



The State of the Industry: Australian Publishing as Seen from the Margins

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Abstract

The Australian publishing industry, although smaller than some international counterparts, is nevertheless a vital contributor to the local artistic culture. Like many other industries, it is facing increasing pressure from readers and writers alike to become more inclusive in its practices, from the books it publishes to the people it employs. This research examines the current state of the Australian industry from the perspectives of First Nations and culturally diverse authors who have achieved publication, considering both their personal experiences as well as their perspectives of the industry at a structural level. We find that these authors, regardless of their success and passion, often feel that the industry and its adjacent organizations (e.g. writing festivals) devalues them as artists. Instead, they often felt—or were openly told—that their acceptance was to fulfil a kind of “cultural ambassador”-type role for an audience. We contextualize our discussion by examining how the Australian publishing history has evolved in such a way that it creates a narrow concept of who can be an “Australian author,” and argue that in order for these writers to be truly included, the perception of who can be an Australian author must also evolve.

Keywords Writing · Publishing · Diversity · Authors · Australia

Introduction

The last ten years have seen a significant increase in efforts to gain insight into the levels of equity and access within publishing industries, and their associated institutions, around the world for demographics who have historically been excluded.

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Methods have included examining the books being published, those which are reviewed, and which win the literary prizes that are so often career-making. In Anglophone countries like Australia, England and the USA, First Nations and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities have been agitating for their right to see their stories represented and held in esteem in an industry which typically under-publishes and under-recognizes them. In the USA and UK, initiatives such as the Lee & Low Baseline Diversity Survey (Lee and Low Books 2021), the VIDA Women of Colour Count (Books & Publishing, 2016), the non-profit group We Need Diverse Books (We Need Diverse Books),¹ and the Jhalak Prize² for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) writers were early 21st-century drivers of the focus on what has broadly been termed the current movement towards “diversity in publishing.” In the USA, these groups build on the legacies of individual librarians, and particularly Black women librarians such as Augusta Baker and Charlemae Hill Rollins, who advocated for and connected young readers with books that reflected their own cultural identity (Cooke 2023).

The term “diversity” is of course imperfect as a descriptor of people and books, as it assumes that there is a homogenous non-diverse writing population by which other writers and other texts are marked as “diverse.” Nevertheless, it has become a key word used within these movements, including by We Need Diverse Books, and this is the context in which we use it. Australian responses to these initiatives overseas have included the Stella Prize,³ the Stella Count (Harvey and Lamond 2017; 2019), and the Blak and Bright festival.⁴ These public-facing initiatives clearly indicate that there is a hunger among readers to understand how the industry works, particularly as it applies to historically marginalized writers. This is supported by the fact that public commentary on this issue outside of academic research has also increased in recent years.

While numerical data, community-led activism, and prize initiatives are useful and necessary tools in industries which normalize certain works and fetishize others on the basis of factors including race and ethnicity, these only give us part of the story. To gain a complete picture, we need to hear from the people involved, such as the authors themselves. Yet, this can also pose challenges when such people are reluctant to speak, as past studies have found (Kon-yu 2018). Australia has a relatively small publishing industry compared to other Anglophone countries, and in this small market, many authors, editors, publishers, reviewers and judges know each other quite well, and this is especially the case for those who work with small publishers where there are additional challenges (Masson 2020, 481). In this context, there are risks for authors from CALD communities related to speaking frankly and publicly about the Australian publishing industry and potential issues (Booth and Narayan 2021a, 16). Most Australian writers also make very little money from

¹ <https://diversebooks.org/about-wndb/> (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/77oXFNXMh>).

² <https://www.jhalakprize.com/about>.

³ <https://stella.org.au/>.

⁴ <https://blakandbright.com.au/>.

writing books (Australian Society of Authors 2023a; 2023b), and as a result of this financial precarity, it is unsurprising that many authors are unable to publicly critique their work industry due to fear of a loss of income and ability to undertake future projects.

To fully understand how the publishing industry in Australia arrived at its present state—one in which it is viewed as not diverse enough—this paper first provides an overview of how “whiteness” as a construct became established in Australia, and the specific ideological values that came to be associated with this status. We next discuss how this influenced the emergence of the Australian publishing industry itself, and how this provided the foundation of what “Australian literature” is in the present day. Following this, we touch on recent research that has sought to examine the state of the local publishing industry from various related perspectives, before moving onto the interviews themselves in which contemporary First Nations and CALD authors speak about the present state of the industry.

