

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

With Us, Against Us

Robert Wood · Thursday, October 29th, 2015

Although I have been interested in and written poetry for over a decade, I have not toiled long in the poetry bureaucratic apparatus. I use ‘the poetry bureaucratic apparatus’ to mean its administrative wing – organising readings, promoting prizes, reading submissions, applying for grants, editing posts, doing social media, paying poets. This bureaucratic apparatus is for the most part ad hoc. There is no union, no enterprise bargaining agreement, no industrial relations body, no governing organisation. It is, of course, simply one aspect of the gift economy that is poetry.

For the last six months, I have worked in a paid, part-time communications role at Australian Poetry, which is based in Melbourne’s Wheeler Centre. Prior to that I volunteered with the Small Press Network, which is another resident organisation in the same venue. For the past 12 months, then, I have had a courtside seat at what constitutes one of Australia’s pre-eminent literary bureaucratic communities. It is a fantastic place to work – the building is gorgeous, one feels like one is making a contribution and it is a particular nerve centre for all kinds of literary activity. In Melbourne it is an establishment and I feel very lucky to have participated in it.

However, as a person of colour, one is struck by how white the place is. My daily work routine takes place amidst white people. My colleagues at Australian Poetry are all white. The people on my floor, which includes Express Media, the Small Press Network and Writers Victoria, are, to my knowledge, all white. The might be one or two people like me – a secret ethnic passing – but everyone seems and presents as white. There is one remarkable exception to this, which is the recently created role of Victorian Indigenous Literary Officer. The role is shared between all the organisations and staffed by an Aboriginal woman.

Yet, there is the implied belief that by employing a sanctioned Indigenous person one has mitigated the structural inequalities of racism. This is the self-congratulatory liberal pat on the back not necessary reform for a politically progressive organisation. Bourgeois liberal racism is the kind of racism that is smart enough to be structurally embedded and creatively evasive when called out. It cognises itself as politically correct, as sensitive, as aware. The insidious aspect is that many of these people may well be the same people who decry the booing of Adam Goodes, the Andrew Bolt zingers, the Tony Abbot policies of systematic oppression. And yet, and yet, the daily reality is that there seems to be little advancement for people of colour when one looks at the establishment. The heads of the Wheeler Centre organisations and the boards of these organisations all appear white, especially the two most important, namely the Melbourne Writers Festival and the Wheeler Centre itself. A Stella Count of the literary bureaucratic establishment is unnecessary because it is all but all white.

Not often does this whiteness present itself as whiteness. It is one of whiteness' great abilities to be invisible and in so doing claim to be universal. Recently though I was asked by a colleague (who will remain unnamed) to maintain my silence about supporting an initiative that would seek to promote CALD communities and recognise the marginalised place their members have in the arts. Quite simply, I was asked not to promote work that is raced and that is important. I have made my opposition to this well known internally. In this particular incident whiteness made itself known including defensiveness when questioned, assumed level playing fields and subconscious ideas of entitlement and right.

I do not by any means want to tar everyone with the same brush and there are many sympathetic fellow travellers who work in the building. And yet one can't help but notice that one is surrounded by white faces when one goes to events, when one has meetings, when one walks into the office, when one looks at programming. These are all faces that do not look like mine or my family's. By not actively campaigning to change the raced dynamics of this establishment though, I am reminded of Joan Kirner, when she said:

Just by making a decision to stay out of politics, you are making the decision to allow others to shape politics and exert power over you. And if you are alienated from the current political system, then just by staying out of it, if you do nothing to change it, you simply entrench it.

These words are not only salutary for other people of colour, but also for the people I work with. We should be in solidarity with marginalised peoples because that is what the art is about. Where the entrenched discriminations have been changed is related to gender. The bureaucratic apparatus, as I see it, employs women commensurate to their proportional representation (this though does not seem to be the case with journals). Hopefully, that means there will be changes in the content of what is produced.

That people of colour are still not proportionally represented is not mere oversight, but systematic and co-ordinated. And this matters for the art. Where would we be without Carpentaria or Foreign Soil? The sea change that has occurred in Australian literature over the last thirty years is remarkable, but for it to falter now would be a disservice to the art itself. Identities matter. Experiences matter. And the bureaucratic apparatus needs to reflect that.

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