

What happens to women's voices during a pandemic? The impact of COVID-19 on women writers in Australia

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This paper presents the preliminary results of a study into the effects of COVID-19 on the ability of women writers in Australia to get their work written and published. In a context where feminist literary activism has made measurable improvements to the amount of attention women writers receive in Australia, we also ask: what happens to these gains when a global pandemic hits? We know the social effects of COVID-19 are disproportionately impacting women in terms of employment, finances, the home and education. What about the literary sphere?

Our project received a grant from the Australian National University's Gender Institute to investigate the gender implications of such impacts of COVID on Australian writers. It builds on an existing collaboration with nonprofit organisation The Stella Prize, with whom Melinda Harvey and Julianne Lamond have been collaborating on The Stella Count since 2014. This is a public project focusing on collecting statistics on the publication of book reviews across a range of Australian newspapers and review publications. Since it began, it has had a significant impact on the gender balance of Australian reviewing.

We are now collecting data to quantify the gendered impact of the pandemic across several interrelated groups of writers, including playwrights, literary critics, writers of fiction and poetry, and of academic literary criticism. We approach this in two ways: firstly, by expanding our data collection to include publication rates in literary journals and magazines (in which writers often first make their name publishing fiction, poetry or essays) and scholarly journals, where academic literary critics publish their work; and secondly, by conducting a qualitative, interview-based, study of the impact of COVID on women playwrights in Australia. In this paper, we present some early results of our data collection and interviews for 2019 to 2020.

While COVID diagnoses and deaths in Australia have not been on the same scale as in many other countries, this has been due in part to a range of restrictions that have significantly affected

Australia's economic, cultural and daily life. These have included an ongoing ban on international travel, strict border controls between states and territories and a series of state-wide and localised lockdowns. Responses to COVID have varied widely in Australia according to location. Some states maintained hard borders with the rest of the country and retained their pre-pandemic way of life (e.g. Queensland, Western Australia, although both have since had short sharp lockdowns in 2021), while Melbourne (the Victorian capital) faced one of the longest and strictest lockdowns in the world in order to quash a second wave of the virus. This saw Melbourne residents unable to leave their homes except for brief periods of exercise and shopping for essentials, school, shops and workplace closures, a curfew across Melbourne from 8 p.m. to 5 a.m., and a 5 km (3.1 mi) radius restriction on individual movement for almost four months.

The impacts of COVID in Australia have been disproportionately borne by women. Churchill, for example, argues that 'The disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has been so profound, particularly for women, that it threatens to upend the progress on gender equality in recent years.'ⁱ This is apparent in 2020 employment statistics, which saw 'rises in unemployment, underemployment and withdrawal from the labour force [which] were very significantly higher for women than men.'ⁱⁱ In the state of Victoria, 61% of all job losses between February and July 2020 were borne by women.ⁱⁱⁱ Despite the clear impact of COVID on employment in female-dominated industries such as hospitality and the Arts, COVID recovery spending by the federal government focused on male-dominated industries such as construction.^{iv} COVID's gendered effects are also apparent in the field of education, in which 'There were 86,000 fewer women enrolled to study [in Australian universities] in May 2020 than in May 2019, compared with just over 21,000 fewer men.'^v Meanwhile, women's responsibilities on the home front increased, especially when schools and childcare were closed. Surveys have found that women's unpaid labour, already higher than that of men pre-pandemic, has increased more than that of men.^{vi}

The Arts is a sector of the Australian economy that has been significantly impacted by COVID-19; in terms of employment, its losses are second only to the hospitality industry.^{vii} As noted in one submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Government's response to the pandemic, 'In non-COVID times, the arts sector was already in crisis. COVID has devastated it.'^{viii} Literature was an already vulnerable sector of the Arts economy; the annual income of a contemporary writer in Australia averages \$12,900 (that's about £7,140), which means that they rely on additional precarious forms of employment, including university teaching and literary journalism.^{ix} Literature received only 7% of Australia Council of the Arts funding in 2018-19, the lowest percentage of any art form.^x The impact of COVID-19 on Australia's Arts sector has been compounded by a set of funding announcements, most notably the cessation of Australia Council funding for literary journals including *Australian*

Book Review, Overland and the *Sydney Review of Books*, theatre companies including La Mama, St Martins and Polyglot theatres, as well as the Sydney and Brisbane Writers Festivals.^{xi} Literary festivals and journals are an important source of income for writers in Australia, and playwrights' livelihoods likewise depend on theatres to produce their work. The university sector has suffered from dramatic losses due to a drop in international student income; this has been compounded by the Australian government's failure to offer a support package for the tertiary sector.