Literature Review: Making Australia

The history of Australian colonization is foundational to understanding the nation’s literature and who is able to achieve publication as an author of recognizably “Australian” stories. While a comprehensive overview of Australian history is naturally beyond the scope of this article, we highlight a few key points in the following section to draw attention to how these historical events have in part contributed to the state of the publishing industry today. The very existence of the nation of Australia today is founded on the displacement of First Nations peoples and the manipulation or silencing of their stories, which has continued to have devastating implications for those First Nations inhabitants who survived British invasion in 1788. Tony Birch writes that:

white Australia attempted to exterminate both the physical and social body of Indigenous people from national historical memory within what would ideally become a homogenised pure white nation. It was, after all, the Chief Protector of Native Affairs in Western Australia, A.O. Neville, who produced the definitive ideological “final solution” to Australia’s unnerving “Aboriginal problem”. Neville sought to cleanse both the nation and the landscape of its darkness through the removal and “assimilation” policies of the 1920s and 1930s that would ideally produce a future Australia where it would be forgotten that there had ever been an Indigenous “race” (Neville 1948). This attempt to destroy Indigenous identity was also a clear act of genocide, regardless of claims to the contrary stated with such authority by some historians. (Birch 2007)

This attempted destruction of Indigenous identity has also meant, as Alexis Wright states that, “Aboriginal people have not been in charge of the stories other people tell about us,” (2016) and this has enabled imperialist stories about First Nations people to flourish in Australia. In *Neither Settler nor Native* (2020),

Mahmood Mamdani demonstrates how narratives related to citizenship within countries like Australia were subject to the whims of the government of the day. For Mamdani, early British colonization took the shape of “direct rule,” which in the case of Australia included genocide, but also a replacement of all local laws, religions, practices, language and institutions with European practices (Mamdani 2020, 10). The use of language as a tool of the colonial project cannot be minimized, as Anita Heiss and Peter Minter write “For Aboriginal people, the use of English became a necessity within the broader struggle to survive colonisation. From the early days, writing became a tool of negotiation in which Aboriginal voices could be heard in a form recognisable to British authority” (2008). Wright asserts that “The plot line has always been for one outcome, to erode Aboriginal belief in sovereignty, self-governance and land rights, even when it has gotten to the point where most Aboriginal people have been silenced, or feel too overwhelmed to fight any more” (2016). When we consider the question of who is able, in the present day, to achieve publication as an “Australian” writer, we must keep in mind that First Nations writers only occupy this marginalized position because it has been forced upon them, and upheld through subsequent government practices. As Sandra Phillips writes, “We are a long way from a national literature overflowing with stories from Indigenous writers, storytellers, creatives and communities” (2022).

Early Australian governments also actively sought to preserve British traditions and worldviews, which was ensured through government policies towards First Nations people, in its approach to immigration. For historian James Jupp, a preservation of British-ness is one of the most important pillars of Australia’s early immigration policy (2002, 17). In response to increased migration to Australian goldfields from China in the 1850s, at Federation in 1901, the Australian government put in place the Immigration Restriction Act (known colloquially as “The White Australia Policy”) (Jupp 2002, 18). This aimed to ensure that migrants coming to Australia were predominantly from the British Isles, keeping the migrant population physically and culturally homogenous. When this was amended in 1958 by the creation of the Migration Act, incoming migrants were scrutinized in terms of physical and cultural difference and migrants from non-European nations were given little or no assistance from the Australian government (Jupp 2002, 34). As we can see in today’s political landscape, this is a practice which still continues.

Making Australian Literature

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said writes that “culture comes to be associated, often aggressively, with the nation or the state; this differentiates ‘us’ from ‘them,’ almost always with some degree of xenophobia. Culture is in this sense, a source of identity, and a rather combative one at that” (1993). In Australia, this has meant that Australian literature has been a site in which stories of what Australia is, and who is counted as an Australian subject, is expressed. Wright describes living “a life’s work of growing increasingly aware of how other people were telling stories on behalf of Aboriginal people in Australia, and how stories are used in campaigns to achieve certain goals,” identifying First Nations peoples as “the

country's troubling conscience" who are "managed by its most powerful power brokers through a national narrative" (2016). André Dao, like Wright, argues that storytelling and nation-building are inextricable, "Once the nation has its own literature, the settlers will truly belong here—and the dispossession of the world's longest continuing cultures will have been completed" (2024). Constructing a national literature in turn constructs a nation.

The first publishers established in Australia were merely outposts for selling books by British publishers, rather than to support any writers based in the colony (Ferguson and James, 2006). This proved to be a hugely profitable enterprise due to the enthusiastic book-buying habits of those living in the colonies up to and into the 1920s (Lyons 2001). Although the population in Australia largely thought of themselves as British at the time, naturally, cultural differences began to emerge between the British in England and those residing in Australia (White 1981). As a result, a desire for reading and writing more relevant works emerged, and publishers such as the notable Angus and Robertson stepped up to publish these writers in response (Alison 2001). Initially focussing on male writers, by the 1940s, women writers were also achieving publication (Webby 1998). The first First Nations author to be published is widely recognized to be David Unaipon in 1929, who is today commemorated by University of Queensland Press with an award for Emerging Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Writer launching in 1988 (Munro 2006). It was not until World War Two and the paper shortage that British publishers finally relented and licensed their books to be printed in Australia, benefiting the local market considerably (Munro and Curtain 2006).

