

Maria Tumarkin – State of the (Writing) Nation Transcript
17 November 2020

I am giving this talk on the lands that belong, and have always belonged, to the Kulin Nation, to the Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung people. I pay deep respects to their elders, past, present and emerging. I am a migrant on stolen land, and in standing here today I am taking someone else's place. This I cannot escape. This I don't want resolved. Because my knowing that this moment doesn't belong to me, my sense of being out of place, mean I may end up doing something worth doing. No guarantees though.

I am a migrant on stolen land. To understand my family's move to safety as the displacement of others is a lifelong project. Sometimes I fight it.

SLIDE – *We came here with nothing. We asked for little. We treaded gently. etc etc*
[Fade in and out]

I am not in the market for fantasies of innocence, I studied history. But to give up the idea of being on the margins – that's for me the hard bit. I am newly 46. I work at a university. I am standing here now. If I am on the margins in any sense, it is because being a writer in Australia is seen as an esoteric thing at best, certainly not a profession, a hobby maybe, and this is the first time I'll say it and I'll say it again in the next 40 minutes – Australia doesn't care about most kinds of artists, but it doesn't care about writers in particular. While this contempt must be fought in submissions, in agitation and policy work, in schools and universities – and I thank from the bottom of my heart those writers, arts workers, educators and advocates who are engaged in this largely unrecognised and thankless labour! – while this contempt needs to be kept visible like a ketchup stain on a thousand dollar suit – a ketchup stain that keeps on spreading – it cannot be, I believe, the defining fight of our lives as writers, or the main conversation we are having in public or private, or the way literature is talked about to children and young people. Orienting ourselves to this contempt and to the struggle it invites us in is a deadend.

I am not finished, but I want to talk about the visible and the invisible a little more first. I am still introducing myself to you. I spent my childhood and an early-to-mid adolescence in Ukraine feeling hyper-visible – everyone and their dog could tell I was Jewish. My nose, the shape of my face, whatever else.

SLIDE – *Nose....*

[Fade in, let it linger a touch before fading out]

The relief of coming to Australia where I was *illegible*, until I opened my mouth and even then who the hell knew where my accent came from and who the hell cared anyway – I cannot tell you how much I loved it, till I understood what a privilege it

was not to be read and how I, by virtue of making a second home in a settler colony, was now inside the electrified networks of invisibility and hypervisibility, in which the invisible had all the power. The invisible claimed to be the everypeople and they had things like democracy and human rights and empathy and literature and 'egalitarianism'. It took me too long to start learning about the history of that all-conquering, universalising invisibility and its genesis in whiteness and colonialism, about the harm it has caused and continues to cause, the cloak it has thrown over violence and dispossession.

SLIDE – *Too Late?*

[Fade in and out]

Talking to you today is part of this learning. I said yes to giving this address to force myself to do some work, to be made accountable for this year in which I have done hardly any thinking.

I am a secular Jew. I understand how in Australia antisemitism may seem to many, particularly the younger people, as something of a phantom. Mosquito bites compared to bullet wounds and sliced-off flesh. But I come from the country – the Soviet Union, the former Soviet Union – where antisemitism was a machine for murdering, exiling, draining life force, destroying families and futures, and I am not even talking about the Second World War, so this is the history I carry inside of me, this is what I need to tell you about myself.

One more thing to say about the kind of migrant I am. Much as I am compelled by the idea of racial capitalism and disaster capitalism, I won't be using the category of capitalism in my talk because I am a migrant from the land of genocidal anti-capitalism and it is my history, my dead, which I can neither disown nor forget. To me the search is on for a different language. This is my particular context. I don't want to argue about it. I have my dead and you have yours.

I am going to take a breath now. []

SLIDE – *Maybe you too?*

[Fade in and out]

So. What to do with the contempt for writers in this country? I might lose friends here, but for me – the answer is NOTHING. Being a writer is a serious and important thing, particularly for writers from minoritised communities. The intellectual, spiritual, pedagogical and testimonial work those writers do is life-giving and life-changing.

SLIDE – *The answer is NOTHING*

[Fade in and out]

May I introduce you to a Russian-language expression you might find useful. It has certainly felt apt to me more than once since we arrived in Australia in 1990. The

expression is 'to prove you're not a camel'. This, just to be clear, is not an anti-camel saying. It's an anti-stupidity saying. I'd like to implore fellow writers to stop trying to prove in earnest that we are not camels because, for one, all that camel business takes us away from the actual work we need or want to be doing.