The Australian Society of Authors has noted 'an immediate loss of income from cancelled appearances at schools, libraries and festivals; cancelled promotional tours and launches; cancelled or deferred workshops through the State and Territory Writers Centres (a significant employer of writers through their workshops); and the evaporation of casual work as teachers in schools and some universities which many authors use to supplement their income.'^{xii} They express a particular concern for the new and 'midlist' authors who are 'under huge pressure reporting fewer publishing opportunities, lower advances, the impact of COVID on event income, a contraction of freelance opportunities [...] There has always been a long tail in publishing but our concern is that the tail is growing even longer and thinner than ever.'^{xiii} Writers have made similar comments. Novelist Claire G. Coleman, for example, notes how small the margins are for freelance writers: 'so losing any money at all is really dramatic.' Coleman, a Wirlomin Noongar woman from Perth, notes particular concern for First Nations writers: 'We're only a very small segment of the industry, and except for the few big names, everyone is very new ... and we've already had it difficult, so that means the loss of momentum will hit us harder.'^{xiv}

1. Gender and periodical publication in Australia, 2019-2020.

We note at the outset that the data analysis presented here is provisional. To date, we have collected data on work published in 27 journals for 2019 and 19 journals for 2020, including information about gender of author and subject, form, publication, and title. At the completion of the first stage of data collection in late February 2021, the remaining 8 journals we had chosen to survey had not yet published their 2020 issues. Several have been published since then. This delay in publication is a first obvious index of the impact of COVID on the publishing sector. We note that most of these are academic journals, and speculate that this delay is a combination both of low submission rates and of increased pressure on the workforce behind academic journals – for example, referees (see Bell and Green on the 'referee problem' that existed before COVID and surely has been exacerbated by it) and editorial staff who are under increasing pressure due both to increased teaching and service workloads and from the pressure of working from home. Twenty (75%) of the journals in our count are edited by women; four (15%) by men and three (11%) by male/female teams. Journal editing,

while once seen as prestigious, is now rarely accounted for in academic workloads and is a service role that academics usually undertake in addition to their existing workload. In non-academic journals, the work of editing is often unpaid or paid at a token level. This work is largely being undertaken by women, and given what we know about women's increased caring loads during the pandemic, it's remarkable that so many of these journals continued to publish over this period.

Our preliminary findings have been surprising. We expected to find women underrepresented, especially in the scholarly journals. This was not what we found. We found that women outnumbered men as authors across almost every journal and every form of writing in 2019 and 2020: across all of the publications for both 2019 and 2020, 62% of works are authored by women and 36% by men. The only shift overall was that the percentage of nonbinary authors represented rose from 1 to 2%. We expected to see a drop in publishing generally, but what we seem to have found is more that there has been a delay in publication, especially in academic journals. The journals that did continue publishing during the pandemic largely published as much as they had the previous year. Only four of the 27 journals published more works by men than by women in either of these years:

Affirmations: of the modern, Colloquy, Script and Print and the *Sydney Review of Books* (although we would note that *Sydney Review of Books* published more women than men in 2020). The data indicates the impact of grant funding on publication volume: *Liminal*, for example, received a grant from the City of Melbourne resulting in a 33% increase in the number of works published.