Leigh Dale writes that "a claim for the study of Australian Literature" in universities, as a body of work distinct from British literature, was first made by F.W. Robinson in 1930 (2020). Clearly, culture and writing had, despite the efforts of the government, evolved into something unlike what was found in British society. Yet even after that first call in the 1930s, it took decades for Australian literature to come into its own. Sneja Gunew and Wenche Ommundsen argue that, "'Australian literature' as a distinct national tradition did not achieve full recognition until the second half of the twentieth century" when the first academic journals and Australian literature university courses emerged (2018). Part of the focus on Australian literature as a distinct category was "marked by the search to define a literary and cultural identity—a national, often nationalist, endeavour to acknowledge roots in the British tradition while, at the same time, charting those departures from that tradition which could be classified as distinctly Australian" (Gunew and Ommundsen 2018). However, the national literature that emerged was not representative of the population at that time. Alison Bartlett (2020) and Lars Jensen (2002) have noted that the quintessential Australian characters at this stage were white, male and situated rurally, rather than in the urban centre. Chief among them were bushrangers, convicts and Anzacs (Jensen 2002). First Nations peoples and migrants of non-Anglo heritage did not figure prominently in this version of Australian literature.

Gunew and Ommundsen note that when in the 1980s the idea of "Australian literature" began to be criticized for its adherence to a "white Anglo-Celtic literary canon" over the "much more diverse" literary and cultural scene which was "emerging," literary establishments and eminent writers perceived these criticisms as a kind

of “betrayal, the denigration of a hard-fought heritage and the wilful promotion of foreign, mostly inferior writers” (2018). This is despite Australia’s proud promotion of itself as a multicultural society. Despite this mixed population, and the inroads made by some First Nations writers and writers of migrant backgrounds, writers and critics have had to work hard against the monolithic Australian cultural identity in literature. Even today, authors from culturally diverse backgrounds find themselves and their work pigeonholed by publishers and reviewers alike on the basis of their identity (Guntarik 2013).

Johanson et al. (2023) have argued that dedicated library services which engage specific demographics, such as the now-closed Centre for Youth Literature run by the State Library of Victoria, have historically held a key role in supporting inclusive fiction for multiple reasons. Direct engagement with patrons allows library staff to connect readers with books through providing recommendations or in group “storytimes” (Cahill et al. 2021) and even ensuring the books are available, through either print or electronic copies (Lear and Pritt 2021). Johanson et al. (2023) specifically argue that librarians are able to connect with publishers and provide direct insights into audience reading interests, including in reading books by authors from a variety of walks of life, of which publishers are often surprisingly unaware. Lack of government funding to support such dedicated work through libraries therefore has the potential to directly influence publishers’ willingness to invest in books by writers of marginalized communities.

Research and Response

There has been greater public attention to publishing industry access and equity in recent years on an international scale. For example, the “Re:Thinking Diversity in Publishing” by Anamik Saha and Sandra van Lente (2020) was the first academic report to examine the UK industry’s publication of diverse writers and encompassed interviews with “agents, publishers, editors, people who work in marketing, design, publicity and sales, and booksellers” as well as festival organizers and authors (2020). This international focus on diversity has occurred alongside a growth in local research into the Australian publishing industry. In addition to the projects discussed in the introduction, research has also been undertaken into the experiences of Australian young adult fiction authors from marginalized communities (Booth and Narayan 2018a, b; 2020; 2021a, b, c). However, most studies in this area have been quantitative. For example, research has documented the under-representation of marginalized communities in children’s picture books (Booth, Kwaymullina, and Lim 2021; Booth and Lim, 2022a,b), and, perhaps unsurprisingly, that 88% of the protagonists in Children’s Book Council of Australia-winning books are “white” (Caple and Tian 2022). More recently, it was found that 3% of Australian books published in 2018 were by First Nations authors, while 7% were written by People of Colour, with the remainder not being identifiable as part of a marginalized cultural community (Kon-yu and Booth 2023). On the publishing side, the Australian Publishers Association has also released a report on the demographics of employees working within the publishing industry, concluding that “Fewer than 1% of

Australian publishing industry professionals identify as First Nations. 10.5% identify with a European culture (other than British), compared to an estimated 18% of the Australian population. 8.5% of respondents nominate an Asian cultural identity, compared with 17% of the Australian workforce” (Bowen and Driscoll 2022). These quantitative results point to an imbalance in the industry; yet despite this, authors from marginalized communities have still successfully accomplished publication.

