**State of the writing nation address**

**WHOSE FEELINGS MATTER IN LITERATURE?**

“I want to write with ‘true emotion’, not just technically well. I want to write from the heart. I want to make people feel something.” – Shu-Ling Chua

**Today I would like to talk about three main aspects of writing – about its production, promotion and reception.**

**And I would like to explore the idea of whose feelings matter in literature, in relation to these three aspects.**

**And of course, as a writer, I would like to do this by telling you stories.**

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When I was younger, my mother’s rage over the phone company overcharging us a couple of dollars was humiliating. While I was trying to politely explain the error to Telecom on the other end, she’d be yelling in the background and I’d be trying to maintain my composure, because I was pretending to be her at fourteen, and trying not to sound like a raging crazy ethnic myself. And I would be livid that she couldn’t hold it together. In her book *Minor Feelings*, author Cathy Hong Park writes:

“One characteristic of racism is that children are treated like adults and adults are treated like children. Watching a parent being debased like a child is the deepest shame… To grow up Asian in America (or Australia) is to witness the humiliation of authority figures like your parents and to learn not to depend on them: they cannot protect you.”

But I felt I had a superpower over my mother – I could read people’s minds and she couldn’t. I could read the minds of old people, moribund men who lived a century ago, Indian people under colonisation, defiant teenagers in America, and important people who had things to say.

No one in literature sounded much like my mother anyway. Even Amy Tan’s Mah-Jong-playing mothers were more articulate, always giving sage life advice to their daughters through anecdotes and myths.

But this was as much my fault as it was the fault of a dearth of diverse books. Never as a child did I consider whether my mother was introverted or extroverted, humorous or shy around other people. She just didn’t speak enough English to have a personality.

From the age of eight, I thought exclusively in English. And the more educated I became as a teenager and then young adult, the more I had to learn to speak and write about complex ideas in a way that a bright twelve-year old could understand. Because that’s about how old my mum was when all her formal education stopped. They closed down all the Chinese schools in Cambodia as the very first part of ethnic cleansing when she was in grade one, and so she can’t even read or write very well in her first language.

Later, she became an adult, with enormous power over us, and we had to be careful not to make her feel stupid, because she felt that way a lot of the time; and it made her feel powerless and so angry. My mother was a force to be reckoned with indoors, but outside, she was silent. A cashier giving us the wrong change could be easily rectified, for her it was a major calamity, she didn’t have the words to get the money back. Or she’d bring home dish detergent instead of shampoo because they were both on sale on a similar shelf in the supermarket, both had organic looking flowers and fruit on the bottles.

Recently she put my baby in an outfit she bought on sale from Kmart and said, “geez, this dress was only a dollar because its stitched all wrong and has these extra holes in it.” She couldn’t read the label that said DOG COSTUME and when I told her, she just laughed and shook her head because some of our dogs here own more clothes than the children of Cambodia.

So I stand before you today with this great honour of giving the State of the Writing Nation address, but I go back to a mother whose sole literature comes once a week in the letterbox – the Woolworths and Coles ads with the half-price specials. She would get a pen and circle the things she wanted to buy and then go out and buy them. During the pandemic these circles became darker and angrier because she could no longer go out, and had to rely on the good mood of my father to open up his laptop and perform the alchemy of typing in the magic that would result in an online shop and delivery.

So every day, I am reminded of this privilege, the privilege of being able to read labels on food and medication, and write a list of things to do during the day.

This is where my talk begins. The debates about who is more privileged and less, who has the right to talk for whom, and when and where and why, all these fall into some context when you are dealing with illiteracy almost every day of your life.

This evening is about and for disadvantaged writers. Any person who’s disadvantaged in some way – as an immigrant, refugee, Indigenous, disabled, queer, poor - will tell you they often don’t have the luxury of having their true feelings, thoughts and personalities publicly recognised.

I don’t even mean in our writing. I mean in our everyday lives.

The best we can do is to blend in and not speak our language so loudly in public lest our ching-chong be construed as crafty slanders, our Arabic greeting be seen as a call to literal arms, our comment about dispossession dismissed as an inability to let go of the past, or our public scowling (because our back hurts) a sign that we are not one of those good ‘inspiring’ disabled people.

Often, true feelings make us vulnerable.