Bell and Green have noted the complexity of the impact of COVID on scholarly publishing. While essays and anecdotal accounts claiming that COVID was 'tanking research productivity' for women circulated widely online, as Bell and Green note, 'among the many uncertainties of the COVID-19 pandemic, one clear outcome has been an incitement to publish...The net effect has been an extraordinary proliferation of research and commentary on the pandemic.'^{xv} Our data does not show an increase in academic publishing in literary studies during the pandemic. Counting only the journals for which we have data for both years, the number of works published remained stable: 297 in 2019 and 296 in 2020. The number of articles dropped by 15% from 154 in 2019 to 132 in 2020, while the number of reviews in academic journals rose by 10%, from 131 to 144. There does seem to have been a gendered impact on publication in academic literary studies journals in 2020: the percentage of works by women dropped overall in these journals, from 63% in 2019 to 58% in 2020. This is borne out by the one set of submission data we have available: scholarly journal *Australian Literary Studies* saw submissions by women drop significantly between 2019 and 2020. In 2019, 38% of *ALS* submissions were by women. In 2020, this dropped to 25%. Despite this, publication rates in this journal sit at 50% women, 50% men across this period. Julieanne Lamond is one of the

editors of this journal and can confirm an editorial imperative towards gender balance at least at the level of the issue.

While academic publishing in literary studies in Australia would seem to suggest a negative impact of the pandemic on publishing rates, fiction publishing in Australian periodicals would seem to support Bell and Green's assertion of a COVID-related proliferation of publication. The number of works of fiction published in the journals for which we have data for both years increased from 86 in 2019 to 132 in 2020. This is largely, but not entirely, due to a special issue of creative writing practice journal *Text* that responds to exactly the kind of imperatives noted by Bell and Green: short, immediate creative responses to the pandemic as it unfolded.^{xvi} Other publications also increased their fiction output between 2019 and 2020, including *Island*, *Kill Your Darlings*, *Peril* and *Westerly*.

Our key finding thus far into the role of journals in relation to women writers in Australia is that they are important. Journal and magazine publication in Australia - across fiction, poetry, nonfiction and reviewing - is a space in which women writers are able to be heard, and have continued to do so during the pandemic. While this is not what we expected to find, it is an important finding in terms of advocating for the ongoing survival of these periodicals in an extremely unstable funding environment. These journals play important roles in women's careers and livelihoods: for academics, journal publication is vital to employment and promotion; for writers and critics, journal publication provides income (contributions to non-academic journals are almost always paid) and opportunities for exposure and readership. As noted above, freelance writers increasingly rely on such income when other avenues for employment have dried up during COVID.

While we don't have longer-term data to know whether the important role of women in these journals is a recent phenomenon, we do know that literary magazines (especially those that publish creative writing, and especially newer publications) currently represent a diversity that is not apparent in our publishing industry or in more established review publications like *ABR*. In relation to the publication of nonbinary writers, the charge is being jointly led by newer journals (*Peril*, *Archer*, *Liminal*), established ones (*SRB*, *KYD*) and those that have long been part of the Australian literary landscape (*Overland*, *Westerly*, *Meanjin*). More research is needed to understand the role of these journals in creating spaces for ethnic and racial diversity, although it is important to note that some journals have been established specifically to address the whiteness of Australia's literary culture (*Liminal*, *Mascara*, *Peril*), and others have led the way in fostering new and diverse voices (*SRB*). The range of writers publishing in these journals - 1,259 authors were published in these 27 periodicals in 2019, and 1198 in 2020 - suggests their importance to new and midlist writers in terms of attaining publication and making an income.

Our key finding in relation to academic journals is, in the first place, that they constitute a tiny fraction of the writing about books that happens in Australia. In 2019 there are 280 pieces of literary criticism/reviews published in scholarly journals, compared to 700 in general/crossover journals, and an additional 3,000 in review publications and newspapers. Works of literary criticism published in Australia each year total 3,980. Less than 1% of this is published in academic journals (though we would note that academics also publish in other journals).

Works published in Australian scholarly journals are evenly distributed between male and female authors, although the drop in submissions by women to academic journals may see a dip down the line in terms of publication. Academic literary criticism has not seen the effect noted by Bell and Green: there has not been an explosion of scholarly work in Australian literary studies responding to the pandemic – at least not yet. Given the temporality of scholarly publishing, works submitted in 2020 may not be published until the following year. We will be collecting 2021 data which should give us a clearer picture.