In approaching writers from distinct Australian cultural groups—First Nations writers, and immigrant/migrant writers who are gathered under the term of CALD writers—this study is concerned with how issues of cultural identity continue to operate within Australian literature. While the challenges and experiences of First Nations writers and CALD writers have points of difference, both groups are disadvantaged by their relationships to whiteness. As we have sought to demonstrate, the complex history of the country and government policy has played a significant role in how the industry has evolved into its current state, and therefore it follows that there is more to be understood about the state of the industry than what numbers alone could demonstrate. For example, for those First Nations and CALD authors who did gain access to publication, what was their perception of the industry from the inside? What role did prizes, reviews, and writers’ festivals play in the promotion and reception of their works? And what changes, if any, had they perceived in these industry and industry-affiliated spaces in recent years?

Method

This project involved semi-structured interviews with seven published female, male, and non-binary Australian writers who defined themselves as “non-White,” conducted in 2019–2021. The writers’ work spanned a range of genres (poetry, fiction, non-fiction) and all age groups (picture books, children’s fiction, YA and adult fiction). This purposive sampling approach ensured that a range of writing experiences was included, and the semi-structured approach allowed participants control over the conversation, including raising topics that were of relevance and interest to them. Each author had to have at least one book published so that the interviews could encompass reviews and prizes, as well as attitudes towards the industry. However, some authors in this data-set are highly prolific, meaning the sample spanned a range of experiences and time active in the industry. Ethics approval was granted through the Victoria University Low-Risk Ethics Committee (HRE 17—198).

The interviewees came from a range of cultural backgrounds including First Nations writers. In structuring the research around the perspectives of “non-white” authors, we note that concepts like “whiteness” and “white Australia” are largely imaginative rather than based on specific cultural practices and histories, yet this does not stop them being structurally and ideologically restrictive for those excluded from these definitions at any given time. As Ghassan Hage notes, “‘Whiteness’ is itself a fantasy position of cultural dominance born out of the history of European expansion” (1998), and that this imaginary position is still one imbued with cultural power. Therefore, the use of terms like “white” or “non-white” within this paper do not refer to specific demographics, but rather ideological framings that have been

applied to authors, including through their own use, as a means of excluding or centering them in the Australian publishing industry. Given the relatively small size of the CALD writing community in Australia we cannot identify which cultures are represented in the sample, as this could potentially identify participants and compromise the confidentiality of the research. The interviews ranged from thirty minutes to just over an hour, depending on the author. The same questions were asked of each author, with additional prompts given when necessary (See Appendix 1).

The interviews were transcribed from the audio recordings, and then thematically coded by both researchers for the analysis. Any areas in which differences emerged in the coding were discussed between the researchers until agreement was reached. From the coded data, findings that related to the state of the Australian publishing industry and adjacent organizations were selected for discussion in this paper.

Findings

The authors echoed quantitative research discussed above into the Australian publishing industry—that it still under-represents authors and narratives that have not historically been thought of as “Australian.” The authors expressed that they were still perceived as “other” within the Australian book industry. Our writers were published by both small and large publishers, yet we did not observe any difference in authors’ experience on the basis of the publisher’s size. For this paper we have selected only that material that corresponds to the state of the Australian publishing industry as it currently functions. Within this categorization three main themes emerged, 1) How the industry works, 2) Challenges within the industry and 3) Possibilities for improving the industry.

How the Industry Works

One of the most intriguing findings in this research was that, on an individual level, authors had largely positive experiences of working with the industry. Their concerns about inequality were typically specific to the structural level of how the industry operated. Author 1, who had a well-established career, felt that there had been real positive changes in the Australian publishing industry in recent decades, which could bring about positive social change. They said:

despite the problems you face in the system, young people, blackfellas, people of colour, whitefellas are getting access to a lot more Aboriginal literature than 10–20 years ago, and I think the benefits of that will grow in the next few years.

However, at the same time, they were wary about how the surge in interest could impact up-and-coming authors. They shared that they sometimes warned junior authors that “some of the people who publish you don’t even care about your work. They want to publish you because they need your content,” and that therefore, these writers had to be careful about how they negotiated the industry.

While recognizing that publishers were now more interested in publishing literature from their community, and that this had benefits, Author 1 was mindful that this also had limitations. Most concerning was the idea that “culturally diverse” authors would feel pressure to speak of their ethnicity and background in ways that were not expected of “white” authors. Author 2 highlighted a similar tension that existed in their writing process. They said they had to “be a bit careful about how much I subject my non-Aboriginal readers to, otherwise they wouldn’t cope, so it’s got to be funny.” Humour was Author 2’s strategy for introducing more serious issues, without risking the loss of their “non-Aboriginal” readership which would in-turn influence their income. Despite having enjoyed considerable success in their careers as individuals, both Author 1 and Author 2 were mindful that their writing might not be appreciated by publishers or audiences without some kind of creative compromise.