This is why I listen to 3AW. Sure I like ABC with its carefully crafted programs and I really like Virginia, but I also like talkback radio esp listening to first time callers.

Daryl – 3 second stunned silence, (someone’s listening at last) then the vitriol!

“I got something to say, I gotto say it.”

They are speaking English wrong! They are spluttering! They are spewing! Give them to Neil Mitchell, patron saint of patience, we don’t want to deal with those types.

When asked how he managed to write about a dissatisfied adulterous young French woman, Gustav Flaubert said, *Madame Bovary, C’est Moi*.

You know Daryl on 3AW. That’s also me.

The racist vitriol Daryl says, I’ve also felt. That’s what racism does to a person. It makes you always put yourself in the shoes of the other, to understand their feelings; not because you are more empathetic and a better person, but more practically, so you can then modify yourself lest you get a broken bottle top shoved in your face back in Braybrook, or you lose out on a job opportunity in middle-class life.

So we think, finally, literature is a good place for us to share our feelings, our language, our inner lives. Literature is a refuge. Literature, and the literary world, is a refined place, far far away from the Darryls on 3AW.

But we are wrong.

When I was 25, I didn’t understand many things about the writing world. But I had a hunch. A vibe. And that vibe has persisted for one and a half decades. Today I want to tell you about it, *this vibe*, Dennis Denudo style, and you can say ‘You’ve gotta be kidding me.’

It was this vibe that got me to begin the first sentence of my first book with ‘*This story does not begin on a boat.’* Because I wanted to write an Australian book, and all books about yellow people back then had to begin *someplace else*, even the ones about goldfields Asian-Australians.

This persistent, unremitting vibe was what got me last week at an online writer’s conference to declare and apologise, cajole with jokes, console with good humour and ‘promise this is not going to be boring’ without even seeing my audience, because the title of my talk was “Writing for Diversity.” Quite a few times at conferences I have experienced half the room walking out in real life, when I’ve had to do a talk on diversity or multiculturalism. I have never taken it personally.

But let me tell you this – these people who walk out have never been minorities or people of colour. And these multicultural sessions are usually slotted in before lunch or after lunch, in the crappy spots where people are too hungry or tired to listen.

In the last fifteen years I’ve tried to look at the world from the perspective of agents, publishers, editors, marketers. Because these are people who are supposed to know better than you about the book industry, and who want to sell your work.

But I also know a little about selling.

When I was younger, I worked at my dad’s electrical appliance store. So I’ve sold literal stereo-types. I’ve also had the humiliation of old women tell me when I’ve approached them with my best customer service smile, “Can you get me an Australian salesperson please?” And I would obligingly grab Joe who was Italian or Jim who was Macedonian. My dad, who owned the store, would sometimes also ask Jim to pretend to be the owner. Because that’s what we do: we Asians remain invisible; we do the hard work, we don’t mind giving other people the credit, as long as our self-dignity is intact. Arseholes of any colour or creed are not afraid to kick up a stink with a Cambodian refugee store-owner in a way they would never do in Myer or Harvey Norman. And if you get enough complaints, head office will question *your* suitability in operating *their* franchise business. So you give in, in small ways; so you don’t have to give up in a big way.

I can honestly say that I’ve spent half my life working in retail, at my dad’s shop. I’ve done some child-labour as an outworkers’ daughter. I’ve also made a few books. So I’m not a publisher but I do know a little about the production, promotion and reception of white-goods and brown-goods. (That’s an industry joke by the way. It’s what we call fridges and hi-fi equipment). But it’s also how we kind of divide literature, if we are to be honest with ourselves.

White goods and brown goods.

**PRODUCTION**

Anne Boyer writes that “in order to LIVE (live, not write) the vast majority of people have to sell the hours of their lives at work.” So there is a distinct difference between a poor or working-class voice and a middle-class voice; and the former is always acutely aware of the latter but the same courtesy is not vice-versa extended.

Emily Maguire introduced me to the work of the late, great Grace Paley, who talked about the importance of blood and money in writing:

“It’s possible to write about anything in the world, but the slightest story ought to contain the facts of money and blood in order to be interesting to adults. That is, everybody continues on this earth by courtesy of certain economic arrangements … And blood — the way people live as families or outside families or in the creation of family, sisters, sons, fathers, the bloody ties. Trivial work ignores these two *facts*.”

