

Editors' Introduction

Bold women write back

On the 20th of January this year, the American people ushered in a serial misogynist as President of the so-called free world. A known womaniser, an alleged rapist with a long list of women accusing him of sexual harassment and a public record consisting of a tirade of derogatory remarks about women, Trump's sexism is incontestable. Further, his various positions and policies—from the Mexican wall and the Muslim travel-ban, to his stand against undocumented immigrants and his commitment to repeal Obamacare, among many others—stand to adversely affect society's most vulnerable. As we watched that election take shape from across the Pacific we felt as if we were powerless bystanders witnessing a fateful and horrific collision unfold as a nightmarish slow-motion spectacle. The implication was clear: hard-won gains for women worldwide risked slipping backward, precipitously.

On the same day, street artist Shepard Fairey released a new poster series to protest President-elect Donald Trump. *We the people* featured powerful portraits of Native Americans, African Americans, and Latinas with slogans such as "Woman are perfect," and "Defend dignity." Just weeks later, on the 8th of March, International Women's Day launched their 2017 campaign, *Be bold for change*, calling for women across the world to rise up and be bold in fighting gender inequality, stereotypes, and all forms of oppression. There was a sense around both of these events that women were being called upon to rise up, and we saw in Fairey's work a challenge to artists to do so in ways that also championed women.

These events inspired our Special Issue, *Bold women write back*. During the 1990s, hot on the heels of the publication of Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), bold claims were made for the power of literature to "write back" to various forms of political, social, racial, and gendered oppression. But by the end of the first decade of the millennium, some began to question those bold claims, and to ask if bold writing actually did translate to bold action. As writers and scholars of literature, we wondered, how does writing matter now? Can writing take a stand and make a difference? Does simple storytelling actually deliver?

Over the course of the year, stories did begin to emerge in ways that demonstrated bold acts of courage. A number of whistle-blowers brought media attention to the magnitude of violence against women on a global scale. The social media campaign #metoo unleashed an outpouring of brave testimonies by women sharing their personal stories of sexual assault and harassment. As this issue took shape across 2017, we watched everyday women engaging in bold acts of storytelling, and truth-telling, for change.

In this issue, scholars and creative writers have addressed the issues of writing back, of the relevance of literature to make bold claims for social change, and of gender inequality both in the world and in the field of writing. They are diverse voices that remind us of the power of second wave feminism, but which also suggest the power of third wave intersectionality.

All but three of our contributors to this issue are women, but as Sarah Holland-Batt astutely observes, in light of the Stella count and attempts to support gender equality in publishing, we should be careful to make clear that they are not *merely* women writers. The writers and scholars in this issue present the best new and emerging writing and scholarship on a range of issues.

The creative works speak to the resilience of women in the face of physical and symbolic—and sometimes largely invisible— structural violence. They question binary, rigid definitions of what it means to be a woman in favour of fluid understandings of gender. They serve to remind readers that questions of class, race, place and imperialism shape the experiences of women. Florence Boulard's poem, "She is From the East," points to the way women's stories from the Pacific are often elided in Western narratives. The poem invites readers into the speaker's vision of Pacific women as powerful, political, sensual and spiritual beings, and speaks to the enduring cultural wealth the region has to offer. Srinjay Chakravarti's "Tongue" literally evokes this bodily organ of speech. The poem re-tells the story of the legendary figure of Khona, a poetess and astrologer who lived in Bengal around the ninth to 12th century, whose powerful narratives invited violent punishment, but whose stories still speak back. Laura Kenny's "Cracks" depicts an intergenerational relationship between women. The magical powers that the speaker's grandmother gifts to the speaker are treated with a reverent dubiousness. The poem depicts the ways such powers traditionally associated with women are feared and dismissed, creating rifts between generations.

