It's hard to be what you can't see: Diversity Within Australian Publishing

Lessons in diverse and inclusive publishing from the United Kingdom

2019-2020 Beatrice Davis Editorial Fellowship report
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I acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the country on which this report was written, the Dharawal people, and recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and culture. I pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

Sovereignty has never been ceded. It always was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.

'When we think about what it is to be 'connected,' we think about memory. We think about history. We think about storytelling. All of these words that we hear—'literacy,' 'inclusion,' 'diversity'—those are all words for connection [...] we need to have diverse books [...] not because necessarily everybody needs to see themselves reflected in every book, but because we need that sense of connection. We need to live in a global sense.'

—Marian Wright Edelman

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Introduction: Plans, pandemics and protests

There are plans, and then there's a global pandemic. For this report, I had originally planned to travel to the United Kingdom to interview and connect with BAME publishing professionals – particularly editorial professionals – and authors there. I hoped to learn more from them about the importance of diverse, inclusive publishing workplaces (specifically editorial and publishing teams), the experience of publishing and being published while being a person of colour, and what initiatives and support structures might successfully be adapted to the Australian context. Ideally, I would see inclusive publishing in action, whether within specialised diversity imprints, or company-wide commitments to publish more inclusively, or inclusive access internships and traineeships, or just listening to the conversations happening at publishing meetings about the merits and risks of BAME authors, with and without BAME staff at the table. The hope was to see what worked and what needed work, and to use all these findings to propose a way forward for the Australian publishing scene, with specific focus on our local editorial community and practice. I intended to be in the UK for six weeks from late April to the end of May.

Then came Covid-19. By mid-March, it was clear that the international travel I had planned was not going to be possible, and would quite likely remain impossible for the foreseeable future. I could have postponed indefinitely, but I was loath to lose the momentum I had built up in contacting BAME professionals. In addition, this project was designed to address an issue that has deeply resonated with me for over a decade. The prospect of waiting, of delaying this already much-delayed conversation further, was unbearable. I wanted to push forward in whatever way possible, even if that meant having some initial conversations online and hoping to follow up those conversations in person when travel was possible again.

To that end, the meetings I had lined up were shifted to the brave new world of video conferencing for all those contacts who had the physical and emotional wherewithal to be interviewed in the uncertain environment of lockdowns, furloughs and looming job cuts. Gratifyingly, this proved to be quite a few of them. I spent April and May having long, discursive conversations with a wonderful group of BAME professionals from across the publishing spectrum, ranging from early-career to long-established editors, sales and marketing staff, from the Big 5 corporate publishing houses (Penguin Random House, HarperCollins, Hachette, Simon & Schuster and Macmillan) to small, indie publishers. And while the range of respondents was extensive, the experiences and insights were, by and large, consistent. This allowed me to start fleshing out a big picture that was not surprising in the least. The only real surprise was the level of detail which my interviewees were willing to disclose. I had anticipated needing to question sensitively and carefully, with frequent assurances of confidentiality. Instead, I was met with incredible generosity, openness

and passion. It hasn't escaped my notice, however, that many of these professionals have worked and continue to work within a tight-knit industry, and that many relate traumatic experiences which could result in further harm being enacted on them. For these reasons, I have sought to preserve anonymity in the following report. Any quotes attributed by name are with the speakers' consent only, or are quoted within previously-published reports and documents.

After my initial conversations were well underway, George Floyd was murdered by police in Minneapolis. His murder catalysed the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement across the globe. Systemic prejudices around race and class were cast into stark and startling relief to a global audience. Suddenly, the calls for representative publishing, for decolonising the white, middle-class industry that is Western publishing, and contending with our own complicity in white supremacy as a cultural industry, moved to the very forefront of how we as a global industry think of publishing today. And just as suddenly, the conversations I had been privileged to be a part of became more poignant, more urgent, and more desperately needed than ever before.

I was initially tempted to divide this report into 'pre-June 2020' and 'post-June 2020' halves to try and capture the ways in which respondents experienced the Black Lives Matter resurgence in their working lives. I've since discarded the idea as bordering on facetious. In every instance, the people whom I interviewed have been, like me, speaking to and working in the realm of representative publishing since they began their careers. The international interest in talking about race has affected the exterior lives of people of colour working within publishing, but not the interior – nobody interviewed woke up in June 2020 to realise for the first time that they were an underrepresented minority. Rather, they were thrust headlong into the newly-awakened appetite amongst their white peers to discuss systemic exclusion on an unprecedented scale. Black Lives Matter may have shifted the ecosystem in which BAME publishing staff are operating, but it hasn't changed their drive and passion to see meaningful, sustainable change within the industry.

There are three industry reports from the UK that have formed the core of this paper: *In Full Colour: Cultural Diversity in Publishing Today* (2004, commissioned by Arts Council England's Decibel programme and *The Bookseller*, edited by Danuta Kean); *Writing the Future: Black and Asian Writers and Publishers in the UK Marketplace* (2015, commissioned by Spread the Word and *The Bookseller*, edited by Danuta Kean); and *Re:Thinking 'Diversity' in Publishing* (2020, commissioned by Goldsmiths University of London, Spread the Word and *The Bookseller*, written by Dr Anamik Saha and Dr Sandra van Lente). While the research and data collected is focussed on the UK industry, there is much to learn and adapt from it to our own context in Australia. On a pragmatic level, these reports offer a chronological, data-driven view of the rate of progress in the UK industry over the

past fifteen years. I address the three reports and others in the literature review to follow, and I will be incorporating and interpreting them where relevant into my own findings.

I am also indebted to the work done by the team at Diversity Arts Australia (DARTS) to identify cultural diversity specifically in leadership positions within our own creative sectors. The 2019 *Shifting the Balance* report surveys the wider breadth of the Australian arts, screen and creative sectors, and has been essential to understanding the limited data available within the Australian context. I have relied upon the DARTS recommendations when extrapolating my own conclusions specific to Australian publishing.

Embedded in my research is my own journey as a woman of colour in the Australian publishing landscape for the past decade. I offer this in lieu of any experiential insights that might have come from physically travelling to the UK and visiting different publishing houses in person.

Before we begin, a final note on methodology. I am writing this paper less as an empirical research report and more as a collection of stories, experiences, insights and recommendations. I can think of no better way to represent the profound professional and emotional connections I have been lucky enough to make due to the generosity of my BAME counterparts in the UK, and to highlight above all, how much these conversations are a part of the constellation of lived experiences that come with being a person of colour in the publishing industry. Our experiences are mutable, personal and subjective; the only resemblance they have to empirical data is how eerily simple it has been to replicate them across all the variations of personal context represented in the cohort of BAME professionals interviewed. Where empirical evidence is necessary, I will be referring to *Rethinking Diversity* and *Writing the Future* in most instances.

This report by and large eschews singling out any particular publisher, with the exception of a couple of case studies. This is mostly related to protecting the identities of my respondents, but also because the problem is not with one or two houses. There are plenty of well-documented stumbles and missteps from a variety of publishing houses should anyone wish to seek them out, even as recently as this year. But the problem lies within the industry as a whole, so let us discuss it as a whole.

It is my hope that this report will offer a window into the experiences UK BAME publishing staff in order to spark long-delayed and much-needed conversations in Australian publishing about the make-up of our own industry, and how we can do better to ensure the gatekeepers of our national culture best reflect the nation they represent.

On language

When it comes to 'diversity' in publishing – indeed, in so many industries – the terminology suffers from a surfeit of acronyms and euphemisms. In the context of this research, I have opted to use terms that reflect the communities under discussion. Rather than 'diverse publishing', I am alternating between 'inclusive publishing' and 'representative publishing' where relevant. 'Diversity' as a term has evolved to simultaneously mean everything and nothing – it is a demographic catch-all that is most beneficial to a corporate body, not to the individual. To have 'diversity' without 'inclusion' is the equivalent of having an instrument without the means to play it, a collection of boxes to be ticked without actually providing seats at the table. The problem is not that publishing is not 'diverse' – empirically it is, if we consider that few authors and staff exactly resemble each other. The problem is very much that it is neither inclusive nor representative: equal access is not provided to all peoples to enter and progress within the space with the same opportunities as their peers, and as a result, publishing is not representative of the world which we live in. Shift our terms of reference, and the imperative to change our practice becomes infinitely more clear.

The terms used to describe staff from non-white backgrounds have similar weight and meaning. When discussing the UK context, I refer to the interview subjects as BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic), as this is the term I have found used most frequently within the publishing community there. When discussing the American publishing scene, I use the term BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour) in an attempt to represent the complex ethnic demographics of the United States. In the Australian context, I use FNPOC (First Nations and People of Colour) as most representative of our own complex demographic needs. When speaking generally, I use the term 'people of colour' for the sake of brevity alone.

With all of these terms, I acknowledge first and foremost that even with all the goodwill in the world, any catch-all acronym is inherently politicised and often serves to flatten the rich complexities of non-white peoples. Not all non-white experiences are the same; broad-strokes categories obscure our singularity and the fact that we do not belong to one monolithic community. Indeed, the needs, concerns and priorities of each community are widely varied both within themselves and within the national and international landscapes at large. Wherever possible, I have respected the individual self-identification of my interviewees.

When referring to the overall culture of publishing, I will be using the term 'mainstream' to mean commercial trade publishing, and white and middle-class. Without getting too far into the weeds of what exactly 'white' and 'white-adjacency' might entail, this report is operating on the principle that culture derived from Western Europe continues to be held as the standard norm, and

cultural experiences that fall beyond these confines are considered niche and Other. In this definition of 'mainstream', I am including Mediterranean European communities. I recognise that these communities have historically been considered as outside the mainstream, but with changing patterns of migration and the increased presence of communities from beyond Europe, they have since been pushed towards the white-presenting centre.

Any oversights in the language used are purely my own.

The virtual evolution of a research project: Where I started and where I ended up

Historically, the Beatrice Davis Editorial Fellow travels to the US for the research portion of the fellowship, but the 2019-2020 Fellowship was newly open to any territory in the world.

After much consideration, the UK seemed most illuminating for the Australian context. The UK publishing industry is culturally closer to Australia's, though larger in size and scope, and their market – while again larger – bears strong similarities with our own. As related in the literature review to come, there are numerous organisations and research projects transparently working in the inclusive publishing space for decades, and these were a huge resource to my own research.

As of 2019, the Big 5 companies in the UK were also more broadly transparent about the initiatives taken to address the demographic bias of the UK industry, although this has of course shifted somewhat in the US in the wake of #BLM. The two Lee & Low Diversity Baseline Studies in 2015 and 2019 show that the US industry is likewise still grappling with the same issues around BIPOC representation within its publishing houses and lists. I don't by any means want to imply that the inclusive publishing conversation in the US is not also worth examining in depth, or without significant experiences and findings that can and should apply to the Australian context. A recent BIPOC publishing panel organised in the US by the Book Industry Study Group, for example, observed that while companies are belatedly discussing diversity, equity and inclusion in the wake of Black Lives Matter, the conversation *within* BIPOC circles is centred on the far larger topics of psychological safety and antiracism. Ellen Bush of UNC Press, who is part of the Equity, Justice, and Inclusion Committee at the Association of University Presses, stated that equity conversations have to be carried into all spheres of work, rather than remaining confined to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion committees, and the work has to be done by *everybody* for it to be transformative to an organisation. 'Traditional hierarchies of power and management are not going to be what defines the success of your equity work. You must remain accountable to those who have traditionally been excluded from these tools of power. Trust is something that has to be earned every day. One act of doing something for DEI is not the be all and end all to establishing a community of equity. It's something that you have to practice every day. There will be failures and recoveries.'

In the interests of being as focussed as possible, I have focussed on the UK. Although the UK does not grapple with the same cultural biases as we do in Australia around First Nations peoples, the long shadow of Britain's colonial heritage is highly culturally relevant to their industry and broadly analogous to ours. Relatedly, an historical unwillingness to discuss the intersections of race and class in any great depth is a common feature both in Australia and the UK. In short, the context

of UK publishing culture seemed more easily overlaid onto the Australian one than the differently-nuanced and complex socio-cultural landscape of the United States.

I continue to believe that systemic industry change will be driven by mainstream commercial trade publishers who define the overall culture of our industry, but that more radical innovations generally come from houses with the agility of independence and smaller overall sizes. The initial plan was to focus my attention on mainstream publishing houses, but also reach out to small and medium-sized presses and independent publishers. I am most fortunate that within the cross-section of BAME staff interviewed, there were representatives from the Black, South Asian and East Asian communities, as well as a number of mixed-race staff. They ranged in age from their early-20s (early-career) into their 50s (established), had experience in both large multinational publishers and small-press indies, across fiction, nonfiction, adult and children's publishing, and worked in marketing, sales and – for the large majority – editorial. The glaring gap in my interview cohort was the dearth of male BAME staff.

My original research project was focussed on some specific questions. Thankfully, a majority of them remained feasible when the research plan had to change in March 2020.

- What is it like being a BAME editor within the publishing industry? How does this affect the working experience?
- How does the editorial experience vary for BAME authors when they work with BAME editors vs mainstream editors?
- How effective have existing initiatives to diversify editorial staff at mainstream publishing houses been? What more could be done to diversify the composition of editorial staff?
- How does the lived experience of BAME editors affect their editorial practice when working with sensitive material and BAME authors?
- How do editors from more mainstream backgrounds approach sensitive editorial work?
- What unconscious bias training is available for editors in mainstream publishing houses?

These questions were naturally founded on a desire to connect with, share and learn from the experiences of BAME editors, which I anticipated would have similarities across international borders. I thought to illustrate the common challenges that needed to be addressed to create a more inclusive publishing environment.

