

“That Authenticity is Missing”: Australian Authors of #OwnVoices YA Fiction on Authorship, Identity, and Outsider Writers

Introduction

The hashtag “#OwnVoices” exploded onto the literary scene in 2015, coined by Dutch Young Adult Fiction author Corinne Duyvis to describe books written by and about people from the same marginalized community (Duyvis, 2016). Inherent in #OwnVoices is the belief that the lived experience of a marginalized person contributes a level of authenticity to writing that outsiders are unable to replicate (Whaley, 2016). #OwnVoices was quickly popularized by book bloggers and reviewers online, and in the years since, has been recognized in academic, mainstream, and industry spaces. Even diversity advocacy group *We Need Diverse Books* has drawn on the concept, with CEO Ellen Oh’s 2016 blog post ‘Dear White Writers...’ specifically highlighting the need for diverse books written by marginalized authors themselves (Oh, 2016).

Since then, there has been a resurgence in discussion about the ‘freedoms’ of outsider authors; or, authors not from the same marginalized community they write about. The infamous keynote by white author Lionel Shriver at the 2016 Brisbane Writers’ Festival in Australia, in which she donned a sombrero and dismissed these discussions about authorship as limits on her creativity, is one such example, and prompted high profile-backlash from Australian activists and writers (Convery, 2016; Abdel-Magied, 2016). Similar controversies have occurred in young adult fiction spaces, such as E. E. Charlton-Trujillo’s cancelled 2016 novel *When We Was Fierce*, criticized for its stereotypical portrayal of African American teenagers by a Mexican American author (Barack, 2016).

More recently, 2020 novel *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummins has been challenged for its incorrect use of Spanish and Mexican Indigenous languages and stereotypical depiction of Mexican migrants, with questions around the author’s own cultural identity

claims contributing to the confusion (Bowles, 2020). What these controversies share is a focus on outsider writers; specifically, a focus maintained by the highly diverse readership who engage with these discussions to educate outsider writers and audiences. However, these ongoing, public re-negotiations of the limitations of outsider writers prevent authors of #OwnVoices fiction from accessing these diverse readerships to discuss their own books and perspectives on writing craft as it relates to identity. This effectively de-centers #OwnVoices literature, and the perspectives of its authors, from the very space that was created to uplift it.

This paper presents the findings of original, empirical research into the perspectives of authors of #OwnVoices YA fiction on the concept of authenticity and on outsider writers. Through the discussion of data from seven qualitative interviews with Australian authors of #OwnVoices young adult fiction, it contributes an understanding of how authors perceive the relationship between their personal identity and their professional creative practice, as well as their views on how the absence of this identity-practice connection affects the work of outsider writers. More broadly, it provides insight into current global debates about authorship and diversity in literature, while re-centering the voices of authors of #OwnVoices young adult fiction.

Literature Review

The concept of “authenticity” in literature has a contested history, and every reader will evaluate this aspect of a book based on their unique, subjective criteria and personal experience. Howard (1991) has argued that authenticity is an intangible quality that permeates certain books, allowing readers of that culture to simply “know that it is true”, and outsider readers to “feel that it is true” (p.92). However, Bishop (1982) lists measurable “authenticating details” that collectively establish a book’s authenticity, including “the language, the typical activities, the values of the characters, their attitudes, and so forth” (p.62). Bishop uses these details to evidence an intrinsic link between the author’s own

identity and the authenticity of the depiction of their community in their book. This is demonstrated through Bishop's (1982) concept of the "image-makers" of African American life and identity in fiction: those who created the most authentic African American characters, enabled by "[t]heir perspective [which] makes it necessary for them as writers and artists to be witnesses to Afro-American experience" (p.99). This is more concrete than Howard's approach, which still permits room for misinterpretation by the outsider reader; particularly if the book merely feels authentic because it confirms stereotypes the reader already held about a marginalized community. Thus, it is Bishop's view of authenticity – that the insider status of the authors facilitated their ability to create these representations – that is revived in the concept of #OwnVoices.

Short and Fox (2003) have noted that the insider author status also shapes the overall impact the book can have on readers. This is a result of "differing intentions result[ing] in different stories for different audiences"; for while insider authors write to "enhanc[e] the self-concept" of children from their community, outsider writers have been noted to do so to "build awareness of cultural differences" (Short and Fox, 2003, p.17). Bishop has similarly noted this (1982, p.30). Pearce (2006) has also observed more recently that "well-meaning" stories that attempt to challenge overtly prejudiced tropes can unwittingly reinforce subtler stereotypes about marginalized communities, which are not present in media created by those who share that identity with the characters (p.58).

Observations of homophobia and clichéd pain-based narratives for queer characters in award-winning Australian young adult fiction further confirm the persistence of the impact of outsider writers on the authenticity and literary quality of books about marginalized identities (Garrison, 2019, p.21). Further, there are ongoing concerns about the lack of intersectionality in the identities represented (Garrison, 2019, p.21; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1995, p.34) and the inauthentic, homogenous construction of marginalized identities that result from a

stereotypical understanding of a community or experience (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1995, p.34). Therefore, the “mainstream dominant-majority writers [who] can still legitimately be accused of appropriating other cultures and silencing or erasing them by speaking in their place” (Pearce, 2003, p.239) can be observed to be countering the progress made by #OwnVoices fiction at an international level.