Author 3 similarly expressed the sense that, although there had been many positive changes in the publishing industry and related industries, challenges remained. For example, they felt that while book reviewers and writers’ festival organizing panels had become much more inclusive in terms of gender, cultural background, and sexual orientation in particular, the need to earn money to maintain these spaces could lead to choosing to feature guests who were “accessible” to the audience. However, as they explained, this and other issues were not the result of ill intentions:

I don’t believe that Australian institutions are deliberately malicious and intentionally racist. I think lots of the Australian bureaucratic and industry and social structures are grounded in really long held institutional racism which is very hard to expose ... like fish in the water ... it’s very hard to understand when you’re inside it.

For Author 3, the perspective gained from being active in these festival spaces in particular had highlighted just how precarious the arts industries are today. At the same time, the changes they had seen over the years highlighted the potential for future progress; in particular, the changing audience make-up which appeared to have more interest in books from First Nations and culturally diverse writers.

Author 4 felt that there was a difference in how their work was received by their audience, compared to the treatment they received from festival and educator spaces. As a writer for young people, they described their child and teenage readers, as well as adult readers of young adult fiction as “passionate” and “non-discriminant” in their reading. Among this readership, Author 4 felt their work was evaluated on its merit. However, the reception of their work was totally different among school teachers, as well as adult members of the general public who did not engage with literature for young people. For example, Author 4 recalled feeling like they had to be the “token non-white thinking” following a conversation with a school teacher who “very directly acknowledged” that Author 4 was only invited to speak to students at the school to fulfil a cultural diversity education milestone. Perhaps even more startlingly, they mentioned that they had been turned away from a certain venue by people who thought Author 4 was an attendee, rather than the author hosting the session—and that this had happened “about four times” at the same location. Experiences like the instances described here had been highly embarrassing for Author

4, and required them to keep proving their merit to those who could seemingly not perceive them as an Australian artist.

Author 5, like the aforementioned authors, had mixed feelings about the current state of the industry. On the one hand, they felt that progress in the industry was limited in the sense that “we’re not doing well with diverse stories that aren’t the terrible refugee migrant experience;” which is to say, that there were too few stories that featured characters from these communities that weren’t about driven by social issues. This resulted in a kind of “mould” into which stories about various communities had to fit, in order to be published. At the same time, Author 5 recognized that challenges around sustaining an equitable industry were complex because “it’s systemic” and that “there aren’t enough people of colour or people of disability or First Nations people actually getting into publishing” for a variety of reasons. The resulting impact was that there were fewer authors and publishing professionals from these communities, which in turn led to fewer opportunities to innovate beyond “tragic” books about being marginalized in society.

Author 6 had a considerably more positive experience with their publisher, who they described as “wonderful.” They acknowledged that there was a need for some of their books to be written in a more didactic manner, however, this was connected directly to the specific categories of children’s and young adult fiction books rather than resulting from their cultural background. They did not feel they had experienced any specific pressures with their books in other publishing categories, either as a result of their cultural background or any other factor. Indeed, Author 6 felt the publishing industry was welcoming new authors from various marginalized communities more than ever now, which they considered to be a positive development. Overall, Author 6’s comments stood out as an example of the kind of experience that all authors deserve, wherein they have creative freedom over their work and a trusting relationship with the publishing professionals they work with.

Author 7, in reflecting on the current state of the Australian publishing industry, was sympathetic towards the at-times contradictory pressures of modern advocacy movements. While they welcomed the push for more authors from culturally diverse and other marginalized communities to be supported wholeheartedly, they stated that:

it must be difficult for [publishers] to deal with, on the one hand, being asked to treat, identity groups as groups, with common grievances and aspirations, I guess, and on the other hand, especially in the cultural space, that is really about you know, the specificities of the thing itself.

Author 7 recognized that publishers, in being asked to promote authors who could “represent” specific communities, were therefore to some extent *needing* to approach writing by these authors as issue-driven first and as artistic material second. This ironically could have the effect of leading to a narrower scope of creative freedom for authors from these communities, as being published could depend on how well they were perceived to have adhered to a certain kind of cultural script. This could be a contributing factor to the writing “mould” identified by Author 5. While Author 7 rejected the perspective that any group, including cultural groups, could be viewed as homogenous in this way, they also felt that perhaps the current

writing climate had to some extent produced this essentialist approach to writers from marginalized communities.

Challenges in the Industry

The interviewees in this sample expressed some clear frustrations at the state of the industry as it is today. Despite their own success, several authors clarified numerous times during the interviews that the resulting publications of this research would be anonymous. The precarious nature of the industry, as well as the potential additional vulnerability they face as First Nations and culturally diverse writers who have had to overcome additional systemic barriers to be published, meant they were cautious about any negative impact for their careers. Nevertheless, they strongly believed in the importance of the research and offered a number of criticisms of the Australian publishing industry in its current state. These critiques span a range of topics, but what unifies them is that these perceived shortcomings were experienced by the writers as the result of the industry being under-equipped to support them.