In addition, I wanted to learn what changes and initiatives could be scaled to the Australian context, with an eye to proposing a roadmap to a more representative publishing industry and best practice for Australian editors in trade publishing. While my interviews did reveal some

recommendations and learnings that can be applied to the Australian context, I was unable to organise interviews with staff designing and operating Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) programs in UK publishing houses. Understandably, the confidentiality needed to discuss internal company policies did not easily translate to online conversations, and HR and personnel teams at large publishers have had a lot else on their plates this year. My recommendations are consequently based on anecdotal evidence rather than scalable models of best practice successfully employed elsewhere. They are broad recommendations, rather than specifics. It is extremely important that mine is not the only voice being solicited when discussing and considering ways to make the Australian publishing landscape more inclusive and representative. It is even more critical that companies, departments and individuals alike commit to doing the work to change their practices and mindsets in a sustainable and holistic way, rather than looking for a readymade action list created for them by people of colour. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to the problem of systemic exclusion within our industry, and extensive consultation and investment of resources are needed to enact meaningful change.

The Beatrice Davis Fellowship has historically focussed on the experiences and development specifically of *editors*, awarded, as it is, to editorial applicants. While I have long been interested in how the industry as a whole can do better for representative publishing, I was counselled when applying for the fellowship to focus my aims specifically on the editorial experience. It was excellent advice – a successful application is the best proof of that. But advocating for change in only one section of an entire industry is inevitably unsustainable and of diminished impact. The unanimous consensus from all of my interviews was also of this opinion. The questions outlined above were designed to streamline my conversations to maintain focus on the BAME editorial experience. In the actual event, however, each question led to endless digressions about the publishing industry as a whole. The editorial experience forms the core of my research, but the conversation must expand to all linked areas of the publishing process: agenting, acquiring, positioning, sales and marketing. Several respondents also had great insights into the bookselling, review and festival landscape.

So, if readers will pardon my dabbling in high school biology references, the report that follows looks at the BAME experience within the entire ecosystem of UK trade publishing, in the hope that the discussion will prompt greater scrutiny into our local publishing ecosystem and consider sustainable, meaningful roads forward to a more inclusive, representative cultural landscape.

Literature review: Fifteen years of reporting and advocacy in the inclusive publishing space

When discussing the experiences of people of colour in the publishing industry – and in life – never underestimate the value of anecdote. The anecdote delivers a snapshot of our varied lived realities, and is often the only evidence we have that not everybody is experiencing our world as part of the white mainstream. However, the anecdote is also terribly easy to overlook, or worse yet, to invalidate as too coloured by personal sensitivities and not reflecting an abstract 'truth'. That experience is probably familiar to many people of colour. So I have been understandably anxious that the geographical restrictions have me relying so heavily on the anecdotes of my UK BAME peers instead of hard-and-fast empirical data, which is (theoretically) harder to invalidate and ignore. However, it's well past time that we stopped treating peoples' stories and lived experience as inferior to 'hard data'.

Three UK industry reports have loomed large in the planning of my research, and have been consistently referred to by respondents and other industry commentators. *In Full Colour* (2004) and *Writing the Future* (2015) rely on anecdotal evidence gathered over several years by BAME and non-BAME researchers and industry professionals, and presented, collated, with a clear vision and narrative. These reports have proved, nevertheless, relatively easy for the industry to dismiss, ostensibly because they have lacked 'hard data'. This is addressed in *Re:Thinking 'Diversity'* (2020), which is focussed on sociological data gathered over four years, as well as anonymous interviews with staff across the publishing spectrum. It remains to be seen how the industry will respond to this report over time, particularly given that its findings lay out how much work there is still to be done.

In the lead-up to writing this report, *Re:Thinking 'Diversity'* has been a topic of conversation in Australian publishing, coming as it does freshly on the heels of the Black Lives Matter resurgence. But the report does not exist in a vacuum. *In Full Colour* and *Writing the Future* are referenced at various junctures in *Re:Thinking 'Diversity'*, as well as other research projects both ongoing and completed, all part of a continuum of research that has been attempting to drive change within the UK industry for at least fifteen years.

I won't take up too much time here summarising the reports. Links to the full texts are in my references, and I strongly encourage readers to read each report to shade in the contextual colour and detail of the inclusive publishing movement in the UK. For clarity in my own research, though, let me list the findings and scope of the reports, in chronological order.

In Full Colour, 2004

Danuta Kean's 2004 report interprets the results of the Decibel survey, administered by *The Bookseller* in December 2003/January 2004 amongst UK publishing staff. It was the first industry-wide survey of its kind. The survey was part of Arts Council England's Decibel programme, a short-term initiative to 'profile, develop and support culturally diverse art and artists'. BAME authors were part of Kean's report, speaking to *The Bookseller* journalist Benedicte Page, but the focus was largely on the industry itself.

By the numbers, *In Full Colour* found of the 523 respondents surveyed, 8% believed the industry to be culturally diverse, while 47% said it was not. 16% said the company they worked at was culturally diverse, 35% said it was not. 87% of respondents (456 of those surveyed) were white. BAME staff made up the remaining 13%. Given that the majority of respondents were in the London bubble of publishing, where BAME communities made up almost 30% of the population at time of reporting, the industry was well behind an accurate representation of the UK demographic.

29% of respondents were in editorial positions, 11% and 12% from sales and marketing respectively. Just over a quarter (26%) were managing directors, chief executives, partners or directors, and 69% of respondents were women. 'Those at the top of companies are often accused of being complacent about cultural diversity but the survey uncovered a general consensus that [under-representation] of minority ethnic groups should be addressed' (*IFC* 5). Only 28% of executive staff regarded their companies as culturally diverse, where 30% admitted they were not.

In Full Colour's findings are summarised as follows:

> There is a sense that the underrepresentation of minority ethnic communities, both by and within the industry, is self-perpetuating and needs direct action by management if it is to change. Publishing employs an overwhelmingly white and middle-class workforce. It is also less proactive that other, more diverse sectors in branding itself as a profession and in recruitment. Networks, personal and professional, tend to be dominated by white, middle-class graduates […] Publishing will remain a closed shop as long as these networks are dominated by white, middle-class Oxbridge graduates and their friends […] But the survey offers room for optimism that the industry is becoming more diverse. That the issue needs to be addressed seriously is acknowledged by many, giving hope that publishing will be better placed in future to reap the benefits offered by a culturally diverse workforce. (*IFC* 7)

The report clearly lays out a business case for diversifying both companies and their lists, citing national data about the BAME literature market, literary pursuits and library traffic. In short, all the way back in 2004, *In Full Colour* provided both empirical and anecdotal evidence as to the composition of UK publishing houses, how this affected the acquisition and success of BAME authors

and the experience of BAME staff, and made a case for why industry attitudes and practices needed to significantly change to better reflect the communities they work in.

Writing the Future, 2015

Writing the Future is the first industry-wide report commissioned by Spread the Word, a London-based writers' development agency, and also co-funded by Arts Council England. It builds on the findings of *In Full Colour* to re-survey the publishing landscape in even broader strokes, relying less on data and more on perspectives from recruitment, authors, publishers, festivals and universities. Additionally, *Writing the Future* surveys BAME individuals working within the inclusive publishing space, including Samenua Sesher, who headed the Decibel programme in 2004. It also spotlights unpublished writing by BAME authors throughout the report. This is not to say that *Writing the Future* has no data reliance at all. For published BAME authors, it dives into the genres in which they write (literary fiction and YA take the lion's share here, at 42% and 26% respectively), and the path to publication for their debut and current works (self, small, medium, large companies).

Writing the Future found that among 66 publishers surveyed, 56% regarded the industry as 'not diverse at all', 29% saw it as 'a little diverse' and 6% said it was 'very diverse'. Among 49 literary agents surveyed, none regarded the industry as 'moderately' or 'very' diverse, and 97% stated it was 'a little diverse' or 'not diverse at all'. 38% of respondents came from medium-to-large publishers, including companies that had instituted Creative Access paid internships for BAME candidates. Nevertheless, 74% of those respondents regarded the industry as not diverse, suggesting that entry-level efforts for a more inclusive workforce lacked longevity and retention. 'The data suggests that the experience of staff within a company was reflected in their opinion of diversity within the wider industry' (*WTF* 21). Of the companies employing BAME publishing staff, 35% worked in editorial, 35% in finance, 26% in social media/online. Very few worked in human resources – only 4% surveyed said their company had a BAME member of staff in this department. 'In response to the question "What is the most difficult challenge you face in improving the cultural diversity of your publishing list?" one publisher wrote "having HR, but especially the decision makers in the organisation, wake up to why this is important"' (*WTF* 23).

Given that *In Full Colour* cohesively laid out exactly 'why this is important' back in 2004, encountering this comment in a 2015 report does not augur well for its overall findings:

> Ten years ago I […] uncovered disturbing evidence of institutional bias, a sense of exclusion and an industry wedded to recruitment methods that undermined diversity rather than promoted it. As a result, a raft of initiatives were introduced by Decibel […] These ranged from paid internships

for BAME graduates in publishing houses such as Faber, Random House and Penguin, to prizes aimed at supporting BAME writers into print.

Ten years is a long time, and […] I expected to find that changes wrought by those initiatives had filtered through to all levels of the business. I also hoped to see that BAME novelists were finding it easier to establish their careers and be taken seriously as universal voices for our times. I was wrong.

[…] I found that the past 10 years of turbulent change affecting the UK book industry has had a negative impact on attempts to become more diverse. With profit margins assailed by high volume/high discount outlets, which demand expensive marketing support, as well as new book formats that challenge everything from copyright to distribution, traditional publishers have retrenched and become more conservative in their editorial and employment choices. (*WTF* 2)

Writing the Future's broad scope uncovers layer upon layer of systemic disadvantage for BAME staff and authors within mainstream publishing, and the disturbing extent of the inertia that had halted – or even in some cases, reversed – the progress of inclusive publishing in the intervening years since *In Full Colour*. And while several reasons are given by respondents as to the cause of that inertia, Rare Recruitment founder Raphael Mokades cuts through the noise when he states, 'It is, ultimately, about how much of a shit you give – and you can quote me on that' (*WTF* 4).

Writing the Future gives recommendations at various points throughout, but the key thirteen come at the end. 'If they are adopted by all sides of the industry they should ensure that in 10 years we will look back on this report as a game changer and not, as has happened in the past, yet another initiative that died of good intentions without serious management buy-in' (*WTF* 37). The recommendations are specifically targeted at many levels of the publishing landscape; I've summarised the most relevant ones here:

- An industry-wide diversity scheme, with signatories mandated to conduct an internal audit 'to address cultural bias and institute changes to tackle inequality at all levels' (*WTF* 37)
- A moratorium on unpaid internships
- Stronger trade links with state school career services and non-Russell Group universities (specifically Oxford and Cambridge, but also the other twenty-two member institutions), including a campaign to publicise the diversity of careers available in publishing
- Adopt successful best practice from other media organisations
- Stronger links with community advocacy groups to widen talent pool and source BAME candidates

- Stronger links between literary agencies and writer development organisations to develop and mentor a more diverse pool of authors

- All public funding for literary festivals to be subject to an audit of the diversity of their programming

- University writing programs to monitor diversity of their intake and industry links, and create strategic partnerships to fund more diverse intake of students

- Further research into the treatment of BAME fiction writers by arts media and retailers

- Further research into the BAME consumer market that incorporates both BAME and non-BAME readers

Re:Thinking 'Diversity' in Publishing, 2020

Authored by sociology and cultural studies academics Drs Anamik Saha and Sandra van Lente of Goldsmiths, University of London, *Re:Thinking 'Diversity'* was released in June 2020 in the midst of Black Lives Matter protests in the UK. It is the first academically-led, data-driven study of its kind directed at the publishing industry and related sectors such as bookselling and literary festivals. In it, Saha and van Lente contextualise their research in upheaval of 2020:

> The cultural and creative industries in the UK are neither reflective of nor produce content for the communities in which we live and work. COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter are showing the existing and longstanding structural inequalities in our society. There is an urgent need for the publishing industry to do more and to do better.

The report is the result of four years of research, in partnership with *The Bookseller* and Spread the Word, and while it takes core data from the industry, it extrapolates it alongside interviews to answer questions that the data alone cannot address: what happens to books by BAME authors after they go to mainstream publishing houses? Why do these books not break out beyond a core readership? How can these books be better published to ensure future successful BAME acquisitions? And how can current initiatives addressing the issue become 'a pipeline to meaningful change' (*RDP* 7)? Of the 113 people interviewed, over 50% were white. Professions spanned agents, CEOs/MDs/publishers and editors roughly equally, and then also smaller percentages of sales, marcomms and design staff, booksellers, and also authors, festival curators and other publishing-adjacent professions.

Saha and van Lente's research and findings cover the myriad steps of the publishing process, from acquisition of BAME authors, comping of titles, packaging and promoting BAME authors and their books, bookselling and the festival circuits. Wherever available, there is relevant data for each focal point. Ruth Harrison at Spread the Word admits that the report was commissioned because it

needed to be academic research so that it couldn't be discounted on the grounds of anecdotal reliance, as *Writing the Future* had. Thus, the research focuses on organisations, systems and processes to present a cumulative portrait of the entire industry.