#OwnVoices fiction has unique benefits for teenage readers, and they notice the differences. Making “culturally relevant” #OwnVoices books available to teenage readers of the depicted community has been demonstrated to enhance their engagement with the book and interest in reading in general (Feger, 2006, p.18). Similarly, reading #OwnVoices books about queer characters has been evidenced to enhance teenagers’ ability to read critically and identify subtle differences in nuance between #OwnVoices and outsider books in the representation of the queer characters (Blackburn and Clark, 2011, p.243). Therefore, it is clear that whatever the differences resulting from insider or outsider author status are, they are significant enough to impact how and how *willingly* teenagers read. Yet there is no sustained conversation around what *exactly* manifests in authentic depictions, and how authors understand authenticity.

That discussions about authorship and identity frequently devolve into debates that focus on “simplistic insider / outsider distinctions, specifically whether whites should write books about people of color” (Short and Fox, 2003, p.3) is a key factor of this. In Australia, these derailments are even more impactful on industry events, as demonstrated by Shriver’s speech, due to the shortage of published #OwnVoices young adult fiction, and the smaller size of the Australian publishing industry in general. The limited access to publication and restricted authorial freedom for marginalized authors (Booth and Narayan, 2018a) also contributes to this, and has prevented even mainstream diversity conversations from progressing.

Indeed, Australian #OwnVoices young adult fiction authors have been found to view their books as signals “that indicated the validity, value, importance, and normality of their identities and experiences” (Booth and Narayan, 2018b, p.14) to the young people in their own marginalized communities. That is, authors still perceive their books as carving out a space for representation and asserting that they hold value as a community; as opposed to contributing to an existing understanding of their identities and stories as being valuable. These same authors have been found to be further burdened by expectations that they educate outsider readers and audiences about their identity through their books, rather than having the freedom to simply entertain all readers (Booth and Narayan, 2020).

Similarly, the most significant contributions to these discussions in both scholarship and mainstream contexts have been commentary on the publishing industry by marginalized authors in public and digital forums. Kwaymullina’s work on adapting the #OwnVoices concept for an Australian context has specifically highlighted the importance of Indigenous Australian writers retaining the sole right to write Indigenous Australian protagonists (2015), to avoid outsider writers from performing a literary displacement of Indigenous Australian writers (2016) that echoes the country’s colonization. Kwaymullina’s discussion pieces with fellow YA Fiction author and co-founder of diversity advocacy group *Voices From The Intersection* (similar to the US-based *We Need Diverse Books*) (Lim, 2016) have also sought to progress public discussion (Kwaymullina and Lim, 2016), although its long-term influence on publisher practices is yet to be determined.

As a result, authors of #OwnVoices young adult fiction in Australia bear the burdens of providing the foundations for the representation of their identities, and education for their outsider readers. These additional responsibilities deny authors of #OwnVoices fiction opportunities to speak about their creative practice, ultimately stalling discussions about diversity rather than enabling an advancement of knowledge in this area. How do they as

authors understand the relationship between their identity and how authenticity manifests in their books? What factors do they believe contribute authenticity? And what do they think of outsider authors writing about their own community? These are questions that have been overlooked in scholarship and mainstream conversations alike.

This study addresses the dearth of scholarship, industry, and mainstream attention in this area, contributing authors' own perspectives on concepts of authenticity and authorship. In doing so, this study re-centers the voices of authors of #OwnVoices books at the heart of contemporary global discussions about authenticity which are too-often dominated by outsider writers' controversies. An understanding of these authors' perspectives allows readers, librarians, and publishers to recognize the value of #OwnVoices fiction.

Additionally, it provides insight into how the lived experience that marginalized authors can bring to their writing is an asset that enhances their creative practice and their book's literary quality.

As there was no prior research about the professional experiences of authors of #OwnVoices fiction in Australia, the project used a broad research question to avoid restricting the potential findings of the study. This question was, 'How do marginalized authors writing young adult fiction that draws from personal experience challenge the lack of diverse representation within Australian young adult fiction? And how has this choice impacted them as writers?'

Methods

Data collection for this project involved seven qualitative interviews with Australian authors of #OwnVoices young adult fiction novels, who freely and publicly identified as members of a marginalized community. Prior to this process, a detailed annotated list of all Australian authors of traditionally-published #OwnVoices young adult fiction was compiled, as no resource existed to facilitate the selection process of identifying potential eligible

participants. Thirty-six authors were identified for inclusion on this list through an extensive bibliographic review of authors' professional marketing materials and Australian book resources, such as *The AustLit Database*. Due to ethical considerations, the contents of the list will not be published. These ethical considerations are detailed elsewhere (Booth and Narayan, 2018a; Booth and Narayan, 2018b; Booth and Narayan, 2020).

Approximately twenty authors on the annotated list were identified as currently active in the publishing industry (i.e. having published a young adult fiction novel in recent years) and residing in Australia, and from this, seven were selected to provide a proportionally accurate, representational sample of the list. The represented demographics in our study were Indigenous Australian People (Author Six), People of Colour (Authors Two, Four, Five), queer people (Author Three), and disabled people (inclusive of physical disability, neurodivergence, and mental illness) (Author One). Author Seven's details are redacted at their request.

Our participants included authors who publicly identified as belonging to multiple marginalized communities. However, we only discuss the information that was explicitly mentioned in the interviews by participants, out of respect for their choices about what to foreground in the specific research context. Participants resided in different states around Australia, ensuring findings were not skewed towards the attitudes prevalent in a single city and its creative community. Authors were invited to participate in the project following institutional ethics approval, and all authors who were approached accepted to participate.