2. Australian Women Playwrights and their Experiences of the COVID-19 Pandemic

This section of our study involves interviews with Australian women playwrights about their professional practice and broader experiences during COVID-19. This methodology has been chosen in order to give women playwrights an opportunity to talk freely on questions pertaining to theatre in Australia at this time. Through analysis of interview responses, we seek to improve understandings of: the kinds of challenges and opportunities COVID has provided women in theatre (and particularly playwrights), how Australian theatre is responding to the new circumstances and what resources women writers need to continue to thrive in the industry in 2021 and beyond.

A pilot interview ‘series’ was conducted in March 2021. Participants were three Australian women playwrights who agreed to be identified for research purposes. Alana Valentine is a well-known Australian playwright with more than 20 years professional experience. Alana works across mainstage and community theatre, a ‘conscious choice’ she makes in her playwriting. She is based in Sydney and identifies as both a ‘woman playwright’ and lesbian. Alana makes a living from her playwriting practice. Michele Lee is a Melbourne based playwright who has been writing professionally for 12 years. She describes herself as ‘an independent artist [who] sometimes works with companies. Michele has maintained a ‘desk job’ throughout her professional practice, though prior to COVID-19 had taken a year’s leave to determine the viability of pursuing playwriting full time.^{xvii} Michele identifies as an Asian-Australian woman playwright, is in a hetero’ relationship and is primary caregiver to a four-year-old son. Emilie Collyer is another Melbourne-based playwright. Like Michele, she works both independently and in connection with local theatre companies. Emilie identifies as a woman artist in a

hetero' relationship. Her partner is a fellow artist. She has more than 20 years professional experience and began a PhD in Practice-led Research in 2020.

The three playwrights interviewed were recruited by email invitation and participated on a voluntary basis. Playwrights were given questions designed to capture their observations and experiences during COVID. Although the individual circumstances of these women playwrights varies, their interviews highlight a number of key experiences, observations and concerns. It is worth noting that Emilie and Michele, being Melbourne based, experienced a more severe lockdown during COVID-19 following a second wave of infections and 112-day lockdown imposed by the Victorian state government. All three playwrights were also directly impacted by the closure of Australian theatres throughout 2020. Alana explains that as a working playwright 'you're usually working on a number of projects at a time.'^{xviii} For her, the closure of theatres and festivals meant the cancellation or postponement of 5 scheduled projects, along with school visits (a number of her plays are on the NSW High School Curriculum). Likewise, Michele had multiple projects cancelled, including a show already 'in previews' with Melbourne's Red Stitch theatre company.

A common impact of COVID has been the need to reimagine arts projects. For Emilie, the planned creative development of her play *Super Perfect* (also with Red Stitch) went online with a reduced timeframe; pre-COVID, such developments were conducted in-person through a workshop with actors. Alana and Michele also engaged in reimaged or COVID-adjusted versions of previously planned developments. Alana explains:

'I work as a dramaturg with Bangara Dance Theatre and Stephen Page elected to continue our dramaturgical sessions with the designer and the composer because Bangara works in a more – you know it doesn't start with the writer and then go to the director it – all of the creatives work together – we did work all through that period – March, April, May, June, July, sort of – mostly meeting every week to create a work that was supposed to premiere in the Sydney Festival 2021 but was cancelled and it's sort of been moved to 2022 though there are some questions around that.'

Project cancellations and postponements have had financial implications for all three playwrights, though they are quick to say that their circumstances are more 'fortunate' than other artist colleagues. For Michele, one impact of COVID was the decision to return to her desk job as playwriting could not, at this time, be a viable source of income. 'If COVID hadn't happened,' she reflects, 'then maybe I would have had a different sense of risk.' Emilie attributes her sense of financial security during this time to having a part-time job and the fact that she has begun her PhD. However, she voices ongoing concern for artists whose livelihoods depend on their practice. She says, 'I think that in some ways *this* year [2021] may end up being more challenging than last year.' Emilie also worries about what was at

the time of interview the pending termination of JobKeeper benefits, which was a federal government scheme to support businesses in retaining their staff that ended on 28 March 2021. ‘What is going to happen? Like, that safety net is in a way more important this year and it’s just about to disappear and I think it's quite scary.’^{xix}