But Anne Boyer notes that there is a different sort of vibe happening in much popular literature today:

“I sometimes imagine some alien reader picking up a contemporary novel and thinking that everything about our species in our time and place was feelings, self-identification, self-interest, self-fulfilment, self-determination.”

Writers of disadvantage don’t have this luxury because every day we are made aware, whether we like it or not, of our bodies, our possessions, our class, our colour. Then we have to make these readers, presumably with more heightened and hallowed sensitivities than our own, care about what we have to say.

Cathy Hong Park says:

“Patiently educating a clueless white person about race is draining. It takes all your powers of persuasion. Because it’s more than a chat about race. It’s ontological. It’s like explaining to a person why you exist, or why you feel pain, or why your reality is distinct from their reality.

Except it’s even trickier than that. Because the person has all of Western history, politics, literature, and mass culture on their side, proving that you don’t exist.”

The writer Shannon Burns says the difference between disadvantaged people’s lives and comfortable people’s is this:

“Strong, class-enforced safety nets means that self-pity can be accommodated, and victimhood can even form part of a functional identity.”

I’ve always been interested in what happens to comfortable people when they encounter the suffering of the disadvantaged? Something repels them, compels them not to believe it.

Unfortunately disadvantaged writers - the truly disadvantaged - make this suspension of belief easier for you, because they do not harp on that they are disadvantaged. They are the last to apply for residencies, fellowships and funding, and when they do their applications don’t know how to highlight exactly what they need (in one case, a literal computer).

Disadvantage is not another identity they can cast on or off, but a material reality, a true lack of time and resources. Shannon Burn says:

“Indeed, the willingness to expose your wounds is another sign of privilege. Those for whom injury has a use-value will display their injuries; those for whom woundedness is a survival risk, won’t.”

Emily Dickinson wrote:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant —

Success in Circuit lies …

The Truth must dazzle gradually

Or every man be blind.

So we have to tell the truth, but tell it slant.

When I was writing my second book, *Her Father’s Daughter,* my dad, on whose life it was based, asked me anxiously, “Do you think there’s too much suffering in this book? White people don’t want to read about too much suffering. You’ve got to be careful.”

That’s the problem with having the feelings of the minority writer. You have the inconvenient truth of suffering in your life. Like the Killing Fields of Cambodia.

Sometimes the silver lining is that this suffering puts other sufferings into perspective, so a Rwandan mother-of-five and a heavily-pregnant me can work together, across an ocean, with an urgency that transcends our own feelings.

Last year I had the honour of mentoring Faina, my Next Chapter fellow from Tasmania. She and her husband Aubert had a house full of children, they were both working, and she just had back surgery. Over the course of six months, she sent me 80 000 word, gripping manuscript about surviving the Rwandan genocide. “This lockdown has been good to me,” she says, “it has given me precious time to finish my book.”

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When a disadvantaged writer, by some miracle, finally finishes their work, they then have to seriously consider who will take them on. This is no small feat, considering the mainstream publishing industry doesn’t particularly like the way we tell trauma.

And if you think I am exaggerating, you haven’t heard how many others have coveted Faina and Aubert’s story and the things they wanted to do with it! You haven’t had the privilege of befriending another talented writer who works as a high school teacher by day and writes about war by night, and is rejected by publisher after publisher, for her work’s “grim subject matter.” (You know who else writes grim subject matter in almost every work? Helen Garner.)

Because shit happens!

But marginalised writers then have to perform the alchemy that transforms this effluence into something like the poo emoticon – perfectly-shaped, smiling with good humour, and odorless – in order for our writing to be initially picked up by a publisher.

I truly do not believe I could have got *Her Father’s Daughter* published without writing *Unpolished Gem* first. To this day, *Her Father’s Daughter* is my most critically acclaimed book but my slowest moving baby in terms of sales. While the others are walking unassisted, she’s still crawling and that’s fine. Because every once in a while, someone will pick her up and carry her somewhere, like the wonderful writer Dr. Melanie Cheng, who chose it as her 2020 lockdown read, and remarked on it’s ‘light and unsentimental touch’ and its ‘laugh-out-loud humour’, qualities reviewers rarely attribute to non-fiction books about genocide.