Semi-structured interviews of approximately 45 minutes in duration were conducted to gain rich, qualitative data, and ensure participants had frequent opportunities to direct conversation to topics they deemed important and relevant to their practice. Interviews were conducted either in person or via phone based on the geographic location of participants, and audio-recorded with written consent to publish deidentified text. Interview questions asked

about professional experiences in the Australian publishing industry, and the way their own identity as a marginalized person and author of an #OwnVoices novel impacted this experience.

Two participants asked to provide written responses due to their personal time constraints, and, aware of the project's preference for interviews, freely provided supplementary materials to complement and enhance their responses. This enriched the written responses and provided access to materials that would not have been available in a spoken interview. Of the seven authors, one requested that their responses not be quoted directly, and therefore their views are discussed throughout in the aggregate.

Interviews were transcribed manually, coded, and analyzed using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to identify experiences of power being contested in "public and private discourse" with their professional peers (Huckin, Andrus, and Clary-Lemon, 2012), and to highlight perspectives relating to literature that engaged with Australia's literary status quo in some capacity. As discourse can take the form of "narratives in a restricted or broad sense of the term, text, talk [...]" (Wodak & Meyer, 2008, p.2-3), many forms of engagement with the 'status quo' were anticipated; particularly as all participants were from marginalized communities, and wrote #OwnVoices books.

CDA has been used to analyze interviews conducted with teenagers exploring the constructions of different identities in Australian young adult novels (Bean and Moni, 2003), and as a result, it was well-suited to analyzing similar identity-oriented discussions with authors, as well as their personal experiences. In particular, it allowed us to identify two groups of findings, based on interviewees' topic and their reconstructions of power dynamics during the interviews. Our first finding explores the differences between #OwnVoices books and outsider books, and our participants reflected on how they imbued their books with truths from their experiences.

The topic of authenticity and representing their community placed our interviewees in the empowered, advantaged position. We found that they embraced the authority granted by their personal experiences, to then speak about how outsiders constructed marginalized identities from a place of second-hand knowledge or outright ignorance. This was a rare reversal of Australian publishing industry power dynamics, as we provided this platform to speak about this link between identity and creative practice only to marginalized authors.

Our second finding focused on the power structures of the publishing industry. Once again, we observed that participant authors inverted publishing industry norms in their discussion of the concept of the outsider writer – as an individual who occupied a position of perceived deficit, and needed to undertake considerable effort to make up for this disadvantage. While our participant authors were speaking about writers who held more societal privileges, they centered themselves as the bearers of knowledge, experience and insight that outsiders could only hope to achieve through rigorous research and shifts in perspective to ensure sensitivity and respect. In this way, our participants framed themselves as the judges of whether an outsider writer had met *their* standards.

All data has been de-identified and anonymized for the privacy and confidentiality of the authors, and all authors were assigned an identifying number unique to this publication. This is to mitigate the risk of any unintended professional consequences, given the sensitive topic area and high-profile discussions that have occurred globally relating to similar topics.

Findings

All seven participants believed insider authors and authentic writing were inextricably linked, due to the connection authors shared with their protagonists. The guiding interview questions relating to authenticity and authorship aimed to elicit whether participant authors perceived a difference in how their community was written about by an outsider writer, compared to how they wrote about their community. All seven participants believed there was a noticeable

difference – and that the books by insider authors such as themselves were truer and more authentic depictions. However, no participant in this study claimed their novel was the definitive representation of their community. Rather, their position was that they authentically depicted some of the countless diverse experiences that could occur within their own communities.

Participant authors also emphasized that the authenticity of this depiction was directly linked to the entertainment value of the story, and the “reading experience” of the book. They stressed that poor representation of marginalized identities and experiences detracted from a novel’s overall quality. All participant authors expanded on the topic of authorship to discuss their views on outsider writers portraying their community. None of our participant authors believed outsider writers could create authentic depictions of their marginalized community, as a direct result of their outsider status. Participants also expressed a range of anxieties about outsider writers portraying their communities, which are detailed further below.

Despite this, six authors said they were generally okay with outsiders writing about their community, although three still expressed notable skepticism and discomfort at the concept. However, all heavily emphasized the need for research and respect during the process. The strength of these emphases and previously stated concerns suggested that participant authors believed this required a level of care was not always undertaken by outsider authors. One author was entirely against outsiders writing about their community under any circumstances.

1. Attributes of #OwnVoices books vs Outsider books

The authors we interviewed for this study identified common shortcomings relating to authenticity in Outsider books, which they did not perceive in #OwnVoices books like their own. These shortcomings were: factual inaccuracies, implausible situations for the characters, lack of nuance, exotification, and the erasure of authentic identities or experiences resulting

in stereotypes or two-dimensional characters. Each of these attributes were weaknesses that detracted from the outsider book's potential for achieving authenticity and overall quality.

Factual inaccuracies were the most frequently discussed shortcoming, with five Authors highlighting this as a common issue in outsider books. Three authors criticized the exoticification of certain marginalized experiences, four authors criticized the erasure of authentic marginalized identities, three authors criticized the lack of nuance in representing certain identities or experiences, and one author criticized the inclusion of situations that were implausible for characters from their community.