The findings, once again, are not fantastic, though the report points to some successful initiatives that are hopefully on the right track. Despite a raft of recruitment and cadetship initiatives following *Writing the Future*, *Re:Thinking 'Diversity'* reports 2019 Publishers Association data that found that 86% of publishing staff are white, only a 1% drop from the Decibel survey's 87%. There are positive steps being taken towards a representative industry, including the creation of the Dialogue Books imprint at Hachette, The Indigo Press and the children's indie KnightsOf, which join the ranks of established inclusive publishers Jacaranda Books, Hope Road and Peepal Tree Press. Another positive step was Bernardine Evaristo becoming the first Black woman to win the Booker Prize in 2019. But as Evaristo herself states in her foreword to the report, '*Rethinking 'Diversity' in Publishing* arrives as another clarion call to an industry which, with all the apparent goodwill in the world, hasn't changed fast enough to become more inclusive' (*RDP* 4).

A significant factor the research grapples with is the tension within the industry of 'publishing as a business versus publishing as a public service' (*RDP* 34). Like the preceding reports, *Re:Thinking 'Diversity'* states both the commercial and moral imperatives to properly embracing an inclusive publishing landscape. It reports a strong sense from respondents that the economic and cultural value of diversity are mutually exclusive, which has led to the continuing inertia when acquiring BAME authors while attempts are made to recruit more BAME staff. 'Publishers are still not convinced by the economic benefits of publishing more diversely' (*RDP* 35). In order to combat this, Saha and van Lente stress the importance of the industry seeking out and investing in new audiences beyond its historical core demographic of white middle-class readers. They offer four recommendations to be applied holistically to reach these new audiences.

First, more BAME staff need to join mainstream publishing, even if this 'comes without guarantees [of subsequently more inclusive publishing lists and corporate culture]. People of colour who work in publishing should not be expected to do this labour. But if the premise that [more inclusive publishing] is the role of the job is clear then it should be properly resourced and supported' (*RDP* 36). Second, publishers need to adopt more creative promotional strategies, including stronger awareness of new media channels beyond the traditional mainstream. Third, booksellers need to focus on how they can reach a more diverse audience of book buyers, in both bricks-and-mortar and online contexts, and consider how their current practices might be exclusionary to those audiences. And finally, for diverse audience development, publishers –

particularly sales and marketing teams – need to invest more time and resources with audience engagement organisations and consultancies.

> Unfortunately, this is not a quick fix and will take significant transformation. But, as a starting point, diversity needs to stop being seen as an additional extra. If publishers are serious about diversity, they need to invest more resources in reaching new audiences. If they are unwilling to do this, they need to be honest about how they value minority audiences as a consequence. To reiterate: a lack of faith in new audiences is the biggest reason why the publishing industry still struggles to publish more diversely. Indeed, it raises the question, if publishing is a profit-based industry, then why the lack of interest in reaching new audiences? (*RDP* 37)

The report concludes:

> One of the clearest findings from our research, based on our interviews at least, is that publishers do care about diversity. Everyone we spoke to showed an openness around how they can make the industry more diverse, especially in terms of the books it publishes. We encountered no denial or defensiveness about the inequalities that exist in publishing. There was a strong sense that publishers need to do better. This is very encouraging for the future […] While independent presses […] continue to be the main driving force for diversity, there was a sense that the big publishers are getting on board too […] we cannot claim for certain that there are more writers of colour being published than before. But it does at least seem like there is a genuine attempt to seek out and publish 'new voices'. (*RDP* 34)

As with *Writing the Future*, there are relevant recommendations to the industry spaced throughout the entire report. It ends with particular calls to action for the industry to rethink diversity:

- Rethink how you measure diversity
- Rethink your audience
- Rethink your hiring practices
- Rethink who you could join forces with

Other research and resources of note

Each of the reports mentioned above is a valuable resource, and I once again encourage readers to seek them out to appreciate the breadth and depth of the research contained in each. Taken separately, they are impressive; taken together, they present a richly-layered picture of how far the inclusive publishing movement in the UK has come, and how much further it has to go. I'll refer back to these reports as significant milestones when discussing the Australian context.

I also want to mention some other important UK research which, while not directly applicable to my own report, are significant supplementary resources to understand the publishing landscape when it comes to authors and books being published.

Spread the Word's 2005 *Free Verse* report – commissioned by Arts Council England, Scottish Arts Council and Arts Council Wales – undertakes a survey of the UK poetry sector, with a follow-up report, *Freed Verse* conducted by Dr Nathalie Teitler in 2017.

Dr Melanie Ramdarshan Bold's 2019 Booktrust survey on children's books examines the racial and ethnic diversity of authors in the children's trade market. Alongside the two *Reflecting Realities* reports from the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) in 2018 and 2019, conducted along similar lines, the Booktrust survey presents some important data on the substantial gaps within the UK children's book market. These gaps are particularly stark when interpreted alongside the demographic reality of the nation. Similar data on the adult trade market is lacking, but the belief is that the situation is not much improved there.

The inclusive publishing space has been thoughtfully serviced for several years by the dedication of a number of advocacy organisations and agencies. Of these, Spread the Word has been most intrinsic to my own research. Co-founded by Bernardine Evaristo, Spread the Word is first and foremost a London-based writers' development agency. But they also campaign extensively to ensure that the publishing landscape reflects the diversity of the community at large – inclusion and access has always been core to their mission. They are also a research organisation; their influence can be seen in both the 2015 and 2020 reports referenced above. They have consulted with UK publishing houses on inclusion initiatives as well as conducting their own development programs, such as The Complete Works poetry mentoring scheme, created in response to the findings of the *Free Verse* report.

Another organisation worth mentioning is Creative Access UK, a not-for-profit social enterprise that began as a charity. Their mission is to help underrepresented communities not only enter the creative industries, but thrive within them, with an aim to changing the landscape of these industries to accurately reflect and engage with society at large. Creative Access funding largely comes from corporate partnerships within the creative industry, and profits are funnelled back into growing, training and supporting their members. While they have engaged with a range of media companies – television, film, theatre and the arts – 60% of their programming and partnerships have gone into the publishing industry in particular. I'll refer back to their work specifically when discussing recent BAME internships in publishing. With the appointment of Faber chief executive Stephen Page as the new chair on the Creative Access board of directors in early 2020, it's a fair

assumption to make that publishing will continue to be a focus area of the organisation's work for some time to come.

There are, of course, numerous other individuals and organisations working in the UK inclusive publishing space – would that I had the time and resources to engage with all of them to a greater extent! I encourage all those interested to delve further to get a sense of the rich heritage and nuanced conversations that have been happening for so many years about how to change our industry for the better.

How to read this report

There was an overwhelming consensus from all respondents that there has been a great deal of goodwill and desire to do better amongst the publishing houses in which they have worked. Some outliers are undoubtedly inevitable, but for the most part, mainstream publishers recognise that there are large swathes of the population who have long been underrepresented in their lists. The issue is not the will to do better, but what – if anything – that will has translated to, and where – if anywhere – BAME staff have factored in any moves to change the nature of the industry at large.

In choosing to begin this section as I have, I am drawing attention to a very significant issue faced time and time again whenever the issue of inclusive publishing is raised. And that is – without relying too heavily on buzz words of the moment – white fragility. It has been my experience, borne up by the experiences of my FNPOC counterparts here in Australia and BAME counterparts in the UK, that conversations around the homogeneity of publishing houses and lists inevitably begin (and often end) with assurances and cherry-picked examples that the people in positions of leadership have been doing their best, and value a plurality of voices. The instinct towards defensiveness serves as a barricade against deeper, more meaningful discussion, and inevitably flattens the experiences and concerns of those who raise their voices about systemic exclusion and bias.

It is undoubtedly uncomfortable to be confronted with our own complicity in harmful systems, and we are all – to complex, varying degrees – complicit. So I take this moment to issue an invitation to all readers from every background to set aside any defensive instincts and instead immerse themselves in the lived truths of their peers of colour with the same spirit of generosity with which these truths are offered.

The BAME landscape in UK publishing

1980 to *In Full Colour*

It's tempting to feel like nothing has changed within the publishing industry, but the experiences of BAME staff over the past 30 years suggests quite the opposite. **Respondent A,** who joined the industry in the 90s, describes an environment where it wasn't considered 'helpful' to focus on points of difference as a BAME professional in an overwhelmingly white industry. 'There is an empowerment of the generation coming through now to self-identify as different,' she says, whereas when she began her publishing career, it 'wouldn't have paid to make a fuss' and not fit in. Fundamentally, of course, being BAME in publishing means that you *are* different, but her experience suggested that the industry was (and continues to be) open to BAME candidates – provided, that is, that 'one ticked the class box' of being university educated amongst the Russell Group (preferably Oxbridge) and middle-class. This highlights from the very outset the intersections of race and class within the publishing world, particularly the likelihood that the exclusionary practices of publishing are a lasting result of the origins of the modern industry in the often-independently-wealthy middle classes – more on this later.

While drawing attention to one's difference may not have been perceived of as helpful, it is nevertheless impossible to operate without an awareness of it. 'Few Black and Asian publishers regard the business as racist,' Danuta Kean states in *In Full Colour*. 'But many feel that prevailing attitudes, while not intentionally racist, compound a sense of being a minority' (*IFC* 8). Andrea Henry, then books editor at *The Daily Mirror*, refers to overt tokenism during her time in a publishing house, being 'wheeled out when publishers wanted to acquire a Black book' (*IFC* 10). She's quoted alongside other pioneering Black editors Ellah Allfrey (then editor at Random House, now editor-at-large at Canongate) and Elise Dillsworth (then editor at Virago, now at the Elise Dillsworth Agency), both of whom relate the surprise people unconsciously betrayed when they realised that both editors were Black women. While all three women might feel reticent about being characterised as 'pioneering' alongside BAME industry heavyweight and forerunner, Margaret Busby, the trajectory of their careers despite this subtly hostile environment – which Kean outright describes as 'hideously white' (*IFC* 8) – is nothing short of remarkable. It is also revealing about the cognitive load that BAME editors carry with them alongside the usual career ambitions, and the inevitable fatigue that comes with it. As **Respondent A** says, the optics and expectations for BAME staff are different – are much, much higher – when compared to their white counterparts, and there is a significant burden to being a representative one of a few. 'People of colour aren't allowed to fail,' she says, 'and there are often no second chances.' In addition, all three women quoted in *In Full Colour* were referred to by more junior BAME respondents in my interviews as invaluable mentors and resources, yet another level of

cognitive load. Small wonder that fatigue is an issue returned to several times in all my conversations.

In the time since the 2004 survey, **Respondent A** *has* observed change in the industry's general attitudes to hiring and acquiring more inclusively: 'the movement is a slow spiral, but it *is* moving'. In the wake of Black Lives Matter, for instance, she notes that there is a desire for immediate action that she hasn't experienced before. However, she cautions that meaningful change must take the time to be adequately scaffolded, or it will lack lasting impact and possibly pave the way for an inevitable blowback when the change is revealed to be unsustainable. A significant issue is the scarcity of BAME staff in positions of seniority where they can lead progressive initiatives. Without sufficient BAME representation in leadership roles, there is also inadequate support for more junior BAME staff.

Respondent A's observations about the slowly changing nature of the publishing landscape are borne out by younger BAME professionals I interviewed, albeit with varying degrees of faith in the capacity of the landscape *to* change. **Respondent B**, co-founder of an indie press, gained extensive commissioning experience at the Big 5 before embarking on an independent venture away from mainstream publishing. For her, there simply was not adequate drive to address unconscious biases during acquisitions in mainstream publishing, alongside a disturbing corporate model which saw a downturn in priorities of care particularly for BAME authors. She saw both of these issues as significant roadblocks to building inclusive lists of commercial fiction. A similar driving force was behind the creation of Jacaranda Books and commercial children's publisher KnightsOf, both indie publishers centring inclusivity in their list.

As we can see, there are BAME publishing professionals who, rather than continuing to tilt at the windmill of mainstream publishing in the hopes that it would make room for more inclusive publishing, have taken the baton of representation and progressed it further and faster using the autonomy of small independent presses. I note that this was never offered as an either/or approach – either change mainstream publishing houses *or* venture out on your own. Rather, it seems that where the resources exist for inclusive indie ventures, they are doing immediate work in changing the publishing ecosystem with agile, adaptable lists, and hopefully providing valuable data and sales records to encourage the slower-moving mainstream houses to follow suit.

In the wake of *Writing the Future*

There's greater anonymity in numbers, so I have grouped together respondents within the 20-35 age bracket who are at earlier career stages in mainstream publishing houses. Their experiences cover companies in the Big 5, and while I hesitate to oversimplify the complex machinery of the large

multinationals, there is a general consensus on the experience of being BAME at these companies. All respondents began their careers either around or after the release of *Writing the Future*. Reflecting back on Kean's findings, in *Re:Thinking 'Diversity'* Saha and van Lente ascribe the lack of progress to the negative impact 'during the turbulent years surrounding the rise of digital, online retail, and the 2008 financial crisis' (*RDP* 6). In contrast, the years spanning 2015-2019 showed a greater commitment to diversifying the publishing workforce, including several recruitment and internship initiatives focussing on BAME and non-middle-class entrants into the industry. A number of those interviewed took part in these initiatives, which I will return to later.

The experience of the younger BAME cohort has been weighted differently to their older BAME peers, who had been operating in an industry without articulated commitments to changing their practice. In the more recent context, all respondents agreed that there was definitely a greater awareness of the limitations of both the workforce and the publishing lists within the big multinationals. They also noted a number of corporate initiatives and staff networks that have been created to attempt to address the problem. One issue, however, is the coded language that persists around hiring. 'Not the right fit for the team' is still wielded when turning down BAME applicants who are often more equipped than their white peers in terms of experience and education. This is particularly illuminating about how publishing teams continue to view themselves. 'It's about who you can imagine sitting next to you, who you relate to,' says **Respondent F**. But as **Respondent P** observes, 'if, living in a city as diverse as London, you're consistently surrounded only by people who look like you, that's a *choice*.' 'The excuse of "Not enough experience",' says **Respondent E**, 'should be recognised for what it really is: a lack of privilege. How many of us can have the requisite experience (which nobody seems to be able to quantify, by the way) if we're never given the shot to try?'.