Author 1 expressed the view that industry professionals and reviewers could at times be too focussed on their cultural background to value their work for its artistic merit. For example, they noted that commissions for writing often seemed to come with the expectation that the resulting fiction would be about their cultural community, even though this was rarely a major aspect of their work. When it came to reviews of their work, Author 1 felt that high-quality reviews focussed on the art “the best reviews of the book haven’t mentioned me at all, or just briefly, and have really got into the bones of the story and I think that’s what we really should be doing.”

For Author 1, the fact that their craft was often positioned as second to their cultural identity by publishing professionals and reviewers was just one factor that signalled to them that they were considered a minority in the publishing industry. This sentiment was shared by Author 2, who noted that their work was “full of metaphors,” yet felt that because of their cultural background, “people aren’t examining my work for the level of metaphor that is actually present.” Although Author 2 did not have concrete evidence that this was the reason—which may also be attributable to individual reviewer’s weaknesses in their own craft—Author 2 had experienced this shallow engagement so many times that it seemed unlikely to be the result of a few inexperienced individuals. Rather, Author 2 was facing the same issue of being perceived first and foremost as a representative of their cultural community rather than as a true Australian author.

Author 3 identified a related frustration with the industry-adjacent space of writers’ festivals, wherein people were invited by organizers to fulfil demographic criteria rather than to be there as artists. This was apparent to Author 3 from their extensive experience on the festival circuit, as well as their sense that panels could sometimes be assembled around cultural identity or social issues rather than craft. Author 3 characterized the process of some festival organizers as follows:

If we need an Arab, we can get this person ... if we need [a] Greek or an Italian person who reflects that sort of migrant space, we can get that person

... if we want to see someone from the African diaspora and a newly arrived refugee setting ... I mean sometimes you could make up these festival programs with your eyes closed by just going through the usual suspects of people of who have some hyper visibility and a particular kind of acceptability politics.

This approach led to the experience of being at festivals as less of an artistic role for the author, and more of a cultural ambassador. While the inclusion of these authors at festivals is certainly something to be celebrated, this revelation from a more established writer is concerning given that there are a number of new authors from First Nations and culturally diverse communities currently breaking into the industry. This could potentially result in these more junior authors feeling discouraged from continuing to pursue a writing career, undermining the progress the industry has recently seen.

Author 4's comments provide further insight into the experience of being on these festival panels. The awareness that they are in the minority among festival guests and that the audience may be predominantly made up of people from an Anglo-Australian background made the experience quite stressful:

you feel a lot of pressure to be like polite and diplomatic about anything that you say ... as the official representative of non-white people you feel a lot of pressure to be palatable and not scare people off.

The sense that the author has to act as a kind of ambassador or "representative" of their community can here be seen to have a negative impact on the author's capacity to freely discuss their craft and ideas. Unable to fully embody the audience and festival planner's concept of an "Australian author," Author 4's acceptance is conditional on the basis of their identity being offered up for interest and evaluation, rather than their craft.

Author 5 saw this conditional acceptance as extending to the types of books that publishers were accepting from culturally diverse authors. While acknowledging that entrenched behaviours in the industry were not "something you can change quickly," and that on an individual level people may not be actively excluding certain kinds of stories, Author 5 felt that publishers had become trapped in a cycle where they were reproducing many of the same stories: "they're just choosing stuff they are comfy with and selling it to people who would be comfy with that and the rest ... who don't get it are just shut out ... that's the problem I think."

Author 5 felt that as a result of the industry being trapped in this cycle, the only new authors from First Nations or culturally diverse backgrounds who were able to be published were those who were able to adapt to the style desired by publishers. In much the same way that these authors felt restricted in what they could say at festivals, the risk of very real constraints on junior authors' creative freedom was a matter of concern for Author 5.

Author 6 echoed this view, and expressed the perspective that these pressures were already affecting upcoming writers and their work. They described their perception of books by these junior writers as follows:

so many stories I get follow a very similar narrative, as you know ... we need an Iranian refugee, we need a Sudanese [refugee]—the market hasn't got that pocket filled, and you could interchange these stories because they're so similar. It's like someone's just extracted their voice—*not* their voice, their *story*, there's no *voice* in it. They all sound the same. And that's *really heartbreaking*.

For Author 6, although author diversity was slowly increasing in terms of the range of demographics able to publish a book, this had not resulted in an increase in the variety of voices that were coming through. Rather, Author 6 believed that there were pressures within the publishing industry that were leading to junior writers needing to compromise their voice in order to be published. Author 6's comments draw attention to the danger of this pattern: if upcoming authors' creative freedoms continue to be restricted in this way, they will continue to be pressured to act as representatives of their culture, rather than truly coming into their own as artists.