Doing nothing is not doing nothing of course. We absolutely should try to look for ways of surviving and forms of enduring and intergenerational solidarity – and we have been; we should be sly and inventive – and we are; and, yes, faking it whenever that faking is called for, but we should not give ourselves over to addressing this contempt.

What I am trying to think about today is this: how to strike against writers made inconsequential, both atomised and collectivised in ways that diminish us, how to strike against writers made to plead and bleat in public, to engage in humiliating platitudes about 'Australian stories' – and platitudes for writers are what acid reflux is for singers: bad for our health and bad for our work.

And I am thinking about how this question is fundamentally connected to the moment of reckoning and self-reckoning we're in the middle of. A huge moment. To understand that the writerly imagination is not a super-power that transcends time and space and power and race and class and gender and the postcode and history, that all that stuff about 'universal stories' and 'universal themes' is not merely a sticky cliché but an attack on literature, disguised as its most well-intentioned defence. To understand how the corrosive language of rights has been internalised with gusto by white writers such as myself – the right to inhabit the other, the right to the universalising imagination – and how the language of rights needs to be pushed off the perch so the language of accountability and responsibility can take its place. And how that overthrow leads to the flourishing, not the wilting, not the drying-up.

SLIDE:

what white artists might do is not imaginatively inhabit the other because that is their right as artists, but instead embody and examine the interior landscape that wishes to speak of rights, that wishes to move freely and unbounded across time, space, and lines of power, that wishes to inhabit whomever it chooses.

...

We acknowledge that every act of imaginative sympathy inevitably has limits. Perhaps the way to expand those limits is not to "enter" a racial other but instead to inhabit, as intensely as possible, the moment in which the imagination's sympathy encounters its limit.

Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffreda, 'On Whiteness and The Racial Imaginary',
<https://lithub.com/on-whiteness-and-the-racial-imaginary/>

[Keep it on the screen for long enough for people to read]

I keep coming back to these words from Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffreda:

what white artists might do is not imaginatively inhabit the other because that is their right as artists, but instead embody and examine the interior landscape that wishes to speak of rights, that wishes to move freely and unbounded across time, space, and lines of power, that wishes to inhabit whomever it chooses.

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We acknowledge that every act of imaginative sympathy inevitably has limits. Perhaps the way to expand those limits is not to “enter” a racial other but instead to inhabit, as intensely as possible, the moment in which the imagination’s sympathy encounters its limit.

This is the work,
'inhabiting-the-moment-in-which-the-imagination's-sympathy-encounters-its-limit',
not the camel stuff.

I don't need to tell you how hard this year has been for writers. At least for writers who don't have a Plan B or C. But tonight I'll just mention people who had their first books out in the middle of the pandemic, years and years of their lives and hearts in those books, such a scary thing to do to put a book in the world, your first book, maybe you never write another one again, and for your little boat to be swallowed like that... My love to you, dear writers of first books. The waves are receding and your books will re-surface, are resurfacing now.

This year is another reason why I believe we should DO NOTHING. 2020 has been, at least in part, a lesson in how doing nothing is sometimes the sanest and the most necessary thing to do.

Let me be blunt. Our attempts to convince this nation that we matter and that we make it better – more united, more self-aware, more civically minded, more productive – are doomed. Evoking 'moral education' of which literature is the number one producer (with its 'patented' empathy production capabilities), referring to how productivity is exponentially increased by reading – it makes me feel hollowed out just saying this out loud.

Not simply because this country is this or that

SLIDE – *Insert your own eviscerating descriptions here*
[Fade In and Out]

but because I don't think these arguments are true. Literature doesn't make us a more productive nation. Arguing that it does is necessary to ensure that the underwhelming, to say the least, and underhanded support from the government continues coming – that the project of defunding is not complete – because this support can still be life-giving. Let's not pretend though that arguing the link between writing, reading and productivity is anything but demeaning. It's the necessary doublespeak which shouldn't be internalised as, or mistaken for, the actual language of thought and analysis.