Another issue is how much consultation there has been with BAME staff in setting up access initiatives, and whether they are being applied as effectively as they could. Certainly, for those interviewed, the industry might be more accessible to BAME applicants, but the experience once you've gained access continues to be a mixed bag. **Respondent O**, who had previously worked in other mostly-white creative industries, said that 'publishing has been the worst. And it's shocking because even now, nobody really talks widely about its whiteness.' **Respondent P** adds, 'I wasn't aware any industry could be this white, to be honest. And they make sure you know how different you are, how excluded you are, in subtle, probably often unconscious ways.'

The phrase 'uneven playing field' arose several times, hearkening back to **Respondent A's** observation about the different optics and expectations of BAME staff and **Respondent E's** remarks

on the privilege of experience. 'We're doing the same work as our white peers,' one respondent says.

> We're doing our best to shine in a crowded field so that when the rare opportunities come up for career progression, we're ready for them. But on top of that, we're still navigating white spaces, white managers, white authors. It starts to wear on you after a while when you end up having the same conversations over and over again defending your community and trying to make the case for why it deserves to be seen. (**Respondent C**)

The quote above refers to the active labour of advocating for inclusive publishing. What about BAME staff who are not overtly carrying the torch for the cause? Is the experience more palatable for them? Another respondent answers:

> Look, even if I actively try not to think about it, keep my head down and get on with it, all I need to do is look at the people higher up every time we're in a big meeting. Who are the people I see up there? More to the point, can I picture *myself* up there? I have good days – doesn't everyone? – where I will say yes, I will make it up there. But there are more bad days when it doesn't seem possible. At least, not unless I'm prepared to play a game that's abhorrent to me. And then I think, what am I *doing* here? Should I just cut my losses and run? (**Respondent D**)

The shortage of BAME staff in senior positions materially affects the job prospects and outlook of new entrants to the industry. 'Who ascends the ranks? That's how you measure the success of a company – how many of us have executive power?' **(Respondent F)**. 'It's a traditional, hierarchical industry,' says **Respondent O**. 'And people of colour fall away at the bottom, and few get anywhere near the top.'

A number of respondents mentioned mentoring from white senior staff as helpful when it came to career outlook. 'But it just makes a difference when it's someone who has some commonality with your own life,' **Respondent E** says. 'I can't explain it. Well actually, I feel like I don't *have* to explain it because I'm talking to *you*, and my immediate instinct is, "Yeah, she gets it, of course she does." And if that doesn't answer the question, I don't know what will!'. 'We should have at least one person who is read the same way as we are, who can help us through the daily experience, and for whom we don't need to code-switch,' says **Respondent F**. 'Someone who understands the personal nuances of being Black or a person of colour, such as family expectations, personal dynamics, so that they're not operating under white assumptions and when advice is offered, it's actually useful.'

Post-Black Lives Matter, **Respondent G**, who has some autonomy over acquisition decisions, describes another instance where the playing field is uneven within the current thirst in UK publishing for BAME authors.

> Right now, authors of colour are being thrust in front of white editors and publishers who are snapping them up. Suddenly I'm competing with my white peers to bring authors of colour to the list, when this time last year I couldn't get them past the door. And that's of course really good news on balance, having more authors of colour join the company. But, for example, I can tell you that I've been in meetings where BAME authors being championed by white editors are privileged much higher than those being brought forward by me or my BAME peers. And my worry is that because everyone's so excited right now to show that they've changed how they do this job, a lot of these authors are getting rushed through the gate with false expectations of their performance, with these wild advances that I just can't see earning out. A crime thriller needs to be acquired with the standard expectations of other books in that genre, not inflated to some insane figure because the white editors think that the book's going to perform impossibly well because the author's Black. That's what I'm worried about. If these authors don't perform according to the insane expectations, then it's just paving the way for a clapback in 18 months' time, when people will point to their poor performance as evidence that Black crime thrillers don't sell, and then we're right back where we started.

This concern was also raised by others in the younger BAME cohort as well as **Respondent A**, who says: 'writers of colour must receive the same publishing drive and effort as white authors – *more* commitment, not less. They deserve to be matched in terms of advances as white authors, commensurate with the expectations of individual books. Too much sets them up for failure, too little is insulting.' Likewise, the assumption that BAME authors should take smaller advances because a BAME editor is making the offer is deeply flawed, despite the different experience BAME editors for BAME authors bring to the table.

The issue is not whether *only* BAME editors can acquire and publish BAME authors, but whether recent changes to acquisition practices in mainstream publishing have been fully thought through, and sustainable imprint or company policies put in place to ensure that BAME authors are operating under the same expectations as their white peers. In order to do this, **Respondent E** believes that the perspectives of BAME staff, particularly those with a track record of working in the inclusive publishing space, should be a greater part of the conversation. The issue of sustainable change also highlights the importance of experienced BAME staff in the sales and marketing departments to project accurate, realistic targets for new BAME acquisitions. Another interviewee goes one step further to say that 'diversity list targeting isn't practical or effective in the long run. If I'm being honest, I'd actually say that it's actually exploitative, whether that's the intention or not'

(**Respondent G**). Getting BAME staff into positions with enough seniority that they are part of these conversations is of critical importance.

Accessibility and career progression

So how exactly does one get to such a senior position as a BAME candidate, and how accessible is that career path? When questioned further about 'the game' **Respondent D** referred to previously, she summarised it as, 'make friends with the right people, given them the right encouragement to think of you first whenever opportunities come up.' I countered that this game surely categorises the experience of all junior staff in publishing, probably even all corporate environments where career ladders are various combinations of meritocracy and networking.

> Yes, of course. But for me, it means keeping my mouth shut when someone says something gross or outright shitty. It means giving people a free pass when they say that Black and brown people don't read, or make jokes that the reason a book about dogs sells rights in South Korea is because it's going to be rejacketed as a cookbook. It's either that, or they'll only ever think of me as 'that one Black girl who always has a problem', even if 90% of the time I'm just that Black girl who's a fucking phenomenal editor.

Respondent D is referring to what Edwin Hollander identified as 'idiosyncrasy credits' – a perceived 'outsider' accumulating adequate goodwill amongst a mainstream by conforming to an accepted norm, in order that a future deviation from that norm is viewed positively. No doubt 'the game' is an experience shared with white peers at a similar career level, but when code-switching, tone-policing, unconscious bias and microaggressions are at play, the cognitive load is far heavier.

There's a level of disingenuousness and erasure in the BAME access programs that some companies have adopted in response to *Writing the Future* and now Black Lives Matter. **Respondent O** relates the experience of being wheeled out with other BAME staff at the company when they have been launching BAME access programs: 'It creates a false impression of welcome. All of us are lower level staff, but from the outside looking in, if you're a new applicant to these programs, it's a diverse industry. It's only when you get in that you realise how false that impression is.' Respondents relate being named in company comms as having been 'discovered' by these programs, as though they haven't been interviewing unsuccessfully for the company outside the BAME access programs for several months prior. Moreover, they are not consulted about the comms nor do they give their consent to be represented in the company's virtue-signalling. **Respondent F** observes that qualifications and experience are erased by these comms, 'so that when you're introduced to your colleagues, they only see you as the one who was let in as a concession. That has lasting repercussions on how you're perceived by your peers, and it affects things like career progression. It might be true that you only got hired because of D&I initiatives, but that's a reflection on a

company's bad attitudes, not your qualifications, especially if nothing about *you* changed between your unsuccessfully applying for a regular entry-level job and then being taken up by a BAME-specific one.'

Respondents O and P also flag the issue of all the access programs being entry-level. 'All these diversity schemes are junior. It's a PR exercise, and meanwhile the culture is not there to keep BAME people in publishing,' says **Respondent P**.

> It generally takes people of colour longer to get into the industry because they have to bank up on experience and education much more than other entry-level applicants just to be considered. They don't want to be working from the bottom after all that, and the frustration of being kept down leads to them leaving within a couple of years. I honestly think there's a white saviour complex in these initiatives, which is why they're always junior initiatives. There's a whole assumption that we're all poor and disadvantaged, that's why we need 'help' to get into the industry. It's like they've never heard of migrant excellence. All the interviews we do to try and get a job end up being free consultancy for companies at *our* cost, because we're rarely hired as a result, but the white people doing the interviewing can feel like they've done their good deed for the day and feel like they've listened to people of colour without needing to actually engage in what we say.

Adds **Respondent O**:

> All these assumptions of our disadvantage lead to our inclusion in the industry being thought of as a one-way street. *They* are offering everything to *us*, as opposed to thinking about what value *we* bring to the table. We really need split focus from companies between recruiting BAME staff and retaining BAME staff, and I think this assumption of how low and valueless we are is really at the heart of that.

Some respondents expressed a slightly different concern with career progressions catalysed by *Writing the Future*-prompted diversity access initiatives and Black Lives Matter. 'I want to see more faces like mine rising to prominent publishing positions,' **Respondent G** says. 'But I want to know that they are rising because they've been properly supported, their professional development has been properly nurtured, not dropped into situations beyond their current capabilities so they're set up to fail'. **Respondent A** has perspective on this: 'dropping people into positions of power is trading short-term gain for long-term problems if adequate resources have not been expended on mentoring and professional development.' More energy needs to be devoted to identifying BAME staff with talent and give them every opportunity to succeed alongside their white peers – which also entails identifying and addressing the unseen systemic issues that might affect their career progression.

Far from the madding crowd

Sharmaine Lovegrove's Dialogue Books imprint launched in 2017 at Hachette UK, and she was operating within the inclusive publishing space for many years prior as a bookseller, literary editor and scout. Her work is thoroughly documented in several press articles, including a 2018 interview in *The Observer*. Crucially, before Dialogue Books, Lovegrove worked in several contexts intrinsically linked to mainstream publishing and in close contact with other BAME professionals, such as Elise Dillsworth and Valerie Brandes, but had not served time within the industry itself. I was particularly curious as to how this affected her perspective on the systems in which she finds herself operating now.

'If you wake up every day thinking that you are in a racist system, you just won't get very far,' Lovegrove says. It's important to her in her own dealings, and those with younger BAME staff whom she mentors, to differentiate between exclusion due to unconscious bias and inertia – which she ascribes to mainstream publishing – and inertia due to active prejudice and hate. 'They don't bear the same weight, to my mind, and one is obviously much worse than the other.' Lovegrove encourages resilience while working within mainstream publishing, made possible in no small part by her self-perception of working within the larger creative cultural industry, rather than the publishing industry in particular. 'I care about my authors, about books, about the culture. If I'm doing what needs to be done on those fronts, then publishing is what it is.' A sense of removal appears critical to that resilience, both emotionally and physically – Lovegrove deliberately moved physically out of London and its publishing bubble in order to create a separate space her work and activism from the industry at large.

As to why feeling removed from mainstream publishing has proved so important to the efficacy of her work, Lovegrove has a very pointed insight:

> Publishing is a hostile environment. I'm not just talking about people of colour; it's a hostile environment for the white people in the industry as well. There's this idea that to be in the industry you have to look, act, speak a certain way, you need to come from a certain place and that's all because of this obsession with where publishing started. Everyone's crippled with status anxiety that they're going to be found out and their performative action takes up way too much energy to focus on anything else. How are you going to make space to talk about race and representation when your whole brain is so busy performing the 'right' social class?

Being away from the physical spheres of publishing removes that element of noise in the conversation. In Lovegrove's view, it makes space to assess the measurable impact of the work being done at Dialogue Books, and to have conversations around inclusive publishing that go deeper than publishers have shown themselves capable of going.

> The biggest problem with the race debate is that whenever there's a discussion about race, we're treated as Other. But it's not us that needs to be more comfortable within the culture; it's the white mainstream that needs to be more open to a non-homogenous worldview. We're used to operating in white spaces – we've lived our lives in them. White spaces are not used to operating with anyone else in mind, so the onus falls on us and our difference, rather than the limitations of whiteness.

Until publishers are prepared to radically change this worldview, the industry will remain trapped in the same patterns it always has. For her own work and activism, Lovegrove finds more satisfaction in maintaining a healthy sense of distance and working within her chosen communities.

Respondent B relates a similar sense of equilibrium in her average workday, having left mainstream publishing to co-found an inclusive indie press. However, with her personal history within the industry, she still sees herself as part of the publishing machinery and the community of BAME professionals working within it at every level. Consequently, the frustrations voiced by her peers also make an appearance within our conversation, and she has much to say about the often-overlooked history of BAME staff and authors who have been toiling away on the publishing frontlines for decades. 'We've been here talking about this – *screaming* about this – for ages,' she says.

> This isn't something that was invented in 2015 [referring to *Writing the Future*]. If you're going to address the issue of how homogenous and white publishing is, you need to also address the fact that there have been people chipping away at it for ages, and there was a time when you didn't think what they had to say was important. It's not just the one or two voices that you're happy to give a platform to now. It's a whole crowd of people, and guess what, not all of them are saying exactly the same thing. Are you going to make space for that? Are you going to engage with the important debates happening within our communities? Or are you looking for a poster child you can hold up and continue to ignore everyone else?

Sound and fury: BAME anger and fatigue within publishing

The alternative to continuing to push the inclusive publishing envelope and work towards career progression is to cut one's losses and walk away. This idea was returned to several times by several respondents. It was listed as one of the reasons behind the establishment of inclusive independent presses – a sense that at least forging your own path away from the machinery of the big multinationals would provide autonomy and agency from the mainstream and its attendant pressures on BAME staff. It's a point that resonates strongly with me. I have been having this debate – whether it's just time to accept that this industry is not built for us and move on – with my FNPOC peers for several years. I keep finding reasons to stay for one more tilt at the windmill (and then

agonising over the wisdom of that decision for the next year or two), but I know of others who chose to abandon the field, or who had the resources to shift to the relative autonomy (but economic uncertainty) of freelance work, and others still who walked away for a time, regrouped, and re-entered.