Concern for artists with livelihoods affected by COVID was a common interview theme. While Michele and Alana acknowledge the provision of COVID-specific arts grants, they both question how this process was executed. Michele explains that she was among those who jumped at the opportunity to apply for money that became available as Arts Relief. She secured three grants, but admits she felt slightly frustrated by the amount of energy it took to apply for ‘small pots of money.’ She also notes that ‘other artists may have been just a bit depressed and overwhelmed and, you know, they didn’t want to put their hand up to do all this unpaid labour to create ideas and maybe get [the grants] or not.’ Alana expands upon this, explaining how artists during COVID have been required to compete with one another for grant money. She says

I noticed that there were a lot of public institutions ... for instance, the Australia Council or others who had these COVID grants – and COVID opportunities – and so what a lot of writers had to do, including women writers, was sort of take the time and energy to respond to those opportunities. You didn’t want to *not* respond to those opportunities, and at the same time – and I don’t want to go off on a tangent here but I do feel quite strongly about this - I felt that the whole notion of making writers compete for COVID opportunities was somehow morally very dubious. ... You know, I’m not condemning it, I’m not saying that they didn’t do what they *could* or whatever, it just threw up for me this notion that in those moments of crisis, the pact that you make with your society, which is that, you know, this is a voluntary way of being sorted according to supposed merit, becomes much less clear as a way forward for artists and the arts and I think the COVID situation really exacerbated that for me ... There were people who were talking about that, who were saying this threw into relief that the companies could protect their staff, their box office, their admin staff but couldn’t actively, whether they wanted to or not, protect their freelance writers, directors, designers, costume makers and all of that, and suddenly the institutions that did fund those people were *still* asking them to compete with each other and it felt to me extremely questionable, as a model.

In the interests of concision, we have summarised further analysis of the interviews as follows:

On the subject of how women in particular have been affected by COVID:

- All three playwrights speculate that women in caring positions, particularly those caring for children, would have experienced greater workloads, including ‘mental load’ during COVID-19. Michele encountered some of this first-hand, particularly during the second-wave lockdown in Melbourne as she had returned to her ‘desk-job’ during isolation whilst caring for her four-year-old son and trying to meet artistic deadlines connected with her adapted playwriting projects.
- Michele notes the concurrent influences of other events that coincided with the COVID pandemic, specifically the Black Lives Matter movement that had begun in June 2020 in the US. In Australia, as Michele points out, the unfolding of the Black Lives Matter movement contributed to ‘more conversations among people of colour and Indigenous artists kind of talking – not so much about Black deaths in custody – it wasn’t so much conversations here about people dying at the hands of the police – but the conversation in the Arts was about institutional racism. So I feel like there was a shift in more people of colour saying ‘we don’t like the systemic racism in the arts.’ So there was kind of more calling to account of companies and in the screen sector as well. So there was that kind of layer going on which I guess made me in a way more broadly – and I’m still grappling with it – it’s like ‘what is the work to make right now?’ and also ‘what is the way to make work so that I’m not perpetuating internalised racism and then internalised misogyny?’ Michele expresses her feeling of responsibility, as an Asian-Australian artist, to engage with these issues, and a sense that they came to the fore for her throughout 2020.

On the subject of innovations and unexpected positives of COVID:

- Benefits of a less cluttered schedule during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Emilie wonders whether returning to the ‘new normal’ will be challenging now that commuting and the return to in-person artistic processes will place more demands on her time. On the other hand, Alana notes that the perception of ‘more time’ can be misleading as one can realistically only spend so much time per day writing. The perception that more time has been available during COVID did not necessarily translate into more productive writing time.
- There is mutual agreement that while technologies like Zoom have been enormously helpful in creative developments during COVID, this has not led to any revolutionary shifts in thinking among theatre makers about the nature of their art. The three playwrights interviewed reported anecdotally that most theatre makers are ultimately waiting to return to the theatre where they can, once again, resume face-to-face collaborative practice.
- Alana notes a renewed awareness among people she has spoken to about the value and significance of the audience as an active and communal part of theatre (and theatre making)

- Online technology, while unlikely to revolutionise theatre practice itself, has opened up new ways of sharing work beyond local boundaries. It seems likely, Emilie posits, that in future artists will continue to collaborate online (during the development of works) in ways they did not pre-pandemic.