Frankly, good books should take us away from the kind of work that is implied in these equations, and make us question the very idea of productivity and make us sit on the toilets at our places of work (when we return to them) for forty minutes at a time – reading, not working. Good books should make us question the very idea of productivity, make our eyes glaze over at meetings, make our ears bleed in the vicinity of institutional language. Bleeding ears, glazed-over eyes, excessive toilet breaks – that's hardly a conventional picture of enhanced productivity.

I am sorry I am saying 'we' all the time, especially as a white settler writer. I'm putting that 'we' on notice. It's a shorthand and it's something I'll come back to, but you are right not to be impressed by that.

Another breath. []

Literature makes us better people and thus a better nation by teaching us to care and feel for others who are not like us, by teaching us to see those others as equal and interesting. Mmm.... Firstly, I believe that reading doesn't make us anymore empathetic than, say, gardening. Secondly, I was lucky enough to have a conversation a couple of months ago with Namwali Serpell, a Zambian-American writer whose essay 'The Banality of Empathy' was a real intellectual thunderbolt for me in the last few years.

In the essay, Serpell tore into the expectations that the marginalised should view their art as vehicles for generating and disseminating empathy.

SLIDE

"This grotesque dynamic often makes for dull, pandering artworks. And it in fact perpetuates an assumed imbalance in the world: there are those who suffer, and those who do not and thus have the leisure to be convinced—via novels and films that produce empathy—that the sufferers matter."

Namwali Serpell, 'The Banality of Empathy', *The New York Review of Books*, 2 March 2019 (available online)

[keep it on for long enough for people to read]

“This grotesque dynamic,” Serpell writes, “often makes for dull, pandering artworks. And it in fact perpetuates an assumed imbalance in the world: there are those who suffer, and those who do not and thus have the leisure to be convinced—via novels and films that produce empathy—that the sufferers matter.”

When I spoke to Namwali, I asked her about the cause-and-effect model of imagining the relationship between literature and ethics—where literature is the cause, while the surge of empathy or other “moral” feelings is the effect of being in its presence.

SLIDE:

‘empathy as such is only one, heavily promoted, mode of ethical engagement. And, yes, I think it is intrinsically beset with a certain grotesque dynamic—that is, if you think that hierarchies of power are grotesque.’ Namwali Serpell

Namwali said (this conversation will be published in the next little while):

empathy as such is only one, heavily promoted, mode of ethical engagement. And, yes, I think it is intrinsically beset with a certain grotesque dynamic—that is, if you think that hierarchies of power are grotesque. Literature doesn’t create our capacity for empathy (or, really, identification and projection); our capacity for empathy allows us to create and read literature. And neither empathy nor literature is *necessarily* a form of moral action. To be clear, language *can* be active, *can* do things in the world, but that doesn’t mean all language-based forms do.

Empathy, Namwali said, ‘also does nothing to resolve the problem of incommensurable values’.

In the world beyond reading and writing, the foregrounding of empathy can often be one of the biggest barriers to justice, transformative politics, actual change, truth. In the world beyond reading and writing, empathy is often a dodge.

Audra Simpson, a Mohawk political anthropologist from the Kahnawake community in Quebec and a professor at Columbia University, talks about

SLIDE – *Thank you to Ro McCoy for introducing me to the work of Audra Simpson Ro, you are supposedly my student but who are we kidding?*

how in the interactions between settler states and their first nation's peoples, emotions are made to work a specified wound so that 'a show can go on', so we could have a better past and get on with it. Do I need to say that hackneyed little phrase, 'This sounds eerily familiar'? In settler states, empathy/affect/emotions have been doing the work of managing national histories and their legacies so that the foundational genocides can be left behind, in the service of what Simpson calls 'contractual thinking' which tries to neutralise or end all further claims of harm. Let's do this and be done with it, boys and girls.

Empathy, which often collapses into identification operates, Simpson say, as another 'field of force'.

And centering empathy is one of the most familiar moves in the settler innocence playbook, which should make us at the very least squeamish about using this term on our banners.

In summary (as they say), a) Australian nation doesn't care about writers. I mean this nation didn't and doesn't care about asylum seekers on shore and off shore. Not even about them. B) Australian nation and settler nationalism are deeply compromised categories. But there is a C there as well. C) Most Australian writers don't care about the nation of Australia either – the nation as distinct from the actual people and the actual places. The nation of Australia is not a horizon they are writing to, not an entity they are addressing in their work, not a subject-matter they are building up their powers to examine.