The stories contained in this issue demonstrate the ways that women navigate geographical isolation, family expectations and responsibilities, and anxieties over body image, and the ways that, for these women, education and work holds deep significance in their lives; for Christina Yin, these women's narratives are a source of inspiration. Her work of creative nonfiction, "Bold Indigenous Women Working for the Conservation of Orangutans in Sarawak, Borneo," contrasts the lives of three Malaysian women working in the Wildlife Conservation Society's Malaysian program, one of the few programs whose conservation work is led by non-Western researchers. Laura Kenny uses the fictional form and the affordances of metaphorical language in "A Fear of Not Flying" to express the trauma of childhood abuse. Kenny reflects on the ways that fiction has allowed her space to tell such narratives, but wonders whether this could be considered a bold act. Samantha Trayhurn's "Island" seeks to speak back to dominant crime narratives that sexualise dead women's bodies, and rely on the flattening of women characters to a mere plot point, by centring a trans woman as the victim in a crime story, reflecting the reality of violence towards trans people. "Island" also speaks to postcolonial concerns of Western tourism in the Philippines. Victoria Kuttainen's "This is Rape Culture, Ladies and Gentlemen," evokes a subtle atmosphere of menace to draw attention to the invisibility of rape culture on University campuses and beyond. Lizbette Ocasio-Russe's

“Sam” offers agency to the trans woman at the centre of the narrative, who navigates structural oppression and everyday judgement with flair and humour. In Sally Breen’s gritty “Once Upon a Time was Last Night,” the narrator engages in a series of casual encounters, turning the tables on the label “slut” by using her sexuality as a mode of resistance. Yet, the hazy edginess of these moments suggests the tensions inherent in such acts. The creative works demonstrate the ways narrative can speak to the diversity and complexity of women’s experiences, and the ways structural oppression is both internalised and resisted.

In essays by Sarah Holland-Batt and Katherine Bode, the visibility of writing by women and the status as well as category of “women writers” is questioned. Leigh Dale’s exploration of reader responses to a string of narratives about the violence and systemic failures inherent in the tropical North Queensland Aboriginal community of Palm Island brings the question of the impact of literature to the fore. So too does Carole Ferrier’s wide-ranging exploration of “Asian Australian” women’s writing and its present status within a globalising but questionably ‘post’-multicultural Australia. Alexandra Philp’s exploration of the trope of the creek within the context of a by now well-established genre, the Australian gothic, considers the ways in which contemporary narratives, by writers Gillian Mears and Jessie Coles, may be seen to deploy the trope in ways that evolve out of Barbara Baynton’s colonial writing.

Ranging across the Pacific and beyond, Robyn Johnson’s article draws attention to the now largely overlooked but once famously radical nineteenth-century American writer Lydia Maria Child, whose historical novel *Hobomok* (1824), detailing the marriage of a white woman and a Native American man, shocked audiences in its day. Johnson considers Child as an activist and a proto-feminist, and directs attention to the cultural and political work she may have been undertaking through her deployment of the “masculine sentimental.” Laura Wright’s article also asks scholars to consider re-reading J.M. Coetzee’s well-known “writing back” novel *Foe* (1986), generally understood as a response to Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), as a novel that also provides some literary restitution of Defoe’s debt to Eliza Haywood. Purnur Ozbirinci takes us beyond the America’s and beyond the Anglo-American scene, to think about more complex forms of intercultural writing and re-writing, in her discussion of the Turkish translation of Sam Shepard’s *Curse of the starving class* (1977) by the Turkish feminist writer Pinar Kür.

Together, these scholarly and creative contributions, as well as our book reviews that showcase sharp-minded and vibrant literature from Australia and overseas, focus on a complex regional and globalising world, in which writing of so many kinds still rewards readers, by widening understanding, and opening up dialogue for change.

Thank you for reading. Thanks too, to our contributors. And thanks to our patient, hardworking, and dedicated editorial assistants, Wayne Bradshaw and Jonathan Kuttainen. Lastly, a special thanks goes to our poetry editor, Dr Siall Waterbright, for her careful and generous editorial advice.