In a 2017 blog post, 'The last ever article about diversity in publishing', a KnightsOf editor begins thus:

> Hi! We're so pleased you're here!
>
> It's great that we finally have something – sorry, someone – to show for our very vocal commitment to diversity.
>
> Yes, this is your thing – this is how you can really stand out. Not that you don't stand out already, but you know what we mean. The industry is really focused on the diversity trend right now and we'd like you to use this as your opportunity. In fact, think of it as your responsibility.
>
> Recognise this scenario?
>
> If you do, it's likely you're a publishing professional of colour. If you are, congratulations, you're statistically improbable. You're also likely to face challenges that many of your non-minority colleagues may not understand, but also not want to hear about.
>
> It will often feel like you inhabit a parallel universe, where the incredible creative talent you see exhibited daily by people of colour is invisible to those who make the big decisions. After a while, you might come to the conclusion that this talent is not invisible, but wilfully ignored, and this will depress you exactly as much as it should everyone else.
>
> You'll learn to live with a sort of latent outrage. This feeling will flare in all sorts of situations.

Every respondent in this research voiced this latent outrage. 'The industry has created barriers and a culture that is exclusive,' says **Respondent P**. 'The whole system is built for whiteness. We're the ones who have to do the work and adapt to fit into it. And then we're asked to explain why BAME people don't enter the industry, instead of the industry asking itself why we aren't there.' 'For me to be included, *I* have to be the one who makes me be included,' says **Respondent O**. 'It's for some reason not the job of the people who are doing the excluding.'

Every respondent in the younger cohort also raised the issue of labour and the burden of expectations, particularly post-Black Lives Matter when the mainstream lens has focussed so keenly on the subject of representative publishing. 'We need to talk more about *who* should be doing this work,' says **Respondent H**.

> I know myself and my peers in the BAME network have been pushing this envelope since we started in the business, and I'd say we were listened to at least as much as we might have been ignored. But listening doesn't equal action, and we're usually not in positions where we can

drive the action. And the question really is, should it be up to us to drive? Or rather, should it be up to only us? I'm reminded of a line from one of [Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan]'s poems: "'Just because they give you a seat at the table doesn't mean they're prepared to change the room". So when you're invited to the table but there's still nothing being done, is that your burden to shoulder as a person of colour? Shouldn't that burden be shared equally? (**Respondent H**)

An example given was a new commitment at one company to have a BAME staff member on important interview panels. But with so few BAME staff, this policy totalled to huge numbers of working hours taken up purely by recruitment, leaving the respondent – an editor – with little time to actually do the work she was employed to do. The impulse for better representation in recruitment is a positive one, but often the practicalities are not adequately – or at all – considered. 'Why are we being asked to do this work?' **Respondent O** asks. 'What is the reason behind the labour that's being asked of me? For my part, I'm not interested in making the company better in some esoteric way. I'm trying to make the *BAME* experience at this company better. It's not my job – and it's way above my pay grade – to change the workplace as a whole.'

On the subject of sharing the burden, every single respondent from the younger BAME cohort attested to the value of peer support networks – both formal and informal – as a lifeline within the industry. 'I would not have lasted without the diverse network,' **Respondent G** admits. Similar to **Respondent F's** words about the importance of mentors from within BAME communities, the sense of a burden shared with others not from within the mainstream was critically significant to her ability to withstand the learning curve of her early years in publishing. **Respondent P** speaks of importance of the BAME peer network at one company, where the network is a closed collective for BAME staff only despite increased pressure from other staff and the executive to open the collective to non-BAME allies.

It's created a space where people of colour can come and thrive and support each other. It's a closed network, although they've organised events that are open to the company at large, and there's been a lot of resistance to it being a closed group – they were called "dangerous" at one point. But it's so valuable to have a space which is closed, where they can't be used when it's convenient to prop up the company's cachet.

The BAME in Publishing network, founded in 2016 by Sarah Shaffi and Wei Ming Kam, is one such diverse network founded to operate across the entire publishing industry: 'In an ideal world, we wouldn't need this group,' they state in their introductory blogpost, 'but we all know there's a lack of ethnic diversity in the UK publishing industry. When people from BAME backgrounds do make it into the industry, they can often feel isolated because they're one of the few BAME people around. So we want a group where BAME publishing folk can meet each other.'

The Black Agents and Editors' Group, started in 2020 by Marianne Tatepo, is another network. It has crossover with BAME staff and authors in the Black Writers Guild, also formed in 2020 by Sharmaine Lovegrove, Afua Hirsch and Nels Abbey. The importance of professional peer support networks cannot be overstated. All bar one person interviewed for this project referred to them as a significant positive factor in their experiences within the publishing industry; the lone outlier didn't discount the value of peer support, only stating that she herself didn't find herself needing one. 'Even if there wasn't a lot to be done about a problem,' says **Respondent E** of the BAME in Publishing network, 'it honestly just helped to be able to talk about it, and for the people around you to say, "Yeah, that's awful, we know" rather than downplay it.' 'It's important to know where your people are,' says **Respondent F**. 'Especially when there is an immediacy to your need for reassurance when a day has gone badly because of microaggressions or things like that.'

Fresh Chapters: A case study on BAME internships and recruitment

Speaking to participants in the pilot Fresh Chapters BAME traineeship at Hachette UK is illuminating of the entire entry-level process of access initiatives. The traineeship was initially organised and administered by Rare Recruitment, which took applicants through a gruelling, highly-specialised preparation process that respondents mentioned was in no way commensurate with the entry-level position they were applying for. Once successful applicants entered the company under the program, they were generally left to the mercy of the various teams with which they were placed. 'There was no mentorship, though there was support,' one observes. 'We were a support circle for each other, there wasn't so much support coming from external sources.' Another mentions being dropped into teams who had not been prepared to train any new candidates, let alone BAME trainees, leading to a great deal of confusion and a sense of time being wasted by every party. 'There wasn't really any accountability in the teams when we came through,' she says. 'So who was this traineeship for?'

There was also a logistical problem, in that the BAME traineeship ran concurrently with an entry-level internship. Perhaps inevitably, applicants for the internship ended up being white, as BAME candidates flocked to the BAME-specific opportunity. The problem, however, was that the internship was only two months long, in contrast to the 12-month BAME traineeship. Once completing their program, internship recipients slipped into the handful of entry-level positions available, leading to an even greater scarcity for the BAME graduates. 'I don't know if anyone thought, oh, see, Black people don't last in publishing,' one says. 'I hope they didn't. I hope they looked at the way the programs had been stacked and thought about why they didn't retain people from our program.'

As to why they applied for the traineeship, given that there was no promise of employment at the end of it, those interviewed felt it was far better than the alternative of indefinite volunteering and unpaid internships, which the UK industry has yet to concretely abolish, or an endless cycle of applying for assistant positions with no success. The traineeship was certainly addressing a need to improve access at entry-level; but as a pilot program, too many variables were left unconsidered, making the process stressful and of debatable value for the participants.

Upon completion of Fresh Chapters, the pilot participants compiled extensive feedback for the newly-appointed Head of Diversity and Inclusion at Hachette, Saskia Bewley. (It is important to note here that Bewley was not in place when the program started, which might have significantly changed the experience of the pilot participants.) Those interviewed state that Bewley was receptive to their feedback, which prompted an audit of the efficacy of the program. Rare Recruitment was dropped as a partner in the initiative and replaced with the team at Creative Access, who were better equipped to provide the necessary support and scaffolding for subsequent Fresh Chapters applicants.

Anoushka Dossa, Director of Talent at Creative Access, relates several days' worth of training that all applicants received in subsequent rounds of traineeships. Some of this was practical information on the workings of a large publishing house so that trainees were prepared for what they would encounter. A lot of it, however, was emotional scaffolding; for instance, laying out what challenges trainees might face in an overwhelming white industry, workshopping ways to resolve certain conflicts that might arise, working on effective communication so that trainees felt able to express any concerns they might have. 'It was important to us,' says Dossa, 'that they had all the resources at their disposal, and that they didn't feel like they'd been flung into a new situation and expected to sink or swim on their own.'

Moreover, it was important that such support and scaffolding came from an external source, rather than relying solely within the company itself. The two were designed to work in concert – external support to bolster trainees, and internal support provided within Hachette to foster meaningful mentorships. 'If the concern is retention,' says Dossa, 'then you need to have both.'

The Fresh Chapters traineeship continues to this day, so one presumes the revised approach taken by Hachette alongside Creative Access has proved to be some success. Exit interviews of my own with subsequent trainees would have been valuable to add to this conversation.

Skilling up: On editing and writing while being BAME

In keeping with the original questions guiding this research project, editorial respondents spoke extensively of the particular experience of being BAME editors in mainstream publishing houses.

When discussing BAME editors working on BAME books, there's a temptation to suggest that only BAME editors can work on BAME books, or that they can *only* work on BAME books. Both suggestions are categorically false. If white editors are prevented from working on BAME titles, they lose a critical opportunity for professional development and to challenge their own unconscious biases. But by the same token, white editors' development should not come at the cost of the sensitivities and positive publishing experience of BAME authors; editors from all backgrounds need adequate resources for unconscious bias training, peer support and professional development allocated by the companies they work for and professional bodies at large. BAME authors should also be offered the same opportunities to work with the best editors in their genre, whatever the editors' backgrounds may be. Sometimes, no doubt, the best editor for the job is going to be someone from the white mainstream. The issue is not whether some groups can or should work with others – it's that in an ideal world, everyone on either side of the publishing relationship should be offered equal opportunity and scope to have the best.

When asked what unconscious bias or sensitivity training was being offered at their various employers, several respondents could think of no consistent program prior to Black Lives Matter. 'Or maybe,' **Respondent M** muses, 'they were being offered to others, but there was a perception that we didn't need to be included.' **Respondent D** mentions certain imprint teams undertaking extensive self-reflection and training post-Black Lives Matter: 'I know the whole team committed to completing a whole anti-racism, unconscious bias workbook, and they followed through. It's not my team, so I don't know the details, except that the managing editor decided it was important for her staff to do this work together, so they did.' When I mentioned this to another respondent, she summarised it thus: 'I don't want to say that there's no training available. There are people who think it's important and they dedicate time and resources wherever possible to that sort of training and conversation. The issue is that it's so erratic. It's not led by the executive, it's completely up to individual priorities' (**Respondent E**).

With or without sensitivity training, it can't be denied that the lived experience of BAME editors is markedly different to their white counterparts, and this often affects their approach to their work when acquiring and editing both BAME and white authors. **Respondent A** mentions her belated realisation that when nonfiction books introducing the topic of race crossed her desk, she often found herself unable to respond adequately. 'Nothing I read in those books was *new* information to me,' she says, 'so I didn't immediately appreciate the value such a book might have in the marketplace.' It was only when speaking to a white friend newly interacting with the topic of race that she realised that the information was new to a whole range of readers. While the temporary blind spot wasn't ideal, it does point to the fact that her lived experience might have

better equipped her for submissions that dealt with race with greater depth and nuance than her white counterparts, and so her acquisitions could have propelled the conversation around race in the United Kingdom further than a non-BAME editor's might have.

Respondent G says that because authors of colour historically come into mainstream publishing at a disadvantage, BAME editors often end up providing extensive support beyond the usual parameters of the editorial relationship. 'We act as publishers, therapists, sometimes even agents for these authors, because the fact is that that support isn't readily available elsewhere.' This often leads to highly nuanced and complex relationships between BAME authors and editors that feed a mutual need similar to BAME peer support networks.

Several BAME editors interviewed mentioned the unequal standards of 'quality' that BAME authors are held to as something they contended with when they worked on BAME titles. This is referenced as a significant barrier to publication in *Re:Thinking 'Diversity'* as well:

> Publishers sometimes believe that publishing more diversely means compromising on 'quality'. While editors need to maintain faith in their own judgements, they also need to understand that notions of 'quality' are not as universal as they may think. In fact, supposedly universal notions of quality correlate strongly with a particular education and class position. The monocultural nature of publishing leads to the reproduction of this narrow version of 'quality'. There is no universal right to be a published writer. But sometimes a writer of colour is rejected for the reason that their book is not of a high enough quality, when in fact it is more about the failure of the publisher to find the right audience, or a reluctance to sell to a particular audience that is perceived as having less value. (*RDP* 38-39)

Others interviewees spoke of the need to allow BAME editors to specialise in whatever field they choose, rather than assuming that they would automatically want to only work on BAME books. 'Are we allowed the same opportunities to excel in the areas we choose?' **Respondent I** asks. 'Or are we pushed to specialise in the books that white managers *think* we should work on?'

In this, there is a commonality with the experience of BAME authors, who are frequently forced into similar preconceived categories by white publishers. *Writing the Future* found that:

> it appears that the best chance of publication for a BAME novelist is to write literary fiction that conforms to a stereotypical view of Black or Asian communities. So, gone are Black families in Brixton growing up with classical music and Asian families who spend more time on the football pitch than the cricket pitch. Instead, writers find that they are advised by agents and editors to make their manuscripts marketable in this country by upping the sari count, dealing with gang culture or some other image that conforms to White preconceptions. (*WTF* 8)

Respondent A says of changing the literary landscape, 'we need significant successes beyond Black authors writing about Black pain.' Author Dorothy Koomson lists the 'accepted' topics for Black authors in mainstream publishing in her June 2020 open letter to the industry:

> If we manage to find a supportive agent or navigate those gatekeepers, the next lot of gatekeepers we meet are publishers who very often have in mind the type of 'Black' book they want to acquire:
>
> Showcasing black pain? Tick
> Willing to constantly talk politely about race and nothing else? Tick
> Making white people feel comfortable? Tick
> Teaching white people something about the 'Black experience'? Tick
>
> No one in publishing will admit this, but you can tell by the rejections you receive, the conversations that you have about a book, suggestions that are made that this checklist is – often unconsciously – there.