SLIDE: *Read Lauren Carroll Harris, 'The Arts Crisis and the Colonial Cringe', Kill Your Darlings, 15 October 2020, online.*

Most writers I know at least would put ten more adjectives in front of the word 'writer' to describe who they are before they get to 'Australian'.

SLIDE – *Part 2 – The Experiment. [Part 1 – The Argument]*

Part 2.

A public lecture or an address can be a violent form. ‘The lecture is always under threat of being vanquished in an instant by the intrusion of violence’, writes Mary Cappello.

SLIDE – *Mary Cappello, Lecture, Transit Books, 2020*

Cappello, who is a friend, says the lecture at its best – we can extend this to a public address – is fundamentally not about knowledge being put in the world, ta-ra-ra-ra. It is about suspending familiar forms of attention to allow other forms to wake – in the name of making possible access to different relationships to language, feeling, knowing, being. The lecture, as Cappello imagines it, encourages hover and drift and fogginess and dreaming.

Cappello also says, ‘as women we’ve still to take back the night, to say nothing of the lectern.’ Noted.

A lecture or a public address is potentially a displacing mode so, in this part – Part 2, I will attempt to displace it back, to counter-displace it, by contaminating it with another form – that of a census.

This year contamination feels like a useful mode of thinking and sharing that thinking. Going for tarnished forms and trying to make them do something they were emphatically not built to do.

A census is a mechanism for systematically capturing information about a population or a group in a specific, fixed moment in time. A kind of a needle puncturing the skin of a country or a community, a kind of a needle you drop on a moving record just so.

A census is of course another violent form

Slide: *So much violence everywhere...*

— part of the machinery of dispossession and erasure. Everyone knows that in Australia, before the 1967 referendum, our first nation’s people were not counted and the census mechanism is still used globally to undercount indigenous peoples and communities of colour for all kinds of political reasons but also because the fantasies of extinction do not die. Practices around counting are inextricably linked to systems of value and devaluation which are part of the slow violence, of the slow death inflicted on the marginalised.

To break the skin of both the public address and the census and to rub those broken bits together... To get familiar forms of representation and self-representation, often replete with violence, to go rogue... To abandon the usual rhetorical and polemical modes of claiming value, space, attention for an embattled and complicatedly diverse group in favour of creating experiments so as to make possible 'other forms of attention'.

That's the shopping list for me today.

How can a census as a form, treated loosely, without respect, attempted on a very small scale, useless statistically, ungeneralisable, forced into a public address, delivered orally, be used to talk about lives of writers – their bodies and their minds and their philosophies and epistemologies and the material conditions in which they live and write?

Lives! Namwali Serprell said in a conversation – not with me, I heard it somewhere, can't remember where – 'People chant Black Lives Matter but I see very little interest in actual black lives....'

Jeanine Leane, Wiradjuri writer, poet and academic from south-west New South Wales and a cherished colleague of mine at the University of Melbourne wrote some years ago, 'How can you [white writers] think about writing about us if you don't really know us?'

SLIDE – *Jeanine Leane, 'Other People's Stories', Overland 225, Summer 2016*

Lives in their perpetual movement towards expansion as opposed to the ever-shrinking forms of slogans, samples, takes, statistical tidbits. I mean, how many times can we hear that the average annual income of a writer from their work *as a writer* is 12 thousand something-hundred, give or take. The constant repetition of this seemingly startling fact – 12 thousand! that's hardly enough for the shoelaces! – has accomplished exactly nothing.

SLIDE – *It's time for non-representative samples, dirty data, small data, loose data, non-extractable data, data that cannot be mined*

There is another reason for screwing with the data-centric forms as opposed to just turning our backs on them. So many people in this country would never make it into any 'representative sample' because they don't consider themselves writers, not publicly anyway, and their annual income from writing would be a zero, or a five hundred in a very good year. Perhaps they are yet to publish anything. Perhaps they are yet to finish their first big work. Deciding you can write as your life pursuit, to call yourself a writer even to yourself – to get to that place if you don't come from privilege, you have to get past a dozen Minotaurs.

Perhaps you have not seen a single writer who looks like you. Money, time, class, deep responsibilities to your family (all the different generations), disability, illness, no one to tell you how good you are, no one to tell you that you don't need to go to university to become a writer; too many cliques, too many inner circles, gatekeepers with rosy cheeks, those endless 'well-attended' festivals and events, everyone knows each other; impenetrable.