Author One was concerned with factual inaccuracies and a lack of nuance, with this view informed by personal circumstances that transformed their novel from being an outsider book into an #OwnVoices novel. They had a unique experience with their #OwnVoices novel, as they had already written a draft of the book *before* undergoing an experience of mental ill health themselves, and a subsequent diagnosis matching that of the protagonist they had represented in the book. Their personal experience prompted them to completely rewrite the relevant scenes in the novel with their newfound insider perspective. Author One characterized their initial approach to writing their novel, as an outsider, as similar to a performance, stating that “writers are known for like if your character's making a facial expression, you sit there and make facial expressions”. They continued,

[W]hen I knew [the protagonist] wanted to ...that I wanted [the protagonist] to be able to experience this [mental illness symptom] right at the start of the novel, I don't think I'd actually gone through one. Ummm, and then I did go through one. Which was horrible, so that—that changed completely how I—how I approached that scene and wrote it...

Author One clearly emphasized the importance of factual accuracy in the representation of their marginalized community, which they had considered important even as an outsider author. They stated they “did a lot of research” prior to writing the first draft, which included

reading about the condition online, having discussions with people who had the condition, and consulting with author peers who had written similar experiences in their books.

However, becoming an insider to this community “impacted hugely” on how Author One understood the condition and its symptoms, and therefore, how they believed it should be explored in writing. This is reflected in their tone and description of writing the book’s first draft, compared to their later revision. Their approach to writing about this mental health condition as an outsider, like a performer playfully “mak[ing] facial expressions”, is a stark contrast to their account of the “horrible”, first-hand experience they endured, or had to “go through”.

This experience led Author One to value nuance in writing about experiences of mental ill health significantly more, which necessitated the book’s redrafting. Although they had already considered factual accuracy to be important as an outsider writer, becoming an insider to this marginalized community provided them with a deeper understanding of how this lack of nuance limited the authenticity of their first draft.

Author Four was similarly concerned with factual inaccuracies, as well as with characters from their community being placed in situations that were implausible for someone of that identity and within the established context of the novel. They stated that when they read outsider-authored books about their community, they felt,

the authenticity is lost somewhat. It doesn’t mean that the story is bad, but I just think that in terms of authenticity, um, it—you know it’s compromised, and that can compromise the reading experience.

Author Four highlighted that what made their book authentic was the distinctive collection of experiences that were drawn from real events in their life as a teenager, and their upbringing in general. While the book was not autobiographical, the inclusion of experiences similar to their own established a context within the novel that Author Four could confidently claim was plausible for a member of their community. Similarly, their personal experiences had provided them with the knowledge that ensured the details in their book were correct.

Author Four compared this to an outsider-authored book they had read several years earlier which featured a protagonist from their community, in which “very, very minor things didn’t ring true”, such as incorrect terminology and situations they felt were implausible for the character to be in. As a result of these weaknesses, the narrative’s primary function of entertaining the reader was undermined, and the book was “compromised”. Author Four felt that their recollection of this “reading experience”, “many years down the track” from reading it, was a sign that these inaccuracies and implausible situations bothered them more than they initially realized.

Author Five also asserted that their status as an insider to the community they were writing about enabled them to give their book greater factual accuracy, as well as mitigate the risk of exoticizing their community. Specifically, they attributed their ability to write more authentically to their identity and personal experience being born and raised in a non-Western country. They stated that the difference between their depiction of this country and people living there, and that by an outsider writer was that,

[O]bviously there’s the more—there’s greater authenticity of detail. Um so I would know what I’m talking about more and I would maybe have less wide-eyed wonder about maybe some of the more mundane aspects about life there.

Author Five’s evidence for their belief that their personal experience made them “obviously” more knowledgeable was located in the concrete “authenticity of detail”, or factual accuracies that they were able to include. They believed this experience also meant that they could write about the day-to-day life as a member of their community more realistically, avoiding the risk of exoticizing it in the way an outsider author may, due to “wide-eyed wonder” at national or cultural differences.

However, Author Five also had an interest in outsider stories with perspectives of the place they grew up in. They discussed one they had read, stating,

I don't know if [the author has] ever been there or if [they're] going off a second-hand account, but it's kind of fascinating because ... [they] kind of wrote about [my city] in a way that I had never seen. Um because obviously it was someone with fresh eyes. And so I think there's a certain joy in both approaches.

For Author Five, the outsider author's "wide-eyes" of inexperience or ignorance at the norms of their country could simultaneously be "fresh eyes" with new perspectives not previously "seen" by those accustomed to the culture – even though the risk of exoticizing this community remained. Therefore, while Author Five maintained that the approach of outsider authors was less authentic or accurate than their own, they were also the only participant who identified potential positives in the writing of outsiders.

However, Author Six, who highlighted similar weaknesses of factual inaccuracies, erasure of authentic identities and experiences, and exoticification in the works of outsider authors to their community, was far more critical. Author Six believed outsider books frequently had "big issues with accuracy" and "erasure" in the portrayals of their community. They gave an example of a book where they knew "the author was representing" their community due to the setting, yet the book did not properly acknowledge their identity nor depict their community authentically. This caused Author Six to wonder, "Who are these [marginalized] people? I don't know these people, I don't know this culture". Author Six described this unsatisfactory writing as "another act of erasure, it's another act of colonization and displacement" for their community.

