. Of the books by First Nations creators, eight were by First Nations authors and seven were by First Nations illustrators. Of these 13 books, there were three Authors of Colour and two Illustrators of Colour, and one book was written by a Disabled Author. No Disabled illustrators contributed to OwnVoices books, and there were no OwnVoices picture books by Queer creators identified.

[Figure 1 here]

[Figure 2 here]

Due to the ethical considerations addressed during the data collection process, which necessarily limited some potential sources of information, the researcher emphasises that findings are *indicative* of the amount of OwnVoices picture books published in 2018. Furthermore, these findings are intended to be reflective of the acquisition patterns and preferences of Australian publishers, with regard to *whom* they empower to write, and what narratives they allow them to tell.

Discussion: Only 4% OwnVoices

This project sought to identify how many OwnVoices Australian picture books were published in the calendar year 2018. These findings reveal a stark reality: only 13 of the 284 picture books published held OwnVoices status, as determined by the guidelines of this study. This indicates a severely low publication rate for this unique type of literature. Within the broader context of Australian picture book publishing trends for 2018, it can be observed that *non*-OwnVoices books appear to be prioritised by publishers.

OwnVoices books made up only 4% of all Australian children's picture books published in 2018. The researcher acknowledges that these numbers may be in-part

influenced by some marginalised creators choosing not to disclose their identity in a professional context for personal reasons; and we only investigated disclosures in the professional context, out of respect for creators' privacy. Additionally, as the number of OwnVoices books is so dramatically disproportionate to the number of non-OwnVoices books, low self-identification rates cannot reasonably be the sole contributing factor.

One possible factor is that creators may strategically choose not to identify themselves as marginalised in order to improve their chances of publication, which is supported by studies that reveal that marginalised Australian young adult fiction authors face additional barriers to publication, as well as censorship from publishers and audiences as a result of their identity (9; 10). However, based on these numbers, it is more plausible that marginalised authors and their OwnVoices books are simply being under-published.

The most represented category of OwnVoices picture books was those by First Nations creators. However, they were only nine of 284 Australian picture books published in 2018, and the majority of these nine books were published by the Indigenous small press, Magabala Books. These numbers reveal the extent to which First Nations stories continue to be erased to uphold the historical narrative of settler-colonisers themselves belonging to, and representing what is now called Australia (28, 35). OwnVoices books by First Nations creators were notable for their books' narratives being explicitly primarily directed towards First Nations children as the intended readers and recipients of these "central values and stories of their own cultures" (20, 17).

While this was expected of the OwnVoices books as a standard, some OwnVoices books by creators of Colour and Disabled creators unexpectedly appeared to a have a more educational approach. Past research with marginalised Australian authors of OwnVoices YA fiction has found authors wrote to affirm the existence of their community (9), however, these authors have also been found to be burdened by an expectation that they educate

outsiders about their community (10). A similar study with OwnVoices picture book creators could provide insight into their intentions for their work, as well as the potential role of publishers in their books' focus.

That only 13 OwnVoices books were published in the sample year reveals that there were minimal opportunities for marginalised characters to be represented by creators who shared their character's identities, and who could provide an authentic representation of their communities. This is particularly significant regarding First Nations creators, who are the original storytellers of the continent, in which everything is formed and informed by these cultures; and is cared for and alive (22).

That only 4% of Australian picture books published in 2018 were OwnVoices is striking, and indicates that authors and illustrators from marginalised communities are still not receiving adequate access to the Australian publishing industry to publish their stories, control their narratives, and benefit from their mainstream distribution channels. The absence of these representations disadvantages *all* children, by depriving them of opportunities to read about the diversity of human experiences, identities and histories, and assisting them to develop empathetically.

Conclusion

This project was the first OwnVoices count of Australian children's picture books, using 2018 as a sample year. This included only nine OwnVoices books by First Nations creators, three OwnVoices books by creators of Colour, and one OwnVoices book by a Disabled creator were identified. No OwnVoices picture books by Queer creators were identified. The findings suggest that there is still limited access to the Australian publishing industry for marginalised creators seeking to publish OwnVoices picture books.

Causes for the underrepresentation of OwnVoices books were not explored as part of this project, though there were several implications that can be explored in future research.

However, one significant question raised by this study is whether Australian publishers are relying on international picture books to contribute representation of marginalised identities; particularly as picture book releases from the US are significantly more diverse than the 2018 sample in this study (40; 45; 46). The findings of this project establish a baseline, from which progress in diversifying Australian picture books can continue to be monitored.

Picture books play a crucial introductory role in showing children the diverse range of human communities, cultures, identities, and experiences in the world, and inclusion is just as much about the books as it is about the people who make them. But as the results of this study demonstrate, the Australian publishing industry still does not adequately support the creation of picture books in which marginalised creators share the stories of their own communities. We will only see change when marginalised creators of stories hold the pen *and* the power.

Acknowledgements

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List of Figure Captions

1. Figure 1: 2018 OwnVoices Australian picture books by creator community – overview
2. Figure 2: 2018 OwnVoices Australian picture books by creator community – detailed