And why is it? Because our books are, to the average reader’s mind, meant to be didactic. They think they’ve read enough of these sorts of books to know the formula. But really, what they have read are books published to ‘educate’, not to reflect the full spectrum of our personalities, thoughts and feelings.

Because to a privileged reader’s emotional health, the disadvantaged writer is either a vitamin-rich supplement (unappetising but necessary) or they’re dark chocolate – not only palatable but irresistible, sparking off all the endorphins. And we’re only dark chocolate if we’ve been blessed with the education necessary to turn neat tricks with language, or we look like Iranian Jesus.

Vitamins or chocolate – notice how these comestibles exist to service the consumer.

Because I make no bones about it, publishing is a business.

But it shouldn’t be a factory.

My friend May Ngo, anthropologist, critic and academic, once worked in a third-world factory production line:

“I worked in that Cambodian factory, as I helped to make those cheap-looking, useless sunglass cases, next to a seventeen-year-old who most likely would be doing many more years of this. I could imagine these cases ending up in a discount bin or two-dollar shop somewhere in Australia, and it hurt to think that we had ruined our backs and strained our eyes for something that could, and would, be discarded so easily, so cheaply, our labour meaning almost nothing at all.”

This is what happens when I see memoirs of refugees in the $10 bargain basement bins. Lives discarded, voices unmentored, stories extracted with surgical precision from still-bleeding souls who once believed their words would change lives, or at least their life.

I say to these publishers, look I know you need to make money. But why churn out these stories in this manner? Sometimes if the writer is not skilled enough, they even get a ghost-writer to do it. But why not cool down a bit? Why not help the marginalised survivor-writer find a mentorship and let them take four years to find their voice and develop a literary personality? What’s the rush? Why the rush?

Are we just fads and interchangeable cut-outs? (*We’ve done Bosnia this year, but we don’t have Iran or Afghanistan – who can find Afghanistan on a map?!*)

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All these publisher-rushed stories of pain and redemption make people think we’re hard work, even before they meet us.

That’s why, fifteen years ago, I politely pushed back on another thing with my first book, in the same way my friend Maxine Beneba Clarke pushed back on hers. When my publisher showed me the draft cover of *Unpolished Gem*, I was quite horrified, because I thought I had written a pretty funny book and here was an image of a ten year old Asian girl, in black and white, in a darkened room, sitting on the edge of a bed or chair (I forget which). My father said, when he saw it, “You really can’t have this as the cover of your book because readers are going to think it’s about childhood sexual abuse!” But the industry norm back then was to have such covers for books about Asian women. I could not live with that cover, and I could not have that blurb about three generations of suffering women. So I had a go at rewriting the blurb.

And I wrote:

*This story does not begin on a boat. Nor does it contain wild swans and falling leaves.*

How lucky I was to have an editor, Chris Feik, who found me by reading Maxine Hong Kingston. He wrote back, “Dear Alice, your blurb was exactly what the doctor ordered.” How lucky I was to have a designer Tom, who redid the cover to the recognisable orange one that’s been in print for fifteen years now. How lucky I was to have a small and careful team, without an expert panel of marketers to dictate and override my vehement objection to that first cover, that ‘three-generations-of-suffering-Chinese-women’ blurb.

How lucky I was to have a team who recognised my personhood, and took risks!

Sometimes, we minority writers are not as clueless as we look. Sometimes we see things differently to the way they were done before, and it might work. I’d like to honour all the publishers and agents and editors here who’ve genuinely taken risks.

And I’m not going to lie here, sometimes our work is hard to read! As it should be. Nearly everyone has bought or been given a copy of *No Friend but the Mountains* but barely anyone I know has read it (except Arnold Zable)! I haven’t read it myself, but I seriously have an excuse.

Publishers are constantly sending me an endless stream of books to endorse, books about the death of children, refugees, genocide, killings, every imaginable kind of trauma.

Can you imagine if I said, this stuff is triggering to me, or I’m not feeling up to it?

Of course I do it because I am genuinely interested.

But sometimes I suggest, Why don’t you get X or Y big name author to do it?

*Oh but they’re too busy.*

Or sometimes, flatteringly, the publicist will write to me, oh you’re a big name.

I don’t buy that.