Similarly, Author Six was critical of outsider authors who exoticized their community. They felt that outsider books tended to "depict [their community] as having these special powers" or with an offensive "mysticism". Author Six directly compared this to their #OwnVoices novel, stating that "there's no reference to [the protagonist being in] any dream state or [having] visions, or anything like that". These common weaknesses had a significant and negative effect on how Author Six perceived outsider books, in which the authenticity was so compromised that they did not recognize the people who were supposedly their own

community. Author Seven, who requested to not be quoted directly, similarly strongly criticized all the outsider books they had read about their community for many reasons, including those related to factual inaccuracies, exoticification and the erasure of authentic identities.

Authors Two and Three were similarly critical of the erasure of the authentic identities and experiences that existed within their communities, as well as the lack of nuance in portrayals of their communities by outsider writers. Author Two felt there were significant differences between the representations of their community by insider and outsider writers, with the honesty of the depiction being a crucial area. They felt authors from their community were, “allowed to be honest about our flaws” such as “our petty insecurities, our resentments, our jealousies, our families, our archaic cultures” in a way that writers outside of their community could not. Author Two felt that outsider writers who wrote characters belonging to their cultural community were unable to do so authentically because of the risk that “they be accused of racism” for depicting imperfect characters from their community. Because of this, Author Two felt that they had,

read many well-intentioned YA books where the [marginalized] protagonist is perfect, and if she does have insecurities they are dear little idiosyncrasies related to her poverty or boys or whatever.

Author Two’s tongue-in-cheek characterization of how outsider authors attempted to write about their community’s “insecurities” or relationships to their “cultures” emphasized their belief that outsider books lack nuance, and were often compromised in artistic and entertainment value as a result. Similarly, Author Two’s belief that such books were inauthentic in depicting members of their community was due to the use of these stereotypical two-dimensional characters. This erased the depth, complexity and richness that was part of belonging to their community, including potential “flaws”.

Author Three was emphatic that #OwnVoices novels about queer characters contained authenticity that non-queer authors could not replicate. This was due to Author Three’s same

perceptions of weakness in outsider books, in the form of the erasure of marginalized identities or experiences and a lack of nuance. They highlighted small details or notable experiences as key factors that were often erased in books by outsider authors. This meant that when queer readers read the books, “it does feel like there are layers missing to it and that authenticity—that authenticity is missing from a lot of it”. They explained that in outsider books,

the subtext is gone. The... the pain is there... [but] ... the subtlety is gone. The small, little things... like... that only someone who has had to stop holding someone’s hand when they walk down the street... can feel. And [...] when you try to just sort of... summarize it? You get the gist? But it’s—it’s missing that vital piece that makes it feel soulful.

Author Three’s example reflects the erasure of an authentic experience and a lack of nuance: they highlight a powerful experience for their community that they believe outsiders would not include, as well as how this and similar experiences would be complex to write about.

Author Three’s word choice emphasizes their view further. They characterize outsider writers as hastily or crudely “summariz[ing]” or “get[ting] the gist” of their experiences, while the work of insiders such as themselves is emotively described as “soulful”. For Author Three, the sense that these “vital” elements were missing detracted from the potential entertainment value of the book and delegitimized the novel’s claim of depicting a queer character and experience.

2. Authors on the concept of Outsider Writers

Six of the seven authors we interviewed for this study expressed, to varying degrees, that they were generally accepting of outsider writers writing and publishing books about their community. However, this acceptance was dependent on two qualities that our interviewees believed outsider writers should embed in their writing process: respect and research. These six interviewees emphasized that these essential aspects did not guarantee that an outsider writer’s representation of the community would be of a high quality. Rather, it reduced the

potential for it to be stereotypical and potentially harmful. Further, all seven interviewees maintained that outsider writers could not achieve the level of authenticity that was inherent to the books of insider authors such as themselves.

Author One was the participant who was most supportive of outsider writers writing about their community. They emphasized the importance of empathy and research in the approach, stressing, “There’s actually work.” Further, they felt that,

[As long as you are] being humble and, and, doing the research and putting the work in, things, [and] making yourself empathetically available to all those emotions which is, you know the point of being a writer, then I think go ahead!

Author One’s support was expressed in relation to their view of authorship as a profession: to them, the creativity to imagine a different experience was the purpose of writing. However, they emphasized that they expected authors to hold themselves “to that kind of standard”, and stated that “everything has to be tested” to “make sure it’s [...] realistic” and feasible for the characters. Author One also felt they had creative limitations due to their own identity when it came to depicting some experiences such as transgender identity or non-white characters. They emphasized that authors from these communities required greater support and access to publication so they could write #OwnVoices books about their experiences, stating,

I think I can talk a bit like a – about mental health and things like that but when it comes in terms of gender confusion and race and all those stuff, I feel, I’m like immediately out of my depth, [and] things, so I think, [I want] just more avenues for those stories to be published by the voices who own them and championing those writers in the community.

In this way, Author One reaffirmed their belief that insider authors were inherently able to write more authentic novels, even if they were supportive of outsiders writing about their “mental health” community. They also expressed the view that marginalized authors writing #OwnVoices novels had a greater right to write these narratives, stating that they are “the

voices who *own*” the stories, and that this ownership should create access and “avenues” to publication for these narrative owners.

Author Five was also more positive about outsider writers writing about their community. However, they placed a similar emphasis on the necessity of research, respect, and knowledge for outsider writers. They stated,

I don't mind it honestly, I think that's fine...um... if they do it respectfully, they research it well, and they kind of put their own spin on it that's cool, that's exciting.

