



At the intersection of writers festivals and literary communities

By Millicent Weber

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(4 Comments)

Literary festivals are complex beasts. They're simultaneously social spaces, cultural projects and political platforms. As providers of entertainment, drivers of tourist revenue and exercises in government branding – think 'Melbourne: City of Literature' – they cop flak for their commercialisation.

Nevertheless, these festivals do work hard to build audiences for writers from marginalised backgrounds, and to program events that critique inequalities in contemporary publishing. This is visible in the programs of the big, mainstream festivals. The [2017 Melbourne Writers Festival](#), for example, featured streams like 'Protest and Persist' and 'Asia What?', and events on representation, identity politics, sexism, and political conservatism. And the upswell of festivals like [Blak & Bright](#), the [Feminist Writers Festival](#), the [Melbourne Jewish Writers Festival](#) and the [Chinese Writers Festival](#), all held for the first time in Melbourne in 2016, and organised with the support of existing festivals like the Melbourne Writers Festival and [Emerging Writers' Festival](#), underscore these festivals' political and critical missions.

Literary festivals' immediate local audiences – typically wealthy, white and well-educated (72.5% of audiences I've polled have tertiary degrees) – are taken as confirmation of the festivals' commercialisation and bourgeois credentials.

Amid the fallout around [Michael Cathcart's interview of Paul Beatty at the Sydney Writers' Festival in May](#), commentators expressed frustration with the prevalence, and the behaviour, of well-meaning but often ignorant audiences. There's no doubt that Cathcart's behaviour, or that of his peers – think [Lionel Shriver's discussion of cultural appropriation at the Brisbane Writers' Festival](#) last year – are indicative of a real problem with racism in Australia. These instances also demonstrate how organisers' cultural sensitivity and awareness can be lost in the push to program controversial, audience-grabbing sessions, which tap into the cultural clout of establishment interviewers like *Books and Arts Daily's* Cathcart.

On the other hand, the scope, the reach and the number of thoughtful pieces of commentary around this event is also impressive. Audiences used Twitter to discuss the issues that emerged, and to raise the profile of their frustrations:


Patrick Marlborough
 @Cormac_McCafe

just witnessed great example of why white baby boomers shouldn't host an interview w a black writer who mocks white liberal aggrandisement

1:50 PM - May 27, 2017

2 6 22


Osman Faruqi @oz_f 30 May

Michael Cathcart intro's his interview with Paul Beatty by warning listeners it contains offensive language:
radio.abc.net.au/programitem/pg... 1/2

Following similar coverage in the major Australian dailies, these issues garnered more [detailed critical discussion in *The Guardian*](#) and *Overland*. The event was also reported on by the *LA Times*. Other big blow-ups – in 2016, around Lionel Shriver's comments at Brisbane, and Melbourne Writers Festival's programming of Melinda Tankard Reist – were yet more heatedly discussed on social media. Shriver's behaviour received extensive international media coverage as well as detailed analytical critiques in Australia. The *New York Times* and the *New Yorker* both ran related articles, while *Time* magazine interviewed Shriver about [cultural appropriation](#) several days later as a way of continuing the conversation.

These responses attest to the ability of a topical event, even at a comparatively small festival like Brisbane's, to provoke substantial conversation and engagement online and subsequently gain traction in international contexts. A literary festival is bigger than the immediate, physical event. These festivals begin as live and immersive, but tap into digital and international conversations and communities as well.

This cross-platform constitution of literary festival audiences is key to understanding a festival's real potential to promote and galvanise political movement. Yes, they are indisputably implicated in the kinds of power structures, inequalities and processes of marginalisation that shape book culture and literary production, and they are, as we've seen with Cathcart or Shriver, sometimes complicit in propping up these structures. But in an age where we interact with physical and virtual communities simultaneously, these events catalyse public discussion far beyond their host auditoria.

We saw a particularly impressive example of this last year following the programming of a panel about sex work at the 2016 Melbourne Writers Festival. This panel – originally called 'The Sex Trade: Murder and Survival', and renamed almost immediately to the equally troubling 'Invisible Women' – notably featured anti-sex work and pro-life feminist Melinda Tankard-Reist, alongside author Ruth Wykes, both of whom had recently published books about the contemporary sex trade.

The first wave of backlash against this panel was on social media. Local feminist communities spoke out against the inclusion of Tankard-Reist, in particular, and expressed significant anger over the absence of sex worker voices in a programmed discussion about the pitfalls of the industry. These conversations initially developed in social media communities, and fed into public statements opposing the panel, including a sequence of public comments on the event page on the Festival website. Twenty-four hours after the Festival had launched their program, nearly fifty individuals had commented. This is a notable and impressive demonstration of the shortened timescales of the digital era. It is also an immediate example of these different spaces for public discourse – digital feminist communities, and live literary events – tapping into one another.