Viet Thanh Nguyen, who is a huge name, a Pulitzer-prize winning name, says:

“Many writers like me have been called “a voice for the voiceless.” It’s what we trot out whenever someone is writing about an experience we don’t know anything about. It’s meant to be a compliment. But it’s dangerous, because when we call someone a voice for the voiceless, what we’re really saying is we don’t want to hear all the other voices that are out there. It’s easier dealing with one person.”

Here I would like to sincerely thank Helen Garner. She wrote a supporting sentence on the cover of my first book, and even launched it at Melbourne writer’s festival, and now in her eighties she is still judging writing prizes for emerging writers. I cannot imagine the level of success *Unpolished Gem* would have had without her support. Helen has always done the hard work to help disadvantaged writers. If Helen Garner is not precious about her name being on debut books, then I am not sure what excuse everyone else has except perhaps some degree of literary wankiness.

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You have all heard of the Bechdel test. I am proposing a new one here. The Pung test. On writers’ panels, count how many times you hear an Aboriginal writer, a disabled writer, or a refugee writer:

a) talk about their writing process at length when unprompted, or

b) talk about their fictional characters without any context, as if everyone already knows them.

Can you imagine this in any other profession? A panel of Accountants on ‘The accounting process’? (I take this spreadsheet and I add these numbers in this column… Questions from the audience please: *Oh yes, is there a specific reason and significance to why you chose to name column 1 ‘Expendables’?*)

We minority writers don’t have this luxury. We have the weight of history on our shoulders, we have to do stand-up comedy and literary handstands in order for half the room not to walk out!

We don’t assume people have read our books and know our characters, or will want to buy our books and know our characters! We have to hustle the shit out of them.

And even then there are no guarantees on how we will be received.

Let’s talk now about -

**RECEPTION**

Jessie Tu wrote her book to write a character like herself into existence. She says that because she didn’t see people like her as active agents in books:

“I felt ineligible for anything, like an adventure, or love.”

In interviews Jessie says a lot of very insightful, thoughtful things about representation and reading and her love of jazz. But she is quoted in *The Guardian newspaper* in a huge black byline as saying: “I will probably never read a book by a straight white male again” as if that is her life’s creed, when I would imagine it would have been a throwaway, flippant line. Because she can also be funny, and the point she is trying to make is that really privileged people can not only tell their stories, but they then feel the need to tell our stories as well. That’s why they are too busy to read and endorse our books! Lucky Ben Law, Maxine, Anita Heiss, Arnold Zable, Tony Birch, Randa Abdul Fattah, Christos, Rebecca Lim – huge names, by the way, are making time to help out fellow debut writers. And phew, now our famous straight white writers can go back to character-building their transgender Vietnamese sidekick characters, because their imagination is infinitely superior, their literary output more important.

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The Irish writer Sally Rooney was the number one debating champion in all of Europe when she was 22. She says of the experience:

“I knew almost nothing about Bosnia … but now my English-language upbringing had deposited me at the top of a lecture hall in Belgrade, where I was falsifying the history of a devastating and prolonged conflict.

The most ambitious debaters go out of their way to absorb information about sexual violence, racial profiling, police brutality: issues many of them will never experience firsthand. I did the same thing. Did it make me more empathetic and self-aware? Or did it just continue to affirm the idea that if I were smart and competitive enough, I could speak for anyone I wanted?”

If we take the commercial publishing industry as a whole, and on average – (I’m not talking about the outliers or the small presses) – then the commercial publishing industry is a little bit like Sally Rooney. Hardworking, superbly talented, highly likeable, self-aware, at every level. But powerful enough to amplify the voices of anyone they want.

Fortunately, Sally had this acute self-awareness at 22 and wasn’t egotistical or calculating enough to shove in some people-of-colour in her books; and she is transparent about how little awareness her young characters have outside themselves and the people they know – other brilliant, progressive people with huge ideas and little outside life experience.

One of the most exasperating questions I am asked when I give writing workshops, by well-intentioned participants, is – how do I write diverse characters? And I think, at least these earnest beginner writers are asking, instead of just going ahead and using their fame and acclaim to do it. But I also think, if you had diverse people in your life – a best friend, a family member, a student you mentor – you wouldn’t be asking me. You’d be asking them instead.