This part of my talk is for you.

A couple of weeks ago I conducted a dirty census asking writers about their second last week in October.

SLIDE –

In the week between 19th and 25th of October:

- *How many hours did you spend on tasks to do with writing (this includes research, reading, watching, thinking, applying for funds, collaborations etc)?*
- *Can you estimate the ratio of your writing-work (in the broad sense) hours vs other-work (unpaid and care-giving absolutely included) hours for this particular week only?*
- *What were the material conditions for your writing work – where and how did you do it if you did do it?*
- *Did you engage in any other forms of sociality or solidarity with other writers?*
- *What felt most intolerable to you and what felt even just a little life-giving?*

[Keep it on the screen till the next slide]

I turned to writers I knew or knew of. I got replies from those writers who could spare the time and from those who were generous enough to give me the time they didn't have to spare. I will keep everyone anonymous because enough people asked me to and because I don't want to expose anyone inadvertently or, for that matter, engage in case-studyism. Beyond removing names, I removed most identifying details so that the game of trying to guess who is speaking couldn't be played. I selected and pulled out bits from responses to use, I combined responses from different people, but I did not edit or rewrite them.

I should say that First Nation's writers I had reached out to were too busy to respond.

I want to acknowledge their absence in an otherwise diverse range of non-representative responses.

In recognising that I am taking someone else's place by standing here, my response is to look for non-dutiful, non-pious forms of decentring myself through which I do not claim some kind of goodness or exemption.

Slide – *Do not absolve me.*

It's hard for a first-generation migrant to give up power because so many kinds of power feel fundamentally out of our reach. In seeking to decentre myself in this part of this address, I don't want to hide my power to wound, displace, name, accrue cultural capital through events such as this. It's very small power in the scheme of things but it's a big power too.

I have chosen to use the first person in writing up my rogue census. To break apart the 'I' and make it into something other than a singular and self-referential phallic little pole around which we wrap ourselves. To break it up and reconstitute it.

Slide – *'A word I hate to use in English is I. It is a melodramatic word.'*

Yiyun Li, Dear Friend, from My Life I Write to You in Your Life, Random House, New York, 2017

[Fade in and out]

From now on, it won't be me speaking most of the time. You need to hear through me and past me.

Do you want to know about my week? One week in my life. The week in which Melbourne is still in the lockdown, but not so the other states. Do you want to know about how and where I wrote this week?

In the second last week of October 2020:

I wrote from the kitchen table and kitchen chair with laptop propped up on a box and portable keyboard ditto to avoid stooping. I wrote sitting on my bed, laptop stacked on a pile of pillows, wearing noise-cancelling headphones, originally to block the drone of the factory behind our building. I wrote curled on the sofa with my shoulders hunched round me like a vulture. I wrote on a 2011 laptop that I'm going to need to max out the credit card to replace when it wears out (any minute now). My OT got me an old external keyboard from the hospital, but I've just been accepted to the NDIS and am hoping that will fund an external monitor. I wrote on my porch, at my desk, at my dining table, on my sofa, in bed. I wrote at playgrounds on my phone. I have the 'NOTES' app on my phone for all the grabbed fragments

where-ever. I finished writing an essay for a book coming out next year in an anthology, while my baby slept in the parked car and I worked on my laptop in the driver's seat. I wrote in a spare bedroom of my share house. The room is currently empty because someone had to leave for Covid reasons.

I wrote at the kitchen table in the flat which has no workspace separate to the living space; a part of me wishes we'd leased something with a second bedroom. A bigger part appreciates what this year is teaching me — this decade will see escalating shocks of many kinds. It will be important to be able to write under many different conditions.

Home office, public library, rented office space. I used to leave the house regularly to write in libraries or cafes when my partner looked after the kids. But since the lockdown there is no leaving the house, so not much writing. A lot of reading and thinking I did lying on or in my bed. I really disliked and disapproved of the fact that I would often still be in my pyjamas and big socks at 2 pm.

I would get up just before 5:30 in the morning and eke out some time before the kids wake. This only works because we moved to a house big enough they no longer get woken by the tap of my keyboard.

I have decided to rent a space outside my home for a day a week to see if that helps.