Their aforementioned acknowledgement of the potential “joy” that outsider narratives can bring, when done well, further supported their more positive views. This suggests that Author Five's support is due to the belief that the “spin” of an outsider author's work on their community's experiences could be “exciting” for readers, if it had originality. However, their support was only “if” the requirements of respect and research were met.

While still being supportive to an extent, Author Six had a more cautiously conditional acceptance of outsider writers writing about their community. They stated that “I don't have a problem with people that do it well, and take the time to engage” with people from their community, and with the existing digital resources that are available to support those writing about their community. Such a statement indicates that Author Six does have problems with outsider writers who don't “do it well” or make those genuine efforts to engage with their community and the resources available to support research and writing. This may suggest that Author Six is somewhat resigned to having their community written about by outsiders. They continued,

If you're going to do it, do it respectfully. [...] [Unfortunately] when authors set out to write about [my community], they [often] do it with good intent [but] without understanding, [...] particularly of what it means when they get it wrong.

For Author Six, good authorial intent was not sufficient to qualify outsider writers to write about their community; particularly as they felt there were many resources available to ensure

factual inaccuracies weren't made and harmful stereotypes were not reinforced. Direct consultation and connection with their community was included in their concept of what having respect and undertaking the research process entailed. Overall, Author Six felt that it was common for outsider authors to be ignorant of the damage that could be caused to their community as a result of inadvertently perpetuating falsities.

Author Two was the sole interviewee who only emphasized respect as an essential attribute. They had experienced a significant change in their perspective of authorship and identity, prompted by reading what they described as, "Lionel Shriver's excellent Brisbane Writers' Festival keynote address". They continued,

I used to think that it was a bad thing, because even well intentioned authors might get it wrong, and if they are very famous then that story stands as the definitive book about Refugees or whatever [...] leaving the genuine refugee author to hear from publishers that 'that story has been told before' [...].
But now I think that fiction is a completely democratic space because it's not real.

As a result, Author Two said they thought it was "fine" for outsider writers to write about their community, despite the strong criticisms they shared of these very books. They emphasized the role of the author's intent and respect, stating,

Usually these days if someone wants to write in a diverse cast of characters, they are doing it out of goodwill, and not racist caricature. And if they get them terribly wrong, then someone will come along and hopefully do it better. The problem is whether that second person can get published though.

Author Two also expressed a far more casual attitude about the possibility of outsider writers writing books that were "terribly wrong" in their representation of their marginalized community. This is further supported by their lack of emphasis on factual inaccuracies being an issue with outsider books, as discussed above. Their support may therefore be due to their expectation that another author would approach the task and "hopefully do it better".

However, Author Two emphasized the importance of authors being honest about their identities when they wrote marginalized characters. They felt their "different cultural

background” was “pretty obvious from [their] face” to audiences, and would contribute to people’s perceptions of their book’s authenticity. They felt that audiences *did* consider the identity of the author in their reading, because they “want to know that the work is authentic and that you are not telling fibs or doing a Helen Demidenko”. This statement refers to the notorious Miles Franklin Award winner Helen Darville, who adopted a false Ukrainian surname to give her novel about Ukrainian characters a false appearance of authenticity (Manne, 1995).

Similarly, Author Two twice voiced concerns about whether publishers would still provide opportunities for “genuine” writers from marginalized communities if outsider writers occupied this space. This suggests they believe that the more significant negative impact of outsider authors is how their presence affects publication decisions by publishing industry professionals, as opposed to the potentially negative or inaccurate representation that may write into books themselves.

Author Three had the opposite view, emphasizing the importance of research for outsider writers. They expressed a significant amount of skepticism at the concept of non-queer writers authoring books about queer characters, stating,

I’m sorry, a 45-year-old heterosexual woman cannot talk about what it’s like to be a 16-year-old [queer person] now. Like it’s just such a... Like, unless you really did your research...

However, for Author Three, the value of an #OwnVoices book was not limited to the content of the novel. They stressed that there was an inherent significance to having publicly identifiable queer authors writing books about queer characters. This was due to their belief in the positive impact that this representation among *authors* could have on queer teenage readers, because “[queer] kids need to see texts that are written by queer people”.

Author Three believed this author-novel identity link contributed to *any* teenage reader’s experience of the book because it was more authentic and enjoyable, as well as specifically giving queer teenage readers the opportunity to see visible role models. However,

Author Three felt that there was still stigma against openly queer authors in some spaces. They believed that as a result, outsider authors were necessary to make queer narratives more accessible: “if only [queer] people can write [queer] people, and then... no-one’s gonna read [about] [Queer] people”. Therefore, Author Three’s support for outsider writers was grounded in their belief that queer narratives needed to be further destigmatized in the Australian publishing industry, and the books made more accessible for all teenagers. Author Three considered the research process essential for outsider writers, as it could support them in writing novels that were more relatable to the teenage audience of Young Adult Fiction.

Author Four similarly highlighted the importance of research for outsider writers, and affirmed that the value of their book was enhanced by their own public status as a member of their marginalized community. When considering outsiders writing about their community, Author Four pondered, “why would you get a non-[marginalized] person to write about what it means to be [marginalized]?” Such a question suggests that they considered outsider books almost unnecessary, as people such as themselves and aspiring writers from their community were inherently better positioned to write about their community due to being insiders. Their support may therefore be due to reasons similar with those of Author Six, in that they are resigned to being written about by outsiders to some extent, rather than enthusiastic about it.