Many of the high school and university students I teach writing to – they do diversity beautifully. Their characters are real, true characters and not assemblages of cultural quirks. They don’t even mention ethnicity in their work because they’re just writing about their best friends and their best friend’s parents. Carrie Tiffany spoke once about how a lot of adults write children terribly. She jokes that one day those children will say, how dare you appropriate our voices!

But many writers, agents and publishers feel the need to tell the stories of disadvantaged people a certain way, especially to children, because they want a sanitised version that they can live with.

What they are saying is, We are too good, our children are too good, to be inflicted pain by you.

I’ve had the uncanny experience of schools telling me to tone down my recounting of the Killing Fields, even while sending me to their children to ‘educate them’!

This pandemic has brought about the liberal and unfettered, unabashed use of words like ‘fragile’ (to describe our children’s mental states); and in the case of one school principal who defied lockdown laws, cries that ‘our children are hurting.’ I secretly thought, listen mate I know you want the best for your children, but what makes your children so special?

What about the children I work with in the Western suburbs, locked inside commission flats, who dare not defy the government and police, who are sometimes trapped with emotionally and physically abusive adults, taking care of elderly relatives, while simultaneously doing their schoolwork and home-schooling a couple of younger siblings as well?

When do they get to be ‘fragile’ and ‘hurting’?

Now we know how you really feel.

For when you talk about fragility you are not talking about the children. You are talking about yourselves. I never blame privilege on the children, but these adults have a lot to answer for!

Cathy Hong Park writes that:

“Innocence is both a privilege and a cognitive handicap, a sheltered unknowingness that, once protracted into adulthood, hardens into entitlement.”

I have had a lifetime of not telling my parents bad news. They’ve survived war, starvation, loss, death of their parents, death of a child. I suppose from this I also instinctually learned how to make suffering palatable for ‘fragile’ readers.

Because you know the kind of reader I’m talking about. Well-versed in the language of micro and nano aggressions, very woke, yet certain books are too traumatic for them. I call it IBS – Irritable Book Syndrome.

Holden Sheppard tells suicidal gay men who feel crap and who want to read his book thinking it will help, NOT to coz it might make them feel worse. The epiphanies only come when you are in a good place. I tell people they might not like my new book if they are anxious in lockdown. See we’re not arseholes.

But comfortable, safe people who claim to care so much about education and learning; but whose feelings are too delicate for this shit? No sympathy.

In her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag writes:

“Someone who is perennially surprised that depravity exists, who continues to feel disillusioned (even incredulous) when confronted with evidence of what humans are capable of inflicting in the way of gruesome, hands-on cruelties upon other humans, has not reached moral or psychological adulthood. No one after a certain age has the right to this kind of innocence, of superficiality, to this degree of ignorance, or amnesia.”

Maria Tumarkin last year said “I am not in the market for fantasies of innocence, I studied history.” She also says: “centering empathy is one of the most familiar moves in the settler innocence playbook, which should make us … squeamish about using this term.”

Sontag says, “So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence.”

Viet Thanh Nguyen muses:

“What happens if we don’t do anything? What happens if we just put down that book and pick up another book? What happens if we don’t get involved in an aid organization and donate money? What happens if we don’t call our elected officials? What happens if we don’t march in the streets? What happens if we don’t take action? I think that’s the danger of literature. As much as it awakens our feelings, it can also lull us into a sense of complacency that we’ve already done something simply by reading about someone’s terrible situation.”

My friend the academic Natalie Kon-Yu, says her acknowledgement of country and then takes it further – she says, “now we’ve acknowledged we are on stolen land, let’s do something about it. Let’s make the commitment to pay back some rent. It could be as small as every time you hear an acknowledgement of country, donating a dollar to an Indigenous foundation.”

Yet how about we don’t just confine our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander speakers to doing the Acknowledgement of Country and then booting them out of the room or Zoom, because they are only there to serve as the entrée to our larger feast of ‘Important Cultural Learnings’?

If you don’t know, that reference it’s from Borat, and by not engaging the refugee speaker, the Muslim speaker, the disability advocate, you make your learning about us a parody.

Also, seriously, you gotta re-evaluate your life if you feel you must use books to educate children about diversity, because your kid is bereft of diverse people in their lives. You are giving books too much power here. Books should complement, not replace, the full spectrum of humanity.