Conclusion

Our preliminary findings suggest that COVID is posing challenges to literary practice and livelihood in Australia, and that while women are bearing the brunt of this in terms of employment and increased unpaid workloads, they are continuing to write, research, edit, publish, collaborate and produce work. When our 2020-21 data collection is complete we will have a clearer sense of the shape of COVID's impact on Australian women writers, but for now our research draws attention to the continuance of women's creative work in the face of incredibly trying circumstances.

ⁱ Brendan Churchill, 'No one escaped COVID's impacts, but big fall in tertiary enrolments was 80% women. Why?' *The Conversation* 23 November 2020.

ⁱⁱ Lyn Craig. "Coronavirus, Domestic Labour and Care: Gendered Roles Locked Down." *Journal of Sociology*, vol. 56, no. 4, Dec. 2020, pp. 684–692, doi:10.1177/1440783320942413.

ⁱⁱⁱ Madeleine Morris, 'Victoria's COVID-19 roadmap favours men as women bear brunt of job restrictions, analysis shows.' *ABC News Breakfast* 9 September 2020.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Churchill, 'No one escaped.'

^{vi} Craig.

^{vii} Brendan Coates, Matt Cowgill, Will Mackey and Tony Chen, "Shutdown: estimating the COVID-19 employment shock." *Grattan Institute Working Paper No. 2020-03*, April 2020. <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Shutdown-estimating-the-COVID-19-employment-shock-Grattan-Institute.pdf>, p. 20; Jo Caust, "Coronavirus: 3 in 4 Australians employed in the creative and performing arts could lose their jobs." *The Conversation* 20 April 2020. <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-3-in-4-australians-employed-in-the-creative-and-performing-arts-could-lose-their-jobs-136505>

^{viii} Australasian Association for Theatre, Drama and Performance Studies, "Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Australian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic." https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/COVID-19/COVID19/Submissions

^{ix} Jan Zwar, David Throsby and Thomas Longden, "Australian Authors: Industry Brief No. 3: Authors' Income." Macquarie University. https://research-management.mq.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/122625541/3_Authors_Income.pdf

^x Australia Council for the Arts, *Valuing the Arts: Annual Report 2018-2019*. <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/workspace/uploads/files/australia-council-annual-repor-5dca054eeeafcf.pdf>

^{xi} Brooke Boland, "Literary magazines 'radically overlooked' by Australia Council." *Arts Hub* 14 April 2020. <https://www.artshub.com.au/news-article/news/covid-19/brooke-boland/literary-magazines-radically-overlooked-by-australia-council-260176>

^{xii} <https://www.asauthors.org/news/asa-submits-to-select-committee-on-covid-19>

^{xiii} <https://www.asauthors.org/news/asa-survey-results-author-earnings-in-australia>

^{xiv} <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-29/coronavirus-covid-19-australian-writers-livelihoods/12093816>

^{xv} Kirsten Bell & Judith Green (2020) Premature evaluation? Some cautionary thoughts on global pandemics and scholarly publishing. *Critical Public Health*, 30:4, 379-383, DOI: [10.1080/09581596.2020.1769406](https://doi.org/10.1080/09581596.2020.1769406)

^{xvi} <http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/Issue58.pdf>

^{xvii} Michele Lee (2021) "ANU Women Writers and COVID" Interview with Bec Clode, 16 March, 2021. Via Zoom.

^{xviii} Alana Valentine (2021) "ANU Women Writers and COVID" Interview with Bec Clode, 26 March, 2021. Via Zoom.

^{xix} Emilie Collyer (2021) "ANU Women Writers and COVID" Interview with Bec Clode, 25 March, 2021. Via Zoom.