Possible Solutions

Despite the obvious frustrations that authors had with the Australian publishing industry, there was also a sense that the industry had the potential to develop solutions and improve the conditions that First Nations and culturally diverse authors currently work in. Author 5 believed that creating pathways that enabled a more diverse industry workforce could have a positive impact on authors, as well as inspire more young people from these communities to want to work in publishing roles:

I don't know if it's like a putting a program together that actually gives people internships that are paid or just letting them see what the industry looks like so that's it's not this forbidding thing full of white women or white men but actually somewhere that's welcoming for people who are a little bit different.

Importantly, this suggestion incorporates not just the goal of inspiring people to work in the publishing industry, but also a possible example of a practical method that could help people gain paid experience needed to successfully get jobs. The Australian Publishers Association's internship program the Open Book is one example of a strategy that specifically aims to "foster cultural diversity within the Australian publishing industry," and which commits a minimum of one internship slot to a First Nations candidate.⁵ Greater support for initiatives such as this, supported with funding from sources like the Australian government could considerably boost its impact.

Author 1 offered advice to the cohort of aspiring authors from First Nations and culturally diverse communities, based on their own experience of being expected to write only about their cultural community. This advice to protect one's creative freedom was clearly balanced with the realistic consideration of young authors not necessarily being able to decline publication opportunities:

⁵ <https://www.openbookinternship.org/about>.

all you gotta do is ask yourself the question, what do they want, but what can I do with this? Whether they have a shallow intention, whether they are ethical or not it's not that you'd say, no I won't do it, it's can I produce work of quality and can I reach the readership that will be important.

Author 1's strategy to protect the creative expression of these young readers and resist the pressure to write as a kind of cultural representative, was to therefore look for openings to subvert reader and publisher expectations. This does not suggest that no changes in industry culture need to be made; rather, it is a strategy that writers can follow to maintain pride in their craft without merely rejecting opportunities that might be important in developing a sustainable career.

Discussion

Despite the limitations they had witnessed, the authors interviewed for this project still believe in the importance of writing and choose to continue this career. They loved being writers, but wanted the industry and adjacent groups such as festival organizers and educators to value them as artists. They wanted future writers to be welcome and not face the challenges they faced. They acknowledged that the industry has seen some improvements, but also expressed that this improvement had not yet occurred at a systemic level. Additionally when they were asked to comment on the industry as they saw it, most acknowledged that they still felt expectations as “minority writers” both in what they wrote, but also in how they spoke about their work on panels and in interviews. This idea of *expectation* intensified in the responses from the authors when they were asked about the challenges in the industry today. Every single author felt the burden to speak as much or if not more about their cultural identity as they did about their writing. This also manifested in the feeling of tokenism in their invitations to speak at certain events. The idea of “filling some diversity quota” was yet another burden to carry in a career in which there is intense competition and little financial stability. It is clear that these authors had all developed ways of dealing with these additional pressures, whether it was to limit how and when they spoke of their cultural backgrounds or to offer up solutions on how the publishing industry could change.

The fact that this kind of research can now be done with “diverse” authors points to an improvement in the industry, and many of the authors interviewed were hopeful about the incremental changes they were observing. However, this ran alongside a kind of weariness at the industry and the way they all felt positioned by and within it. So while the *numbers* of migrants from culturally diverse backgrounds that have emigrated to Australia has increased since 1959, their *presence* here remains contested by those that consider themselves “true Australians.” The writers we interviewed felt that they had to write against these stereotypes, and that there was an expectation placed upon them to do so.

This need among the interviewed authors to represent their communities could also be tied to the relatively small number of writers who have identified themselves as “non-white.” The 2018 First Nations and People of Colour Writers Count

demonstrated, quite clearly, that the Australian publishing industry has an underrepresentation of First Nations and culturally diverse authors, when compared to Australian demographic statistics from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. This was keenly felt by our interviewees, who, even without the figures from the count, were aware that they were a minority in the demographic make-up of the Australian author community. Given the push by early Australian governments to preserve British traditions and worldviews the creation of a specifically Australian literature as distinct from English literature has always been a struggle defined by inclusion and exclusion. This struggle continues today, with First Nations and culturally diverse authors now fighting to be recognized as Australian artists rather than cultural representatives. This is not unique to Australia. As Saha and Van Lente found, “writers of colour effectively become squeezed into either of two marketing routes, both of which fulfils a particular white, liberal expectation of who and what writers of colour are allowed to be” (2020). In the UK, as in Australia, “writers of colour struggle with the perception that their books are seen as too niche, or ‘issuey’” (2020).