Fundamentally, as long as the assumed reader continues to be white, whether this is the ideal reader being marketed to, or the white staff within a acquisitions meeting, the scope of subject matter and genre available to BAME authors will continue to be restricted by the limitations of a very specific white imagination.

Why won't Susan read this book?: Audience assumptions and limitations
In *Re:Thinking 'Diversity'*, Saha and van Lente introduce the assumed ideal reader:

> Our first main finding is that publishers have a very narrow sense of their audience. The idea of the core reader as a white, middle-class older woman (sardonically referred to as 'Susan' by several of our respondents) remains dominant. There also remain suspicions over whether racial and ethnic minorities read, or at least to the same extent. As such we find that the core publishing industry is set up essentially to cater for this one white reader. While this does not rule out opportunities for writers from minority backgrounds, until the publishing industry diversifies its audience, writers of colour will always be 'othered'. (*RDP* 12)

Every BAME respondent categorically rejects the idea of Susan as a reason why BAME authors should not be acquired on lists. 'We're massively underestimating readers,' Lovegrove says. 'They don't only want to read about things in their own lives.' **Respondent J** remarks that 'even if we accepted the idea that people of colour don't read (which I don't, by the way), shouldn't we talk about why that might be the case? Maybe they don't read because we don't give them stuff they *want* to read?' Children's indie KnightsOf released a video in December 2019 titled #BooksThatMatter, showing BAME children in their school library, responding to the range of books

on offer and specifically speaking to the power of seeing people like themselves in the books they picked up. 'If you're that concerned that people of colour don't read,' says **Respondent J** when I mention the video, 'then do something about it.'

Assumptions of audience are why any attempts to make mainstream publishing more inclusive cannot solely rely on a handful of diversity initiatives or focus on one aspect of the publishing foodchain. 'It's not just that publishing is a hostile environment,' says **Respondent G**. 'The world we operate in is also hostile. We have to change how our media landscape works, how booksellers and the festival circuit and the awards system work as well.' Faced with work on this scale, small wonder then that publishers have been so slow to enact significant change. But it does need to start somewhere. How are books being marketed, and who are they being marketed to? Is that marketing successful, and is there a way to measure that success? Can it be replicated? Is it excluding or alienating groups that might be a good target audience? 'We *must* change the marketplace – the booksellers, the media, the consumer,' says **Respondent A**.

Sales forces in the UK are traditionally populated by white middle-class, middle-aged people – is training being provided to them about how to sell books that fall beyond the standard mainstream? Are BAME staff entering the sales force? If not, what is preventing them from doing so? Are booksellers being communicated to properly about the needs of each BAME book on a list? How are buyers at indie booksellers targeted differently to those at chain booksellers and supermarket buyers? 'We need to speak to retailers to find out what they think the barriers are. And publishers and retailers have to invest in their readership, invest in qualitative and quantitative data' (**Respondent O**). The industry has relied for so long on shorthand between sales reps and buyers that the actual processes of supplying books to retailers and thence to consumers has become mechanical. But when selling books that don't fit the usual mould, 'multi-tiered marketing and publicity approaches are needed' (Lovegrove) and 'editorial direction and creative choices need more diverse consultation teams' (**Respondent K**). It's not just about capturing a narrow view of who a target market might be (BAME readers for BAME books) but thinking, more laterally, 'is there a wider audience who would respond to BAME stories?' (**Respondent A**). **Respondent F** advocates for even more radical change. 'The books that have gone to the top still need to pander to the white gaze. But white audiences need to figure out how to decentre themselves in these conversations.'

In terms of the critical and festival landscape, representation is once more the issue at hand. While there are slowly increasing numbers of BAME literary journalists writing for the major UK publications, it remains an overwhelmingly white field. This often means that the usual reviewers who are approached by publishing and publicity teams lack the literacy to engage with writers of

colour or bring their own unconscious biases into their reviews. 'The question stops being "is this book a good example of its genre?",' says **Respondent K**, 'and becomes "does this book match my ideas of what this particular author should be writing about?", and that can be extremely limiting." **Respondent L** also mentions the limitations of cultural literacy in many reviewers. 'I remember one book by a South Asian author where a reviewer picked out a particular scene as being unrealistic and jarring to read, and it was a scene that was completely accurate to my experience of being a South Asian migrant in London. I felt it in my soul when I read it, but to the reviewer it was "unrealistic"'. Several respondents mentioned the need for greater diversity in the reviewers utilised by the key publications, but they also observed that the growing culture of online reviews and specialist online publications could sometimes patch gaps left by traditional media.

> I definitely think publicists need to be creative in targeting specific reviewers for some books by authors of colour and think outside the box. But maybe it's also a matter of speaking to contacts at the major publications and recommending specialist freelance reviewers if they don't have someone on staff who can properly respond to and assess a book. I know of a few campaigns that did this, and it worked pretty well. It's not foolproof, by any means, but it's better than getting a review by [prominent white reviewer] that tells readers that this book isn't worth their time because it isn't John le Carré or Ian McEwan. **(Respondent B)**

A holistic approach is recommended in order to appeal to both 'Susan' and the wider reading public.

> I guess the question is whether those reviews in smaller mags are as easily found and carry the same weight as a review in *The Independent*, *London Review* [of Books] or *The Times.* And whether you're limiting the audience by only focussing on smaller publications. Susie probably reads *The Spectator* when she's trying to work out what to read next, so a good review there is worth a great deal. And the people who aren't Susie might be reading *Red* or *Pride* or listening to Red Hot Chilli Writers. You need to cover all bases if you're going to capture a wide audience, especially if you didn't have a massive adspend to publicise a BAME book in the first place.
> **(Respondent J)**

On the festival circuit, programmers are also inevitably overwhelmingly white, and program accordingly. In recent years, **Respondent J** observes that an increasing interest in what she calls 'diversity panels' amongst festival organisers and audiences is, on balance, a good thing when compared to no representation in literary festivals at all. **Respondent K** mentions the children's— specifically the YA—festival scene as particularly ahead of the curve on this front. But there are logistical limitations to the lack of representation amongst festival programmers.

> I can't tell you how many times they've programmed a bunch of diversity panels to run concurrently. Like 2pm-3:30pm is the black and brown people slot, or something. It means the

authors and panellists have to compete with each other, and it's also just stupid, because someone who wants to hear Akala is also probably going to want to hear Kwame Anthony Appiah and Nikesh Shukla, especially if organisers thoughtfully cross-pollinate the sessions with a view to educating and cultivating audiences, instead of just thinking 'oh, diversity is a trend now, let's have some diversity panels.' **(Respondent J)**

Respondent J lands on a crucial point here, which is that even if the initial audience for a book might be limited, wider and more varied audiences can be cultivated if authors of colour are given platforms in the festival and reviewing scene to make their work visible. There is scope to capture multiple audiences if publishers are willing to make creative sales and marketing decisions and work in concert with booksellers, reviewers and festivals.

> In their recommendations, Saha and van Lente summarise the audience issue thus:

Do not cater only for 'Susan'. Rethink the idea of there being a 'core' audience and understand that modern Britain consists of multiple audiences. Catering for these new audiences necessitates more imaginative promotional campaigns, new types of partnerships, and booksellers doing much more to attract new audiences. People involved in the making and selling of books need to ask themselves whether their bookshop/writing course/festival are truly open to all, as minorities can find certain spaces exclusionary. But in rethinking their readership, publishers need to be careful not to think of 'BAME' audiences as homogenous. They contain as much diversity as white audiences, intersected by class, gender, sexuality, age, and so on. While particular communities have their own particular needs, their interests overlap with other communities. The sooner publishers start realising the value of these audiences, the range of books published will become richer and more reflective of the nation. Needless to say, there is a clear financial benefit in creating new audiences. (*RDP* 38)

As I said, the work is on a massive scale. But all the moving parts have to work in unison, or the BAME books and their authors are inevitably crushed in the gears.

Perceptions and realities: some home truths

In order to change the way the publishing landscape exists, it must face uncomfortable truths about itself; in particular, the difference between the way the mainstream industry thinks of itself, versus its reality. Several respondents – and Saha and van Lente in their report – mentioned the general conceit that the publishing industry considers itself a meritocracy when it actually, currently, is not. There are several barriers of entry for both staff and authors, class first and foremost, but also, of course, race, gender and ability. If these barriers are to be addressed, the fallacy of meritocracy must first be identified as precisely that – a fallacy. 'How many people have gotten into publishing because they could afford to live on nothing while they did one of the bullshit internships?' asked

Respondent L. 'Or they can live with their parents while they earn peanuts? If I'm going to bunk down with Mum and Dad, I have to leave London. And then that's goodbye to my career in publishing.'

Respondent J raises similar issues around authors: 'Some authors love to say they got into publishing because they worked a waitress job for 12 years and wrote on stray napkins or whatever. They completely obscure the fact that their mum has friend who knows an agent who got them a publishing deal. How many people of colour could say the same, especially considering how few BAME agents there are?' Is the pathway to publishing equally accessible for writers of colour – do they see it as easily and clearly as white authors? Do they have the resources to pursue a career or even a sideline in writing? Is the prevalent, privileged myth of the starving writer working minimum wage jobs because they truly believe they should be published one that has any particular resonance for writers of colour? **Respondent B** goes one step further about publishing prospects for BAME writers:

> Where are the authors of colour who are allowed to just be a middle-range author? Publishing lists are packed with filler titles and I can't think of any of the Big 5 who don't employ the 80-20 rule. Why can't a Black or Asian author be a filler author? Why are they supposed to be a massive runaway success when we're not asking so many white authors to be the same?

If there is not currently equity in the access that writers of colour have to mainstream publishing and the expectations they must perform under if they *do* gain access, then more needs to be done on the part of publishers to level the playing field as much as possible within their acquisition and publication structures.

Then there is the ongoing conceit that publishing is simply a leaf in the culture stream, responding to arbitrary market forces. Nothing could be further from the truth. 'A book is usually going to sell 100,000 copies because you've paid WHS Smith to put it in their window and poured thousands of resources into pushing it at every possible avenue,' **Respondent K** says. 'Let's not even get started on how many white authors get that level of dedication from their publisher and don't deliver, yet live to publish another book. God forbid that a Black or brown author had a similar stumble.' Publishing is a creative, cultural industry – we define culture at least as much as we are defined by it. In both the business and ethical cases to be made for better, more representative publishing, surely this is the strongest. 'If we tell readers that stories from outside the mainstream matter – better yet, if we *show* them by actually publishing these stories,' says **Respondent E**, 'then who's to say that the culture won't come along for the ride?'

A #Merky Dialogue: Some responses to inclusive imprints

With the recent focus in Australian publishing on diversity-targeted imprints, I asked many respondents for their thoughts on inclusive imprints (to be distinguished from inclusive indies), particularly given the track record and profile of some such imprints in the UK market. The creation of Dialogue Books was met with considerable industry coverage, but it's not the only diversity-driven imprint that has come into existence after the *Writing the Future* report. #Merky Books launched at Penguin Random House in 2018, partnered with grime artist Stormzy, with 36-year-old Tom Avery at the helm. 'If the heritage of the Penguin brand gave #Merky legitimacy in the publishing world, the Stormzy name broke down some of the barriers to access, reimagining the kind of stories that might "get far",' Kieran Yates writes in *The Observer.* Yates's profile of the imprint is well worth a read, providing insights into the nascent stages of an inclusive imprint working on developing a strong point of view.

In theory, inclusive imprints occupy a middle space between mainstream publishing and indie presses – they service underrepresented groups within publishing lists, but with the resources of a large multinational at their disposal. On the subject of why an inclusive imprint was her chosen path, Lovegrove says:

> I'm not interested in doing the work for other publishers at the company. I value the autonomy
> that Dialogue gives me, otherwise I'd lose the ability to understand the change that the books
> are bringing and see the measurable impact of the work.

Although I was not able to speak directly to the #Merky team about their views, commissioning editor Lemara Lindsay-Prince is on the record about the value of the inclusive team working at the imprint:

> I ask Lindsay-Prince if the #Merky team looks different to staff elsewhere in the Penguin
> building. "100%!" she laughs. "It's one of the reasons that I thought publishing was
> impenetrable before I saw this position advertised and thought, 'Yeah, go on then.' But I've
> never been in a room where we're the majority and that feels really important and powerful in
> terms of cultural reference points." [Editorial assistant Theophina] Gabriel agrees: "Writers are
> becoming a lot more discerning. They want to be with people who get them."' (Yates)

I encountered a very mixed bag of responses from other BAME respondents on the efficacy of separated imprints. For instance, several respondents observed that the presence of Dialogue had inadvertently led to publishers on other Hachette imprints to avoid the responsibility to make their own lists more inclusive. 'Oh, this book is by a Black author? It must be a Dialogue book, then,' says one. 'No further questions about whether it actually fits the Dialogue framework of literary fiction.'

At PRH, respondents noted a similar impulse to push BAME writes to the #Merky list, though hampered by a general confusion about what the #Merky brand actually entails. 'And that kind of points to another problem,' one respondent says. 'You're at the same company, why don't know you know what your colleagues are doing? It's like they see 'Stormzy' and 'Black' and then make unconscious value judgements in their heads, so when they're put on the spot to say what exactly Merky's about, they get flustered and don't know how to answer.' Another respondent identifies the brand as 'pretty edgy and youthful. And not all submissions from authors of colour fall into that brand.'