I rented an Airbnb apartment a few blocks from home. This was technically illegal under stage 4 lockdown. I knew there was no way I'd be able to turn over a project of this length and complexity at home without even a desk of my own. The rental property was being handled by a company, not an individual, so they took my money no questions asked. Plus, my GP wrote a note saying I was a basket case and "at risk" and needed seclusion— just in case I got a knock on the door. Hey, I was certainly at risk! But I was probably the most Covid-safe person in all Victoria during the 9 days I was in the apartment. I barely went out.

My desk is out in the shed, my 'studio'. It's a multispecies space – snails are slowly nibbling the least read books and spiders crawl across my screen at times. When it is cold and raining I work at the dining table, I put my computer at the bottom of my wardrobe at night when I finish writing.

I wrote at home, at my desk for writing I wanted to do, but had no time to do. The last nine months have been one long stretch where I have taught, and just taught online. More than 10 hours of Zoom facetime with students, add to that the time spent in preparing lectures, recording lectures, uploading lectures, trouble-shooting, setting assessments, marking assessments, providing pastoral care, all in all leading to a routine of hitting my desk at nine in the morning and not being able to go to bed before midnight on the good days. I feel myself after this 9-month

human-gestation period to have been turned into a mule, with all the racist/humanist insinuations of barren dumbness towards a load-bearing animal.

I wrote at my teenage son's desk with our dog sleeping in his bed under the two blankets, to the sounds of people next door renovating. It's so Australian to believe that home renovation will make death go away. Possum shit flew off their re-tiled roof onto our kitchen window, like the locust, turning our morning into the night.

I use the first person not to create a composite picture in which our differences are erased or overshadowed by the imagined unity of our purpose, struggles and lived experience (there is no unity!), not to strain towards something that might sound like a singular voice, but to complicate forms of self-identification available to writers – 'I', 'we', 'they'.

Slide – *Remember putting 'we' on notice earlier?*

Breaking 'I' in from the inside allows for a different kind of unflattened, vibrating plurality, when 'I' comes together and falls apart repeatedly to point to what is different and irreconcilable but also to create a web of connections – maybe not so much a web, but a mattress which can hold us if we fall from any serious height.

SLIDE:

- *In the second last week of October 2020, what choices and decisions – technical, aesthetic, political, philosophical, epistemological – did you find yourself contending with?*
- *In the second last week of October 2020, what thoughts can you remember having about being a writer as well as about writing in Australia and globally?*

(I should say that the next section does not have a single word that belongs to me.)

In the second last week of October 2020, I wondered what it meant to be an author 'in (medical) exile'. I wondered about the place of ghost stories, and about why I was writing one. I know that deep down this manuscript is a love letter to my country of birth, a letter that is filled with a melancholy, hurt & rage for a place that may never see me as a whole, but a place that I still long for as some kind of home. I wondered if writing a prose voice was like writing performance, and if it's performance, is it like drag? And if it's like drag, what is it doing with gender, other than pointing out that gender exists?

In the second last week of October 2020, I wondered how and whether to engage with friends whose politics have taken a weird turn during the pandemic. They seem lost in a wilderness of conspiracy theories. In the second last week of October

2020, I wondered about 'exiting' my current book project. Have I given enough to the topic, if I have taken the broad theme to a place that isn't cliché or shrill or just shit? Can I go now? I wondered if I should print out my manuscript. Is it a waste of paper? I think I hear the trees falling! When I worked as a graphic designer the link between the hand and the page was something I very much believed in. I suppose I was trained that way, to begin with a scribble.

In the second last week of October 2020, I wondered if writing historical fiction an act of imperialism, if made-up stories are still relevant, is it even possible to write landscape in this country without addressing the original apocalypse, the original solastalgia, the displacement and ecological loss of our indigenous people. I thought about the fancy way I might have written about my experiences – checking for positionality, trying not to turn a piece I was working on into a cipher for my own virtue. I thought about sentences, about making the work small. Last time felt like this huge, invigorating, wild, ridiculous juggle, and I cared about it deeply, yet the emphasis on ideas meant the sentences felt serviceable, and I wanted them to be more than that, this time. I wondered if I should prioritise short pieces that will earn me a small immediate income over long ambitious work that will give me nothing. I felt, for the twelfth week in a row, that my time on earth might be better spent helping support other people's creative projects than writing books of my own. Felt like I had taken more than my share. That I didn't want to participate in the economy of mediocre books and mediocre reviews and sad little online events.