Author Four further emphasized the link between their book’s authenticity and their own identity. They stated that,

[M]y book’s mission, or the authenticity of the book, or the authenticity of [my] words as a speaker would not ring true if I [...] misconstrued my identity.

Author Four was generally supportive of outsider authors who wanted to write about their community. However, they were careful to specify that the outsider writer must have thoroughly researched their community before attempting to do so: “as long as it comes from an educated place” and “from a place of knowledge”. Therefore, their emphasis on research

was strongly influenced by their own negative reading experiences of outsider books, and the factual inaccuracies they had observed, which still bothered them years later.

Unlike the other participants, Author Seven strongly objected to all outsider writers writing about their community, under any circumstances.

Discussion

The findings from this study demonstrated that Australian authors of #OwnVoices young adult fiction strongly believe that authors from marginalized communities are able to write about their own identities with more authenticity than outsider writers, as a direct result of the marginalized identity they share with their characters. This view directly aligns with the founding principle of the contemporary phrase #OwnVoices, which highlights this link between authorship and authenticity. Despite this, six of the seven participant authors in this study said they were generally comfortable with outsiders writing books about their community. However, three expressed notable discomfort and skepticism of the outsider authors' ability to do it *well*. All six of these participants stressed the necessity of thorough research and respect on the part of the outsider writer.

All seven participant authors highlighted different forms of “authenticating details” (Bishop, 1982, p.62) that collectively made their books more authentic, including understanding emotional and psychological nuances, including or excluding specific behaviors, and knowing factually accurate information about the identity and plausibility of certain scenarios. This provides insight into how authors of #OwnVoices fiction identify and evaluate literary authenticity in their own work, and the absence of it in the work of outsiders.

Participants frequently highlighted the authenticity of their own books through direct comparisons to negative attributes of outsider authors' books, with only Author Five acknowledging potential positives from outsider books. Author One was a unique case, as their comparison was with the initial draft of their #OwnVoices book, which they produced

when they were an outsider. Their need to significantly rewrite relevant sections of their book after *becoming* a member of the community they were depicting indicates the significance of lived experience in producing authentic writing.

All authors in this study maintained that outsider books were inherently of a lesser quality than #OwnVoices books such as their own; and believed authors from their communities should be given the access to write their stories over outsider authors. Overall, participants characterized outsider books as defined by their deficit: their failures, and the details they lacked. That these shortcomings were identified by readers of the same communities as those depicted also reveals how regular readers of these books are likely to find their “reading experience” similarly “compromised” (Author Four).

The view that outsider books were inferior as a form of entertainment for readers was expressed by Author Two, Three, Four, and Six. This supports previous findings of #OwnVoices fiction being more engaging to readers (Feger, 2006, p.18). Authors Three and Six in particular highlighted the potential negative impact of sub-par representation of their communities, which could result in either a lack of interest or direct harm to the reader. Research has indicated that teenagers can and do notice these subtleties, especially when they result in negative or reductive representations of marginalized characters (Blackburn and Clark, 2011, p.243). This further supports observations of “well-meaning” books by outsider authors unintentionally producing stereotypes (Pearce, 2006, p.58) or homogenous constructions of the identity (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1995, p.34), with Author Two’s comments about unrealistically perfect marginalized characters being particularly applicable here.

Intent was a more divisive area, with Authors One, Two, and Five believing good intentions from outsider authors could contribute to a better result, and the remaining authors – Author Six, in particular – negating it as a factor that could enable outsider writers to produce better books. Authors Two and Four stressed the importance of authors being honest

about their own identities in relation to the protagonists, rather than becoming “a teller of untruths who has assumed for [themselves] a false ethnic identity” (Manne, 1995). Author Three similarly stressed the importance of visible Queer authors for teenage readers to “see”. However, they acknowledged that existing stigma meant that it was still necessary for non-Queer authors to write Queer fiction to ensure representation reached teenage readers, which is a strategy that has been demonstrated to be effective (Booth and Narayan, 2018b).

The six authors who expressed support for outsiders writing about their communities, albeit to varying levels, had their own reasons for why they had varying levels of support for outsider writers. Author One and Author Five emphasized that writing fiction is a creative profession, in which imagination is “the point” (Author One) and a new “spin” on a story can be “exciting” (Author Five). Author Two similarly accepted outsider writers because fiction is “not real”, and Author Three’s support was due to their belief that outsider writers could contribute to de-stigmatizing queer Young Adult Fiction. However Author Four and Author Six appeared more resigned, suggesting that they considered the experience of being written about by an outsider author to be inevitable. Their comments emphasized ways to mitigate the potential negative impact of outsider books, rather than identifying any benefit to the books.

These six authors shared the same core beliefs about the work required of outsider writers to adequately portray their communities. Research and respect emerged as the critical factors that influenced whether or not participant authors felt outsiders could achieve this. However, as Author One’s experience demonstrated, even an extensive research process could not compare to the lived experience of a marginalized identity. When supported by the widespread criticisms from all seven participant authors about the shortcomings of books by outsider authors, these findings suggest that contemporary *outsider* Australian young adult fiction authors are not sufficiently investing in the research or respect required to write

marginalized characters. Indeed, the insight provided by this study raises the question of whether outsider writers could ever authentically write marginalized characters.