'I'm for it, but I'm also against it,' says another. 'Diversity imprints don't change how the actual structures operate. But they do offer a pathway to publication for a lot of BAME authors, and that's important too.' Yet another observes that both Dialogue and #Merky have outperformed by the standards of new imprints amongst their contemporaries and that can't be overlooked. 'They've clearly found ways to talk to audiences that others haven't been able to do. And it's not fair to judge them on anything else.'

Several respondents agreed that regardless of the work that inclusive imprints do, they didn't appreciate on principle the necessity of their existence, as though BAME authors needed to be separated out somehow. 'It's ghetto-isation, surely,' says one. 'Why can't they exist alongside white authors?' Another observes that once the imprints are recognised as a shorthand for inclusive publishing, it can actually work against individual books. 'You'll have booksellers and customers seeing the imprint label and deciding on that basis that the book isn't for them. "Oh, it's only for Black readers."' I ask whether this could also be of benefit, rather than solely a handicap, if imprint labels can become a shorthand for inclusive publishing without needing to expend valuable resources actively spelling it out for consumers. 'I guess that depends on how much value that label has,' is the response. 'Are there people buying books because they're specifically diverse? Or are they buying books because they've been packaged right and the blurb tells them that this is something they're going to like? I know what I *think*, but I don't know it for a fact.'

One respondent had particularly strong views on the subject:

I hate it. I think it's the worst kind of exceptionalism and it pisses me off. Especially the people now talking about airlifting people of colour from outside the industry, whether they're celebrities or whatever. It erases all the work that Black and brown people have been doing in the business of so many years, like none of them are capable of driving an inclusive list. Instead you've got some weird idea of star power, and you've put someone into a position of so much authority who is completely removed from everyone else in the trenches. How the hell is that

supposed to change anything? It doesn't change anything, it just becomes a PR stunt that publishers can point to for brownie points without having to do any of the work themselves.

But alongside the mixed response is consistent awareness that fixating on overt critique of the inclusive imprint model is not helpful to the overall cause of inclusive publishing. 'I hate to say it, but it doesn't pay to show dissent in the ranks,' says one respondent. 'I have to look at it as, on balance, is it a good thing? Would we be worse off without it? For me, the answers are yes and yes. So I'm not going to rock the boat and point out that there are bigger problems if it means that even these small gains will be taken away.'

Black Lives Matter – for now?: Anti-Racism and the UK publishing landscape

In terms of scale, the cultural impact of Black Lives Matter on the creative industries cannot be overstated. But BAME respondents whom I contacted for follow-ups and new conversations in recent months expressed varying levels of faith that the industry's reaction was going to enact sustainable change in the UK. 'The conversation is being had as opposed to not happening at all, but whether this is followed by meaningful action remains to be seen,' says **Respondent E**. 'But there's a level of individualism in taking responsibility for the industry's complicity in white supremacy. It's not exactly being led from the executive.' As mentioned previously, different teams have taken different approaches to addressing their unconscious bias and complicity, and there are some who are not prepared to embrace the need for change at all. 'It's not going to happen in our lifetimes,' says **Respondent A**, 'but I think we continue to move forward, however slowly that might be.' **Respondent M** observes post-Black Lives Matter, 'I'm seeing more active desire for change. It seems less performative, more sincere.'

Others, however, are less optimistic. Observing the reaction to the *Re:Thinking 'Diversity'* report, Ruth Harrison admits to cynicism in how sincere the avowed appetite for change really is. 'There's a little bit of stepping up,' she says, 'a *very* little.' But regardless of the public response to the report – which she attributes to the timing at the peak of Black Lives Matter – the report and the BAME response to Black Lives Matter was still met with some defensiveness and dismissal among senior staff at mainstream publishers. Dorothy Koomson's open letter to publishers contains a fiery litany of her own experiences as a Black author and challenges the blatant hypocrisy of the response. It's worth reading the letter in its entirety, but here is a particularly poignant excerpt:

> A week after all of your public posts claiming how supportive you are of Black voices when you've done – at best – the bare minimum, I am still extremely angry. So are many of the other Black authors I have spoken to.

More than anything, I resent being made to speak out like this. This is not my way. I try to support other authors behind the scenes, I try to fight battles for myself and other people without making it public.

But what I witnessed last week was truly horrendous; it was so outrageous that the publishing industry, which exacts a huge toll on a Black person entering their world, would pretend otherwise.

I have watched people who have made it clear over the years they wouldn't spit on me and my kind if I was on fire now asking for submissions from Black and minority ethnic voices. To what end? So you can demean, demoralise and discard them? I've seen 'right on' festivals with racist directors rushing to invite Black authors to sit on their panels. For what, except to make the festival look good and inclusive? I've seen declarations of support from people who seemed to barely know we existed six months ago.

And truly, what will the result of this ill-thought-out rush to find and support Black voices be? Us who are here already doing the hard yards being forgotten? New Black authors being made to feel as if there is some doubt about how they got there? Let's face it, Black writers will probably always be frowned at as if to ask if we've truly earned that spot or if we're just there to fill a quota. You have done that, not us. You.

Do better, publishing people. Do better, be better, treat us better. Talk to us, listen to us, stop going out there with words of support and look inside with your actions to improve the environment for Black authors. Just do better. And enough public posturing, all right? Enough.

I cannot fathom reading Koomson's letter and not seeing pain and righteous anger writ large, but several respondents related that the response of some within the Big 5 was that Koomson was bitter, oversensitive and ungrateful about the opportunities that she had been given. That she had sought, essentially, to bite the hand that fed her. **Respondent K** mentions a staff-wide company meeting called at the Big 5 company she works at, in which the CEO spoke to the issues of systemic racism and exclusion. 'It was so patronising and just horrible, and left so many of us feeling like we had absolutely no faith in [their] ability to bring about meaningful change when it comes to inclusivity.'

'Oh, don't get me wrong, there's a lot of work they want me to do right now,' says **Respondent H**. She cackles when I offer the term 'woke-washing'. 'But look, I'm not holding my breath. I'm assuming the next big trend will come along in the next six months and I'll be shelved with all their good intentions.' She sighs resignedly as she says this. **Respondent P** remarks that post-Black Lives Matter, the BAME staff and networks at the Big 5 have been called upon to put out fires caused by poorly-considered comms or external criticism of publishing decisions. 'We're not given space to make something for ourselves. It's just hours of uncredited work and consultancy, endless

labour, especially for junior staff. Since June, I've been trying to limit the work we do on things that are just PR exercises and focus on serving the people of colour on staff.' Another respondent notes that while BAME staff are being called upon to speak to issues of representation and inclusion, they are not being offered the option to do training in this area – the assumption is always that BAME staff are all experts, and all more than willing to labour endlessly without support or without clear action points.

Other respondents mention 'a lot of work' as well, and 'countless interviews, like what more is there to say?' Still others declined extensive follow-up conversations, admitting to immense fatigue. 'A lot has been happening recently and I am quite overwhelmed with things […] I'm exhausted with the talk around diversity and publishing at the moment. I am sorry,' one replied to an email query. Of course, I cannot and do not begrudge any of these women the opportunity to step away from the fray, particularly given the circumstances. But their fatigue alone is worth noting in the industry's response to Black Lives Matter.

I've noted previously some of the concerns about the industry response, the appetite for quick fixes and immediate change that can be pointed to as a sign of progress. The unanimous consensus from respondents is that none of the suggested changes are effective or sustainable. 'The truth is, resources need to be invested,' says **Respondent I**, 'and maybe we need to talk about the cost of integrity. Are publishers willing to make financial sacrifices to stand by their commitment to Black communities?' She refers to another issue that has yet to be substantively tackled by the industry: are publishers prepared to sacrifice revenue and relationships by committing to cease publication of titles and authors that promote hate speech and harmful views? We've seen in the past few years publishers signing books from Milo Yiannopoulos and Woody Allen, for instance, only to hastily back down when faced with public backlash. David Starkey was recently dropped by his publisher after his racist remarks emerged. Will we now see such titles and authors be rejected from the outset on principle, or is public scrutiny still required to hold publishers to account? 'If you're going to ask minority communities to trust you,' says **Respondent N**, 'then I think you need to earn that trust by putting your money where your mouth is, and sacrifice relationships and revenue with authors whose work harms them.' **Respondent M** agrees. 'You've given them no reason to trust you. This could be one way to earn it.'

Harrison's money is on the continued relevance of public shaming. 'It's very easy for publishers to slip back into complacency. Social media seems to be one way of keeping them on task – they're terrified of being publicly called out.' Saha and van Lente identify this as a cause for concern, but Harrison is more pragmatic. 'If that's what it takes, then that's what it takes.'

Conclusions on the UK landscape

Even with all the goodwill and empathy in the world, frustration and fatigue inevitably bleeds into the responses from all respondents. This is not to say that they haven't had positive experiences during their time in mainstream publishing. We took time to talk about and celebrate those, particularly their amazing achievements in inclusive publishing even when the industry may not have been especially hospitable to such titles and creators. It's incredibly important for people of colour who are minorities in any industry to have the space and energy to celebrate any victories, large or small.

Substantial work still needs to be done in the UK to not only bring BAME candidates into entry-level publishing positions, but to support and develop them so that BAME staff retention is at least at the same level as their white peers. Crucial to this is the promotion of BAME staff into high positions – properly scaffolded – where they can experience greater visibility and autonomy within their own work, as well as be active, consensual consultants in any D&I initiatives companies are developing. Consultation needs to be meaningful not tokenistic, and the more BAME people seated at the table, the less pressure on individual staff to shoulder the burden of representation.

Most importantly, as observed across the board in both research and anecdotes, long-term investment of resources is critical. There's no quick fix to a decades-long problem, and approaches need to be nuanced, staggered, and holistic. 'The problem with just looking at recruitment is that it could be a sticking plaster on a gaping wound,' says Mokades in *Writing the Future* (7). As all three industry reports lay out, every facet of the publishing landscape needs scrutiny and transformative action. **Respondents E and N** both spoke of the need for an Ethnicity Pay Gap report; Harrison is adamant that industry-wide transparency on all data sets is critical, including pay, staff demographics and list breakdowns. 'You also need time to develop effective programs,' she says, pointing to the 10-year progress of The Complete Works project and Spread the Word's London Writers Award program.

> You need to *invest* in BAME authors. A significant number of writers need to be supported through to presenting manuscripts for publication in order to see results, and that includes accepting that a lot of them won't come through. Our London Writers Award had over 50 participants, and that's currently resulted in 6 book deals. Big publishers need to be okay with that, because it's about investing in a big picture. In my experience, they've been resistant to changing how they think about acquiring and have not until this point put their money where their mouth is, cherry-picking writers of colour and importing the rest from the US. But they need to invest in local writers first.

The word keeps coming up in every conversation, every research recommendation – invest, invest, invest. This is not, however, to be confused with further delay; as Samenua Sesher says, '[it] doesn't mean we should settle for the old saw that "these things take time"' (*WTF* 19). The long-term strategies need to be consulted upon and put into place now to change the landscape into the future. Strategies include writer development programs and new partnerships with existing advocacy and development groups, emerging media channels and educational institutions to fortify a pipeline of BAME authors writing across all genres. Within publishing houses, in addition to investing in the career development and progression of BAME staff, the overall corporate body needs scrutiny and support. All staff need adequate training to change the traditional ways they think about the publishing landscape, so that the overall environment is more hospitable to everyone. Equity should be the aim – a level playing field for both authors and staff, and this means engaging meaningfully with any factors that are unduly advantaging or disadvantaging pathways to publishing.

It's a daunting amount of work ahead. But if all can agree that the work is worth doing, then there is no excuse to delay further – act now.

Bla[c]k Lives Matter and Reflections from the Front Lines: Recommendations on the Australian Publishing Context

In Camha Pham's August 2020 *Kill Your Darlings* article, she begins by saying, 'While the push for diversity started as a movement to address the representation (or lack thereof) of marginalised voices in books, this momentum has spilled over to the other side of the publishing paradigm. To diversify the writing landscape, we need to turn our gaze inward to look at the gatekeepers and power structures that dominate these spaces.'

This, fundamentally, is the biggest challenge facing mainstream Australian publishing moving forward. If we consider the three reports referred to in my research as milestones in the UK's chronological progress towards inclusive publishing, they offer a helpful frame of reference when considering the Australian context. And to be brutally honest, when it comes to inclusive publishing, we're sitting somewhere between 2004 and 2015 – probably closer to the former. Our industry and the structures it relies upon continue to be far too homogenous to enact meaningful change when it comes to inclusive publishing. FNPOC representation within the mainstream trade publishers is appallingly low, particularly when looking at the key departments of editorial, sales and marketing. Pham and Djed Press's Hella Ibrahim ('We Need Diverse Editors') both point to a significant gap in the numbers – particularly for First Nations publishing professionals – as does Natalie Kon-yu in her 2016 article for *The Conversation*. Higher up the publishing ladder, without erasing a handful of women of colour in acquiring positions, the vast majority of the gatekeeper acquiring editors and publishers are homogenously white, as are our bookseller associations, major award bodies, festival organisations and media. As the DARTS *Shifting the Balance* report found, only 9% of the 1,980 leaders of our major cultural institutions are FNPOC, and only 14% of leadership positions in the literature and publishing sector are held by FNPOC.

In short, at this critical juncture in our national and international discourse, Australian publishing is, with zero irony, starting from a significant disadvantage.