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William Hazlitt wrote that 'the smallest pain in our little finger causes us more concern than the destruction of our fellow human beings." So unless we can transcend our physical and emotional corporeality, our feelings *do* matter more than anyone else’s. That’s a statement of fact, not a judgement of selfishness.

Our feelings are the way we experience the world and the cause of all our desires, friendships and enmities.

But unless we can transcend our feelings for a little bit, and acknowledge some real hard truths, we’ll never have any idea how to fix this problem called diversity, representation and appropriation.

Audre Lorde wrote almost 30 years ago:

“Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference -- those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older -- know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.”

I’m afraid to say that the master is still alive, and the master has the same sensitivities as a nineteenth century romantic poet, and the master is not dying of consumption anytime soon.

And he may, out of the kindness of his heart - or even self-interest - spend his time painting the outside of his house rainbow colours so that people of all cultures, classes and creeds feel welcomed. But he may also very likely warn us to please wipe off our crap and mud on the welcome mat first, in case we foul up the sitting room.

Because we still seem to be the ‘white man’s burden’ but this new ‘white person’ is now a ‘woke’ publisher-marketer who knows what sorts of our stories we can tell because they have a ‘vibe’ on what sort of stories might sell.

But there are now other places we can go.

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And how far we have gone in fifteen years since I first started out. When my latest book came out in the middle of this year, it was reviewed mainly by women of colour and Asian women: Thuy On, Sarah Malik, Jackie Tang, Giselle Au-Nhien Nguyen, Anna Song, Maxine, May, Jessie Tu, Yen-Rong Wong, Marino Sano, and so many others unmentioned to whom I am very grateful. My audiobook was read by Sun Park (formerly from Hi-5!). Even before the book even came out, when it was still in rough draft form, Michelle Law bought the film rights. It has taken twenty years, and progression into middle-age, for this writer to finally feel like Taylor Swift and her girl gang, surrounded by all these crazy-talented, wonderful women operating at every level in the arts and literature. I admire and appreciate them so much.

Amplified bookstore, our official booksellers tonight, were one of the first to publicly stock and support my book pre-release. They are a bookshop that stocks diverse books, because their motto is ‘everyone should be able to see themselves on the page.’

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**So for all disadvantaged writers out there -**

Forget about the maddening crowd of thoughts when you sit down to write. Your voice is not a cliché just because you are poor or aboriginal or a refugee or disabled or queer and you feel pain. It’s okay if you don’t have the time or background to tweeze each word in place, if your writing is more like macramé rather than embroidery, if it is a distressed dresser rather than a polished tallboy.

A once-small publisher offered me refuge, and made my career. Small presses are still offering refuge houses everywhere. And larger publishers are on the lookout for ‘different’ voices. There are mentorships, online publications, competitions, residencies open for you. The Deborah Cass Prize. The Next Chapter mentorships. The Deakin Non-fiction Prize. So many opportunities, please contact Writers Victoria to find out!

I have talked about production, promotion and reception. The last word on Longevity, I will leave to the great Ouyang Yu, who says -

“I write, I live in this country, I send stuff out, I get rejected and I hardly get invited to any events, literary or artistic. But that doesn’t stop me from writing. As for whose taste matters, I’d say no one’s taste matters to me. I once said that reading Ouyang Yu is an acquired taste and that’s what it is. If you don’t like what I write, well and fine. I don’t care. I create my own taste. I cater to no one’s taste. We’ll just see who dies earlier than who and whose taste lasts. Probably no one’s does and that’s even better.”

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One final family story: My father thinks he’s pretty funny, as most dads do. But while most dads in Australia tell stories about their formative years and how they might have seen a rock concert or something, my father’s stories involve surviving a genocide. One evening we are having dinner and he begins to tell us about how he made fertiliser out of human waste in the Killing Fields. “You know I could have been a doctor,” he said, “because I knew my shit so well that I could tell just by its colour how long a person had to live. If their poo was bright green they were seriously ill and not long for this world. If their poo was black they were on their last legs. If their poo, however, was nice and yellow, like this curry here, it meant that they had had enough rice that day…”

“Stop it dad!” we protested, but that never stopped him.

“What’s the big deal?” he’d retort, “I’m just talking about crap. You’re not actually eating it.”

Thank you.