In the second last week of October 2020, I considered the question of how much to say, how much is mine to say, how much is trespass, and how much of that trespass is necessary. I wondered, when I'm in a state of despair and don't believe in much of a future for anything, how do I write towards the future? Then, having written it, how do I speak of it with sincerity when I have so much doubt? Also, when is the time for words, and when do we head to the picket line? I thought obsessively about money. I worried about grammar and syntax, mostly. And trying to avoid hot air. The novel's sagging in the middle. What to cut? I tried to negotiate various speeds and abilities of using and collaborating on zoom for disability arts events.

In the second last week of October I thought that I'm glad my book is so far from complete that I don't have to try and get published right now. That it's been at least six months since I dedicated more than an hour at a time to writing. That I prefer reading. That there's not much good reading coming out of Australia right now. Or anywhere. Or maybe I've forgotten how to do good reading because there's nowhere to talk about it.

In the second last week of October, I had dark, Thomas Bernhardian thoughts about the dwindling funds for writers, the way the prize culture deforms the literary sphere, how small the writing world feels when we're cut off from the rest of the

world. I thought about a culture that demands 'Australian stories' as if to plug up the great big empty hole at its heart.

In the second last week of October 2020, I thought I am the slowest writer on earth! How is it possible to be so slow? I thought about how we write about uncertainty when uncertainty is ongoing. I spent time thinking about parochialism and small stories, local stories. Stories of place that happen in place. I thought that no one was in charge of the language. The language holds its enormous store of what-is-knowable. The writers just pan for some gold-dust. I thought that less and less do I care about being an Australian writer specifically or a global writer generally. I have always had high expectations of myself as *a writer* but correspondingly low expectations of what that might mean in the public sphere. It's a matter of self-preservation. The story of the arts in this country has always been that no, frankly, you're not important, and most people couldn't give a fuck.

In the second last week of October, after speaking with my mentor, I was uplifted and sustained and felt I had the most rewarding task in the world. I felt my work was important. I realised, yet again, how much better my work would be if I spoke Māori. In the second week of October, I wondered whether we need to rethink our notion of authorship, given how many of the books by settler-authors appropriately acknowledge the role of Indigenous community members in producing these books - but there's only one name on the cover. I thought about the racist history of the Australian Children's Book Council and how the books they awarded promoted white supremacist Australian nationalist identity. And how the NSW Premier Lit Awards has the Ethel Turner Prize for Young Ppl's Literature. Why? I thought a lot about how confining our conception of the writer as an individual is – how difficult it is to work/write collaboratively and have that recognised as artistic, especially when the collaborative writing is non-fictional.

In the second last week of October, I thought about how I had always carried anti-intellectualism and anti-creativity internally and how I struggle with this daily. When I sit down to write I have to contend with really toxic voices in my head that can, at times, completely flatten me. These voices have been amplified this year with the overt contempt shown by the government.

In the second last week of October, I had a dream in which I proposed taking every manifesto and reframing it so that it conveyed the opposite message. I woke up and realised we have to stop talking about what we as writers do and trying over and over to make the case for its importance (an old story) and instead draw attention to the self-mythologies of the people building chicken coops and making rendang while locking up children and praising the Lord and being a daggy dad while also refusing to give a detained man permission to hold the three year old son that he has never yet held.

In attempting an improvised, rogue census and in bringing it into this address, I have been looking for ways to speak of writers collectively by foregrounding different forms of socialities, reciprocities, entanglements, collaborations, dissents which usually pass under the radar.

I am thinking about infrapolitics writers participate in – political acts, gestures and refusals that pass beneath the threshold of the political.

SLIDE: *Guillaume Marche, 'Why Infrapolitics Matters', Revue française d'études américaines, Volume 131, Issue 1, 2012*

I am thinking about the infrapublics writers create – culturally undetectable forms of breathing and being together.

SLIDE*: [Keep moving through the slides marked with an asterix until done. I will be silent as you're going through this batch...]

Reading-Aloud Group. (My Job is to divide up the text we're reading into bite-sized sections and plan who's going to read which section)

Monthly 'book club' (we help each other solve craft problems and reflect on the influence of what we're reading on what we're writing)

I mentor. I am being mentored

Reciprocal reading and workshopping of drafts

Unions!