This immediate response led to a negotiation between the festival, advocacy groups and feminist communities. Over the upcoming weeks several articles and blog posts were published discussing the event, including commentary from Kylie Fox, Ruth Wykes' co-author, calling the Melbourne Writers Festival 'naïve' in their programming and promotion. The Melbourne Writers Festival eventually organised a follow-up panel designed to continue and develop conversations from the initial event. Titled 'Nothing About Us Without Us', it ran the weekend after the original panel and featured sex workers Jane Green and MJ Hughes, spokespeople from local advocacy organisation Vixen Collective.

The day of the 'Invisible Women' event, members of [Vixen](#) and of the sex work peak body [Scarlet Alliance](#) staged protests arguing for better representation of sex workers' voices in discussions about the industry. Protesters congregated in Federation Square with red umbrellas, obstructing access to the event. They also congregated around the festival hashtag, #MWF16. Together, these acts ensured that visitors to the festival, both in-person and virtual, would be exposed to the conversations happening around this event – a determined, and notably cross-media, act of political visibility.

[Many critics express frustration with the ways that literary festivals encourage writers to publicly perform](#) their authority on a range of social and political issues. Social media responses to literary festival events deemed problematic certainly display preoccupation with this crossover from writer to pundit, as well as frustration with writers who speak on behalf of communities or issues they're not actually involved with. Literary festivals, as projects that are both derived from and working to amplify a system with clear commercial and populist imperatives, are necessarily implicated in the power structures of contemporary society – the economic, cultural and social logics that dictate cultural taste. They also demonstrably and actively work to reveal and critique these structures – and do so in digital and media spaces far beyond the reach of the immediate festival audience. These festivals celebrate literary culture, and

are consumed as cultural products in their own right, but they also, sometimes forcibly, represent literary communities to themselves.

Public, mediated and embroiled in the conversations of participatory digital media, these festivals irrefutably draw broad public attention to crucial issues within contemporary culture. Hopefully their audiences, both in-person and virtual, will continue to respond critically and reflectively to these events.

Image: Umbrella trees / Jennifer C

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More by Millicent Weber

Comments

From Rodney on 6 September 2017 at 7.43 pm

Sometimes it seems impossible to please anyone, but I guess we should still keep trying!

Reply

From Tony Birch on 7 September 2017 at 11.50 am

The 'fallout' of the Cathcart interview with Paul Beatty says more about self-righteousness than it does about racism. Beatty uses the word 'nigger' throughout *The Sellout* – he doesn't use the 'n word'. So, when we read the book – as I did – do I read the 'n-word' or 'nigger'. Obviously the latter. So, the word can then not be discussed in context in a public forum about the book? In my latest book a kid tells a white girl that he's an 'Abo' – as opposed to her feeling that it's more appropriate to be called a 'half-caste'. If this exchange came up in an interview I would hope the interviewer didn't say 'how do you feel about using the A word'. It's a joke. (And by the way, blackfellas in Australia were often called 'niggers' historically. So, do we get a free pass in using the word? As I've written elsewhere, why is no one interested in the degrading representation of women in *The Sellout*? Surely not because Beatty is a 'writer of colour' who is satirically engaging with both racism and misogyny? If an Aboriginal writer wrote about Aboriginal women in such a way I would personally blow them up. Beatty wasn't disrespected in Sydney. He got a free ride. And yep, it would take an interviewer of colour, hopefully a woman, to put the heat on him. Beatty also said, in the interview that he'd only been asked twice was 'he born black' or did 'learn to be black', and only in Australia. This is not true. Beatty has been interviewed all over the world, most often by white middle-class men in suits. He was asked similar questions to those he was asked in Sydney, and seemed very happy to answer them. But, hey, he was on the BBC's 'Hard Talk' and CNN and ABC in the States and CBC in Canada – he wasn't hanging with the provincials.

Reply

From Tony Birch on 7 September 2017 at 12.18 pm

I would like to add (not directed my criticism to Millicent Weber, by the way, but the stomping of liberal boots) – if you think that Paul Beatty had such a hard time in Sydney and you regularly attend writers festivals, then please think about your blindness when it comes to Aboriginal writers in Australia. I have witnessed revered Aboriginal writers – Miles Franklin winners no less! – become the subject of ill-considered, ill-founded, ignorant and racist festival audiences. And not a peep from the 'outraged'. Aboriginal writers are most likely to be interviewed by non-Aboriginal people – men and women, white, middle-

class, literary types. I cannot remember a single occasion when this has been raised as an issue. And if it has, with none of the noise when a hipster from the States rolls into town. Again, we are invisible in this debate – if we were cool, we'd do a lot better.

Reply

From Millicent on 7 September 2017 at 2.29 pm

Tony, these are such important points. I suspect I can't do justice to a response in the context of an online comment thread, but I completely agree that the absence of these perspectives and these conversations speaks volumes about the politics of contemporary cultural consumption.

Reply

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