However, no participant author expressed the view that marginalized authors in general could or should only write about their community. Such a practice would limit their creative freedoms in a way that outsider writers are not subjected to. Rather, consistent with Duyvis' concept of #OwnVoices, author's statements reflected the belief that they were deserving of primacy within the publishing industry, in the specific context of books about their community. This may be due to their ability to also be a real-life representative of their community to the public, due to the shared author-protagonist identity emphasized by Authors Two, Three and Four.

This may also be due to the power dynamics of the publishing industry, as access to publication for aspiring marginalized authors was highlighted by Author One, Author Two, and Author Seven. With marginalized authors being so significantly underrepresented, a majority writer can easily occupy the limited space allocated by publisher about a specific identity. In particular, Author Two expressed concerns about whether authors from marginalized communities would receive industry support for #OwnVoices books if outsider writers were "appropriating other cultures and silencing or erasing them by speaking in their place" (Pearce, 2003, p.239). Outsider writers can be seen to enable the perpetuation of this systemic discrimination that limits the industry participation of marginalized authors.

Participant authors similarly respected other marginalized authors who were differently marginalized than themselves, and their right to primacy in writing about their community. Author One expressed that rather than writing an outsider novel themselves, there should be "more avenues for those stories to be published by the voices who own them", indicating a preference for a creative practice that did not restrict opportunities for other marginalized authors from communities different to their own. This publishing industry

commentary was an unexpected finding from the project, but provides further insight into marginalized authors' perceptions of publishing industry accessibility and equity.

Lastly, the comments of our participant authors about the weaknesses of outsider writers' books simultaneously provide insight into some of the attributes that can establish a book's authenticity: factual accuracy, plausible situations that recognize how identity influences an individual's circumstances, nuance in emotions, three-dimensional and complex characters, and a recognition of the multiplicity of identities and experiences that exist *within* marginalized communities. These are not concrete attributes that demand stories be written in a uniform way to be correct. No participant author claimed to be the sole authentic voice for their community, or stated that there was a singular correct way to represent their community. Further, as no marginalized community is a homogenous group, and every individual has their own unique life experiences, there can therefore be many authentic depictions of these identities that differ from each other.

Rather, the attributes of authenticity identified above are creative and conceptual considerations made during the writing process. That these intangible elements were what participant authors believed contributed to a book's authenticity emphasizes the extent to which a marginalized protagonist's identity affected every aspect of a book. As Author Three expressed, even thorough research and deep respect by an outsider writer would have limitations, as a research process must end. Additionally, outsider writers' own beliefs or values may conflict with that of their subject and affect their writing. However, as insiders to their communities, the lived experience of our participant authors equipped them with the first-hand knowledge that gave them the capacity to imagine how a character of their identity would act, think and feel their way through the narrative. This contributes to ongoing discussions about the nature of authenticity in fiction, and how it relates to the author.

Conclusion

The results from this study demonstrated a strong alignment between the perspectives on authorship and authenticity of Australian young adult fiction authors from marginalized communities, and the broader concept of #OwnVoices literature. There was also a consensus among our participant authors that #OwnVoices books will always hold a level of authenticity that books by outsider authors cannot achieve. Despite this, six of seven author participants were agreeable to outsider authors writing about their communities. However, the consistent use of a language of deficit to describe existing books by outsider authors strongly suggests that the recommendations of thorough research and deep respect for these narratives and marginalized communities are not being adequately undertaken by contemporary outsider writers.

All authors were able to identify details that they felt contributed to the authenticity of a book's depiction of a marginalized identity. This indicates that common shortcomings of outsider authors are: factual inaccuracies, implausible situations, lack of nuance, exoticification, and the erasure of authentic identities. Further, the authors in this study are readers too. Therefore, the findings also reveal that *readers* from the same communities as the characters portrayed are highly likely to identify these common textual flaws of outsider books, which reduce the overall literary quality of the novel. The findings strongly indicate that authors of these communities are the best candidates to write these narratives, to create more enjoyable and engaging narratives for readers.

This study provides new insight into how authors of #OwnVoices fiction understand their identity and its relationship to authenticity, and how authenticity is constructed in a novel. Outsider authors can take note of the aforementioned shortcomings, and the strong encouragement for thorough research and respect. For librarians, the findings evidence that readers can have a more positive "reading experience" with #OwnVoices fiction, and so

prioritizing these books when expanding a library's collection and making recommendations is beneficial for all. More importantly, we urge publishers to take these findings as feedback on their acquisition practices and increase the number of authors from marginalized communities on their rosters. Improving their practice in this way allows for more high quality, engaging literature to be produced and distributed, along with a reduction in what Author Four dubbed "compromised" books.

No marginalized author should be forced to write about or disclose their identity, and this paper does not suggest authors be pigeon-holed into writing about their personal experiences. This same principle is reflected in the definition of #OwnVoices, which Duyvis stresses is designed to operate off information about books and authors that is already publicly available (Duyvis, 2016). Instead, this paper argues that #OwnVoices books, and the views of the authors who write them, be re-centered in discussions about authorship and quality literature; as well as in publishing and library practices.

Rather than focusing on whether outsider writers "should" infringe on the creative territory of marginalized authors (and whether they have done so "well"), #OwnVoices books can be championed by publishers, librarians, and audiences for their inherent value as literary works with superior artistic potential *because* of their shared connection with the author's identity. With this support, marginalized writers can gain greater access to and agency within the publishing industry. It is only through this that #OwnVoices books can reach their true potential – as stories that are both authentically written, and genuinely enjoyed.

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