Supporting a writer-friend in an abominable situation of domestic abuse

SLIDE*

WhatsApp writers' group with writers who live in my local area

Attending rallies

The smallest gesture: I offered a writer that I know space to come and work at my house

3 per cent of my income goes to First Nation organisations

I did middle-of-the day babysitting for friends with a newborn to give the baby's mother a chance to sleep

SLIDE*

I collaborated with two writers to come up with the idea for a puppetry project

I'm collaborating with a couple of musicians; this work has startled my writing in many happy ways

I've been writing a long, collaborative pandemic poem with another poet over GoogleDocs - each of us writing a few stanzas, a few lines, every couple of days both in response to each other and to current events, big and small

I collaborate on a monthly book show / with a scriptwriter on TV drama / on an urban thriller with another author

I have an ongoing dialogue with a friend and collaborator where we vent about the institutional racism and other issues we experience

SLIDE*

I walk twice a week with a writer friend and her toddler. We punctuate our sentences with "whoosh!" as we push her daughter on the swing

I went for a walk with a friend who is an emerging writer and who has been feeling pretty down and isolated

I continued contact with some men in detention

I ran a writing group for women

I attended two Zoom book launches/discussions this week and found that Australians don't know how to talk about literature. Much of it is hyperbole and backslapping

SLIDE*

Weekly Friday night drinks online (we talk about motherhood and writing and life stuff and teaching)

Political study group

Zoom shut-up-and-write sessions

I organised a tight group of 9 people with the background, skills, discretion and motivation to support one endangered dissident

Lit awards judging duties

Fundraising

The idea of a writing 'community' strikes me as a wank

SLIDE*

I continued to do some work around the axing of the Vietnamese bilingual program at a local school

I've been badgering the NSW state government about the de-funding of Writing NSW

Calling and emailing politicians

Writing submissions

Collaborative drafting of a political statement/manifesto to be issued by a professional organisation pushing back on some recent govt bastardry. And there's so much bastardry, you won't be able to guess it.

Thinking with the help of infrapolitics and infrapublics might be an antidote of addressing the contempt of the nation, doing the camel work.

Slide: *Reminder: this is an anti-stupidity saying*

A way of speaking up for writers and readers.

Pulling apart seemingly calcified literary and non-literary forms, taking others with us through the gates, collaborating so that the logic of the singular, autonomous author is shaken...

This too could be a way for speaking up for writers and readers.

Prosopography is the Greek word for collective biography. Alexis Wright's *Tracker* is a collective biography

Slide: *Alexis Wright, Tracker: stories of Tracker Tilmouth, Giramondo Publishing, 2017*

– its subject, Tracker Tilmouth, is one person only, if a giant in his own right, if a visionary (Wright’s word, not mine), but in *Tracker* his life is being told by a collective of voices, each person speaking chosen by Tracker. ‘Let people have a say’, Tracker said to Alexis Wright. ‘Let them speak for themselves’. ‘A reasonable response’, Wright notes, ‘to a lifetime of confronting the legacy of our stories being told and misrepresented by others’. (12) ‘A Western-style biography’, she writes in the book’s introduction, ‘would never do for Tracker’ (7).

‘Nor would a biography do for someone who said he was like a virus that could spread anywhere and never be gotten rid of, or like a chameleon that could change into whatever anyone wanted him to be.’

That’s not what we can put in government submissions and on grant applications, but submissions and grant applications do not get to decide anything about who we are.

Final breath. []

Dear writers, just in case you are compelled by the idea of infrapolitics...

Shall we revolt against the logic of shortlists in which writers are pitted against each other?

Shall we bury the idea of the festival panel once and for all?

Shall we put on our book covers names of those who gave birth to us and showed us the world, but also of our editors – because we are sick of how so much work is made invisible?

Shall we stop translating non-English-language words?

Slide: *It’s happening! See The Australian Multilingual Writing Project:*
<https://australianmultilingualwriting.org/>

Shall we stop answering stupid questions during interviews and start singing instead?

Shall we make sure at least one unpublished writer is published on our watch each year?

Shall we go to our readers when they need us and read to them in hospital beds and on park benches (in a Covid-safe way)?

SLIDE – *Thank you. I am done.*