The expectation from industry and adjacent parties that writing, especially from junior writers, adhere to specific moulds that conformed with so-called migrant stereotypes was a particularly notable criticism from the participant authors. Gunew and Ommundsen have indicated that the notion of authenticity is often tied to ethnicity in migrant writing. They point a review of Tom Cho’s *Look Who’s Morphing* in which the reviewer writes: “[O]ne can’t help but feel that Cho could have written a much better book, although obviously a completely different one, if he had restricted himself to the question of Chinese/Australian identity and presented it in a more conventional tone and structure” (Gunew and Ommundsen 2018, 23). This is a particularly bold example of the way in which fulsome discussions of ethnic identity and so-called authentic depictions, are an expectation of these writers even when their work is not about ethnicity; and one which influence’s readers’ perceptions of its quality. This is an issue not only for “migrant” writers, but also for First Nations writers, too. While increasing access to publication for authors is a key priority to address industry equity, it is also therefore not a solution to the challenges authors face. The expectations placed on these authors, and indeed the entire concept of who can be an *Australian author*, needs to shift in the minds of publishers and readers alike.

Conclusion

While quantitative research provides a useful foundation, it is clear from the interviews presented in this paper that only qualitative research provides the rich insights needed to truly understand the state of the industry. Through conversations with these authors we uncovered that current, successful authors from First Nations and culturally diverse backgrounds have a complex relationship with the publishing industry. This includes feelings of gratitude and passion for their craft and the positive bonds they have developed through their experiences, which co-existed with a sense of loneliness and isolation that came from their awareness that they occupied a minority status in the industry. This was enhanced by the frustration caused by specific industry and industry-adjacent parties like festivals and educators, who either gave the

impression—or openly admitted—that they viewed the participant author as a cultural representative and not an artist in their own right. Nevertheless, the authors we spoke to still loved writing books, and held strong aspirations that the industry could continue to grow and evolve in such a way as to truly value these authors.

The authors' responses provided several insights into the kinds of changes that could be made in order to foster a more inclusive publishing industry. One was the use of programs to provide pathways for aspiring publishing staff, and it is worth noting that several such programs do currently exist. For example, the Australian Publishers Association's the Open Book,⁶ the Hachette Summer Internship Program,⁷ the Writing NSW Editorial Internship,⁸ and the black&write!⁹ Editing Internships are all promising examples of such programs that aim to facilitate industry change. Similar pathways dedicated to writers have recently been launched internationally, such as A Writing Chance in the UK, to great success (Shaw 2023). Greater support for these programs, including at a government level, could considerably impact their reach and benefits. Likewise, there was advice for aspiring writers themselves, to find a way to express themselves and pursue their own goals without being pressured into a mould.

Industry-adjacent spaces also have a role to play in creating a more inclusive environment for First Nations and culturally diverse authors. Libraries can be avenues for authors to engage directly with their readerships, and their framing of events with marginalized authors can markedly influence how the authors' work is received by their audience (Booth and Narayan 2018a; 2020). Library events hosting authors can provide key opportunities for authors to connect with local communities, and be more accessible than festivals which may unintentionally exclude marginalized peoples due to their pricing or extent to which they appear inclusive. Similarly, book reviewers and indeed the broader reading public could play a role by not only supporting the books by established and upcoming authors, but also by not evaluating their quality based on the extent to which a book appears to "authentically" capture a specific cultural experience. If authors are permitted more creative freedom, it can encourage industry professionals to do the same.

As we have illustrated in this paper, there is a complex history behind the Australian publishing industry that has influenced its present state. We have aimed to provide historical context for how current structural inequalities came to be, including the powerful influence of government policies. At the same time, by drawing out the history of how Australian literature came into its own as distinct from British works, we hope to demonstrate that the concept of Australian literature is not a static entity but rather something that can be open to change. It emerged from the desire to differentiate itself, and to better represent the experience of Australians in a way that British literature cannot, and that very spirit is what can enable it to grow to represent the Australia we have today. Just like the authors interviewed in the paper, we also believe it can change for the benefits of artists and readers alike.

⁶ <https://www.openbookinternship.org/about>.

⁷ <https://www.hachette.com.au/news/applications-open-for-hachette-australias-summer-internship>.

⁸ <https://writingnsw.org.au/diversity-initiatives/diversity-initiatives-emerging-editors/>.

⁹ <https://www.slq.qld.gov.au/get-involved/awards-and-fellowships/indigenous-writing-fellowships-and-editing-internships>.

Appendix 1

The core interview questions were:

1. What do you write about? (How would you define your writing?)
2. How do reviewers/ critics define your work?
3. Who tends to review your work?
4. Which other writers are you most often compared to?
5. Does your ethnicity or cultural background get mentioned in reviews and interviews?
6. Who do you sit on panels with at festivals?
7. What topics are you asked to speak about at festivals?
8. Is your ethnicity/cultural background used to promote your work? How?
9. What adjectives are used to describe you and your work? Any that jump out at you?
10. Are there elements of your work that are ignored or sidelined?
11. Are there certain narratives or stories that you feel the industry demands from you?
12. Which awards have you won for your writing?
13. Other comments.

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