There is some data confirming this, of course, but more still is needed to amass adequate empirical evidence of the problem. In terms of anecdotal evidence, I can only relate my experiences working in the inclusive publishing space, as well as those related to me by my FNPOC peers. And my experience has been – until June 2020 – very little mainstream interest in engaging with the complex issues of inclusion and representation within our lists and within our industry as a whole. As an industry, we haven't even been able to agree that inclusion is necessary, let alone a priority. Small-scale fixes are attempted from time to time, but we are struggling under the weight of a crippling

inertia when it comes to the big changes in ideology and practice that need to happen for our industry to better reflect and serve the society in which we live.

Mainstream Australian publishing is grappling with a problem of perception. We see ourselves as part of the liberal arts industry, with all the attendant beliefs and perspectives of the world and our society. But as many persons of colour could attest, whatever personal truth we ascribe to ourselves is never as powerful as how we are perceived by the world around us. Why is it that our industry is perceived to be exclusive and unattainable by FNPOC creatives? How does that perception serve as a barrier of entry to FNPOC writers and staff? And what can be done to shift that perception in action as well as words?

Ultimately, the Australian publishing industry has been reactive, not proactive, trend-chasing, not trend-setting. We seek to capitalise on cultural moments within our lists, which is all very well and good when it means publishing more books about mindfulness, sloths, slow cooking, or botany. But when it comes to social movements to address real systemic disadvantage, indignity and harm, the lack of engagement with the pain that drives these cultural moments – and more crucially, our complicity with that pain – is flattening and exploitative. I can find no other way to describe it. FNPOC staff working in this space are being asked to perform so much labour, especially at times that are significantly painful. And when they do sacrifice their time to such conversations, they are not often met with commitment to the cause and are forced into tone policing to protect their own careers from the repercussions of speaking too frankly.

In terms of the Black Lives Matter moment of 2020, the fact remains that the current wave of concern about representative publishing, however effective it ultimately proves itself to be, has been prompted by unspeakable violence being perpetrated on Black and brown people. That cost is too high. We absolutely should not have to rely on such a scale of horror to gain traction. It's not enough to continue to react in this belated, peripatetic way to the needs of our communities – needs that, as we see time and time again, are often life or death. If the wave of protests worldwide was our catalyst, we should also ask why the longstanding Blak Lives Matter movement in Australia, and the ongoing campaign to end Indigenous deaths in custody was not sufficient impetus to spur change in the local mainstream industry. There is no shortage of trauma being perpetrated on FNPOC in our history and current landscape. Is it destined to continue to be disregarded unless paired with an international cause?

With all that in mind, I hope that we as a group resist any attempts or instincts to reduce this moment to a passing fad and use the UK context to catalyse our own growth and development into a better, more inclusive and representative industry. To help the conversation forward, here are

some recommendations to consider. Once again, I begin with the disclaimer that these are only my recommendations, and extensive consultation with all those working within the inclusive publishing space is absolutely critical to paving a way forward. If mainstream commercial publishers are truly committed to developing our industry, they must actively and meaningfully engage with the work.

Consider access and inclusion in our acquisitions processes and lists

When so many authors are published off the back of extant industry connections and relationships, and authors from underrepresented backgrounds often do not have access to that same privilege, are our acquisitions processes truly democratic? Where are the resources to develop and launch new authors when a handful of familiar names take up so much space? This is a significant problem in the children's publishing landscape in particular. We must publish more inclusively for children so that they remain readers into adulthood, to create a pipeline of FNPOC authors and editors – invest, essentially, in the future of our industry. I encourage readers to watch the #BooksThatMatter video I referenced earlier to understand the vast impact of homogenous publishing on FNPOC children and their view of their place in this world.

Educate and meaningfully engage in important conversations about appropriation and exploitation

Some publishers have been patching the gaps in FNPOC staff and lists by publishing the familiar faces while utilising sensitivity readers. But is there meaningful engagement and education in our industry about appropriation, exploitation and literary brownface? Are publishers prepared to bring our authors along in these conversations? The accusation has been made that the anti-racism movement, for example, has been 'imported' from overseas, because our mainstream culture is so untethered from the racist colonial heritage of our nation. Often very important conversations around literary appropriation get swept up in the same reductive rhetoric, that we have 'imported' concerns about literary appropriation from the US and UK. We must educate ourselves and our authors better on these issues, rather than shying away from them because they are undoubtedly uncomfortable conversations to have. If authors want to write about minority communities to which they do not belong, we need to be prepared to ask whether this is a decision a publishing house should stand behind. Is this space that would be better occupied by a writer from that community? Are we prepared to substantively engage in any feedback about the harm that book might do, beyond the usual defences of freedom of expression or bipartisanship? At the very least, we need to encourage extensive consultancy with the communities in question and comprehensively consider whether the work is exploitative or opportunistic.

Consultancy with adjacent sectors to improve access to retail channels and cultivate audiences

The publishing industry could work with bookseller organisations to help physical and digital retailers become more inclusive, so that currently underserved audiences have equal access to retail

channels. In return, publishers could gain valuable insights into targeted audiences, which could feed back into sale and marketing campaigns for future books. The UK market is in the nascent stages of implementing this kind of consultancy between publishers and booksellers, as is mentioned in *Re:Thinking 'Diversity'*. Here, Australia's smaller market might actually work to our benefit, as we have fewer players amongst the bookseller sector to bring along in conversations about access and inclusivity. We also have a vibrant public library sector with which publishers can work to platform diverse authors and cultivate inclusive reading communities.

Improve the access to and experience of mainstream publishing for First Nations writers
I hesitate to speak specifically to First Nations issues, as this must come from First Nations communities themselves. But I observe that our mainstream commercial trade publishing industry has long been letting First Nations authors and stories down. The Indigenous Literacy Foundation does incredible work in improving literacy and access to books by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors amongst First Nations children and they receive support in this endeavour from the Australian publishing industry. Magabala Books also meaningfully services First Nations authors with their remarkable list, certainly proving that there is a great wealth of First Nations storytellers in this country. The black&write! Program administered via the State Library of Queensland is a fundamentally important career development resource for First Nations authors and editors alike.

But how much access do First Nations authors have to *mainstream* publishing, with its significantly greater resources and reach, outside the work of indie presses, government-funded programs and NGOs? A 2000 report, 'To tell my story: A study of practicing professional Indigenous writers of Australia,' noted that 'many Indigenous writer find the atmosphere of publishing houses alien and alienating' (41). Is this why so many First Nations authors head to a handful of smaller presses? What needs are not being met at bigger commercial houses? What is so alienating about our mainstream publishing culture? First Nations authors also often occupy either a literary space or memoir – where are the resources to develop First Nations writers across a wide range of genres? We need better investment from big publishers with appropriate consultation with community advocacy and education groups to develop and launch more First Nations authors, an enormously vital part of our national literary culture.

More inclusive hiring across all levels, not just entry-level
We need more inclusive hiring, particularly in editorial, sales and marketing. Because FNPOC are generally unrepresented in the industry at present, the conversations that have happened internally at some publishers since June 2020 are missing crucial voices and perspectives. This then raises the very likely possibility that our industry's capacity to change is hamstrung from the very outset. More First Nations editors are essential. At the *very* least, they are a resource that First Nations authors

should have access to so they have the choice of a different publishing experience than the standard white one we offer. More POC editors would also enrich the publishing landscape with their varied lived experiences. More FNPOC staff in sales and marketing roles would offer an invaluable opportunity to rethink audience targeting and campaigns to widen the market for all books, not only those from FNPOC authors.

Better community outreach and transparency of targets
The general opacity of our industry poses a significant barrier to access. Publishers could do better outreach to high schools to clarify mainstream publishing as a possible career path to encourage more entry-level applicants from FNPOC communities. The intake of FNPOC staff at all levels is tied up with ongoing broader issues around access and fair pay. Industry-wide pay transparency and commitment to fair targets are essential to understanding accessibility issues for staff from every background. In fact, we need more transparency across the board. Our industry commitments to inclusive publishing should be public, or there is literally no accountability. If we communicate with booksellers and consumers as well, so they understand the work that is being done, it helps reshape the market into a more hospitable one for inclusive lists, and has the added bonus of being an exercise in positive branding as well. And above all, openness and hospitality invite authors and staff from a myriad of backgrounds to enrich our industry.

Improved staff support systems, professional development and training
Certainly, more can be done to support all staff across all companies. We need to invest in professional peer support networks for a wide range of staff, including FNPOC staff, and ensure people from all levels are included in these networks so that juniors can benefit from senior staff, and senior staff can remain sensitive to the concerns of juniors. Ongoing and diverse sensitivity and unconscious bias training is essential, as well as clear messaging that the training is part of the core values of a company, rather than a tick-box. I still shudder to remember training sessions in past jobs where senior staff – who were specifically asked to attend – left the sessions giggling and dismissing what had been discussed, rather than considering it as a significant opportunity for professional development.

Holistically-planned training would also hopefully reduce the burden on FNPOC staff to shoulder the mantle of representation and inclusivity in companies. Wherever possible, external consultants from FNPOC communities should also be approached when developing inclusive initiatives and programs – it should not solely be work expected of FNPOC staff in these companies. Nor should the assumption continue that all FNPOC wish to speak to these issues, or that they wish to be considered as representative of specific communities. Any consultative work, whether in-

house or external, should be remunerated accordingly. The labour is immense on a scale that cannot be comprehended from the outside, and it should never be solicited for free.

In particular, I return to one of my original objectives in my research proposal back in 2019. So much more could be done in terms of professional development for editors of all levels and backgrounds, and I would love to see greater investment in industry-wide opportunities for editors to address unconscious biases, improve their practice and share skills and experience. Organisations such as IPEd and its regional branches offer constructive training courses, but these can be expensive, particularly for freelancers, and many editors may not even know the courses are being offered. Publisher investment in IPEd might lower the costs of courses and improve access, and publishers would gain even more highly-skilled staff as a result. Inter-company forums for editors to safely share their experiences could provide invaluable opportunities for learning about various sensitivities without relying on individual lived experiences, or worse, learning from individual mistakes after inadvertently enacting harm on one or several groups.

Aim for retention and progression

FNPOC staff should be offered clear paths of career development alongside their white peers, with the aim of creating a pipeline to a more representative body of publishers and commissioning editors who are acquiring for publishing lists. The aim for all inclusive hiring initiatives should not be limited to entry-level or junior-level hiring, but rather, focus on *retention* and *progression*. For retention of entry-level staff entering the industry via D&I access initiatives, a support and training structure similar to the one adopted by Creative Access in the UK is extremely important so that new applicants are adequately prepared for the industry culture they will need to engage with. Retention also involves critical assessment of the unseen systemic issues that might impede progression to higher levels within companies. It also involves an acknowledgement that FNPOC staff might have needs that are different to their white counterparts in order to feel supported within a company, such as different working arrangements to ameliorate fatigue and improve psychological safety, or access to inter-company peer support networks. Senior FNPOC staff should be empowered to be mentors and role models for more junior-level staff if they choose, which would go some way to creating more hospitable workplaces within the industry. Our industry has already lost far too many talented FNPOC staff who cannot sustain a career in publishing because it is so hard to maintain a sense of self in this inhospitable ecosystem.

Invest in the research

There are some larger gaps within the Australian creative arts industries that are flagged in *Shifting the Balance*, and they have particular relevance to Australian publishing. There's a paucity of research on the demographic composition of the industry, as well as of our national trade publishing

output. Without this critical data, there can be no baselining, and without baselining, it's impossible to set realistic targets to improve. Several companies have committed to internal audits of their staffing and lists, but this data needs to be made transparent to external researchers so that it can be collated and analysed. Funding is of course an issue – perhaps never more so than in the era of Covid-19 – but research and advocacy bodies need resourcing so that they can conduct industry-wide research. In short, although there is much to learn from the UK research, we need our own national version of the Spread the Word reports if we are to properly identify where we can improve our practice. We know the industry needs to adapt and change, so to avoid such a report is tantamount to burying our head in the sand.

Some final thoughts on the way forward

As Philip Jones says in his introduction to *Re:Thinking 'Diversity'*, 'late though it arrives, we should not ignore progress when it occurs'. It's not all fire and brimstone, doom and gloom. The past few years have seen an uptick in First Nations authors winning major literary awards, and, one hopes, a resultant acknowledgement that First Nations stories from across the spectrum – not just focussing on trauma and pain – are culturally valuable and marketable. Though our media landscape remains incredibly hostile to FNPOC, an increasing number of FNPOC writers have found a foothold within major publishing houses, not just the smaller dedicated presses, and their books have sold solid numbers within our market. The Australian Cultural Fund's First Nations and POC Writer's count, launched in 2019, is currently underway, which will provide valuable data on the representative breakdown of books across the publishing spectrum – fiction, nonfiction, poetry, children's and adult. Several companies have instituted D&I committees to address internal issues around access and inclusion, and we have by and large, put an end to the exploitation of unpaid internships. There is ongoing conversation around how to make hiring practices more inclusive, which will hopefully incorporate representative interview panels and outreach to a wide range of schools so that the industry has greater visibility as a career pathway for people from all backgrounds. It is now time for the big houses within our industry to step forward to openly lead the charge, and the first to do so will have a defining role and legacy in the conversation and culture.

I have no intention or inclination to centre myself in the inclusive publishing space – I stand amongst and on the shoulders of giants who have been toiling away on the front lines for years. It is my great hope that this report will lead the industry to seek out these voices anew and give them a much-needed seat at the table, as well as seeking out new advocates within the inclusive publishing space. Goodwill alone cannot move us forward to where we need to be, nor can good intentions. It's time to take good action and create the world we wish – and deserve – to see. Let's get to work.

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