IMPACT STUDY
NATIONAL YOUNG WRITERS' FESTIVAL

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NATIONAL YOUNG WRITERS' FESTIVAL IMPACT STUDY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The National Young Writers' Festival (NYWF) is Australia's premier gathering for young writers, held annually in Newcastle, NSW. Established in 1998, it brings together writers and arts professionals under 35 for four days of transformative events. The festival aims to provide a joyful and radical experience for young Australian writers, fostering a sense of community, networking opportunities, and a safe environment in which to take risks with literary form and performance.

In 2022, the NYWF celebrated its 25th year, demonstrating its enduring impact on Australia's literary landscape. Through a literature review and interviews with NYWF participants, this study aims to gauge the festival's enduring contribution to Australia's literary landscape. Qualitative analysis of the interviews revealed the following themes: the NYWF's distinctiveness compared to other literary festivals; a sense of community; the influence of the NYWF on career trajectory; and the importance of Newcastle as a location.

Covid-19 brought challenges in terms of disrupting leadership channels, but also benefits through accessibility and audience numbers. Looking to the future requires deftness in navigating an insecure funding landscape, and the need to secure support for a vital component in a literary ecosystem that grows Australia's future writers.

Authors

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Dr Stuart Richards

Stuart's research focuses on screen-based creative industries and queer screen media. His first monograph, *The Queer Film Festival: Popcorn & Politics*, is published as part of Palgrave Macmillan's 'Framing Film Festivals' series, which looks at the queer film festival as a social enterprise and its growth in the creative industries.
His research has been published in established journals, such as *Senses of Cinema*, *New Review of Film & Television*, *Media International Australia* and *Studies in Australasian Cinema,* and in emerging publications, such as *Queer Studies in Media & Popular Culture*.

INTRODUCTION

The National Young Writers' Festival (NYWF) is Australia's leading festival and gathering of young writers. Established in 1998, the festival takes place on the land of the Awabakal and Worimi peoples in Newcastle, NSW. Each year writers and arts professionals under 35 years of age descend on Newcastle for four transformative days of events programmed for young writers. The festival's mission is to provide a joyful, radical and transformative bootcamp for young Australian writers, and a free and accessible national arts festival which acts as the convergence point for Australia's young, emerging and experimental writing communities. The NYWF creates dialogue between a diverse range of emerging, mid-career and experienced writers and artists, and champions new word-based art forms through performances, reading, workshops, and other interactive projects. It is aimed at an audience of creative practitioners and is their key nationwide networking event. The festival program is curated in consultation with emerging writing communities and is self-critical and peer reviewed, but emphasises DIY, open-access opportunities for all participants. It celebrates and amplifies the creative voice of a new generation of writers and artists and is festive, idiosyncratic, and at times radical.

The festival is volunteer-run by emerging arts practitioners and managers. The young staff ensure the NYWF remains relevant to young Australian writers. Artists are programmed, predominantly through a nationwide open callout, which brings a diverse range of voices and experiences to festival programming. The festival also hosts a Younger Young Writers' Program for writers aged 15 – 18, an annual zine fair, and has historically hosted the Student Media Conference (primarily a gathering of student university newspaper editors from across Australia).

The regional Newcastle location creates a neutral festival gathering, particularly outside the major networks of Sydney and Melbourne. Given around 90% of the audience/artist pool is from outside Newcastle, those who attend will stay over the four-day-long weekend, enabling a fully immersive festival experience. The festival draws on the sense of place of Newcastle, using a wide variety of venues through to the city's streets and beaches. Prior to Covid-19, the festival was held in conjunction with its sister festivals, Critical Animals and Crack Theatre Festival (and historically Sound Summit and Electrofringe). For two decades, these intersecting festivals made up the components of This is Not Art, a 'a not-for-profit arts organisation with a 25 year

history of supporting experimental and emerging artists in the Hunter region of New South Wales' (This is Not Art, 'About').

Since 1998, the NYWF has inspired young Australian writers, building a network of practitioners and artists through creative partnerships and capacity building. The festival fosters the early careers of talented voices; alumni include Benjamin Law, Matthew Reilly, Clementine Ford, Yassmin Abdel-Magied, John Birmingham, Marieke Hardy, Ben Jenkins, Michaela McGuire, Ellen Van Neerven, Zoe Norton Lodge, Lawrence Leung, Casey Briggs, Patrick Lenton, Jessica Alice, Rebecca Shaw and Marcus Westbury (who co-founded the festival).

In 2022, the festival celebrated 25 years. The festival has a rich history of establishing a young, evolving writing community and has helped establish connections, collaborations and career opportunities for young Australian writers. The NYWF plays a unique and central role in the Australian literary landscape, but due to the festival's limited financial resources and high turnover of staff (which is managed purposefully to keep leadership young and relevant to the community), only anecdotal evidence can be provided to suggest the festival's impact in Australia.

This study aims to formally investigate and examine how the festival has contributed to the literary landscape of Australia over the last 25 years. In particular, it focuses on the impact of the festival on creative practitioners and professionals; on the trajectories of key participants; on the way it fosters a supportive, national writing community; where it is placed in the young writer ecosystem; and its connection with the local environment.

RESEARCH METHODS

The research was conducted via a literature review on writing festivals generally and on the National Young Writers' Festival specifically. This literature is threaded throughout the report to provide context and reflection.

Following ethics approval from the University of South Australia, interviews were conducted with ten participants who were involved in the NYWF: Benjamin Law, Amanda Kerley, Anna Poletti, Bhakthi Puvanenthiran, Ed Wright, Jessica Alice, Jesse Oliver, Marcus Westbury, Tom Doig, and Alexandra Neill. The participants were recruited through suggestions from previous board members and through

recommendations from interviewees. Over recorded Zoom sessions, each was asked a series of questions (see Appendix). The recorded interviews were transcribed and coded according to pre-determined themes assigned at the commencement of the project.

The researchers then undertook a 'cut and sort' approach to thematic coding, where specific responses were cut and re-grouped according to key themes. This enabled the data (i.e. the responses) to systematically describe how the themes are distributed across interviewees (Ryan and Bernard, 2000, p. 9). Once the grouping of these responses was completed, the researchers coded the re-arranged text inductively so as the identify the themes across the participants. A separate interview was also conducted with Nik Beuret to obtain additional information on the festival's beginnings.

The main themes arising from the interviews are: the NYWF's distinctiveness compared to other literary festivals; a sense of community; the influence of the NYWF on career trajectory; and the importance of Newcastle as a location.

BACKGROUND

Literary festivals are festivals that 'incorporate literary culture into their constitution' (Weber 2018, p. 7). They celebrate literary culture, often occur at times of literary significance (for example, commemorating a significant literary anniversary) and they often address a specific community that is defined through engaging with literary culture (Weber 2018, p. 7). The Cheltenham Literary Festival in the United Kingdom marked the birth of literary festivals almost seventy years ago (Cheltenham Festivals, 2021). Since then, the number and popularity of literary festivals have increased, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s (Weber 2018, p. 5). The initial function of festivals as a medium for writers to meet has also expanded to cover a broad range of contemporary ideas and issues of interest to society (Stewart 2013, p. 263). This has enhanced their role as significant sites of public culture, creating a range of connections between authors, the media, and the wider public (Stewart 2009, p. 1).

Writers' festivals are broadly categorised as 'international' or 'peripheral' events. Festivals in major cities with a high level of 'literary capital' such as, Paris, Berlin, New York, Toronto, which also work as key junctions of global publishing business, are defined as 'international'. Those festivals held in cities with a small level of literary capital are

regarded as 'peripheral' (Stewart 2013, p. 265). While international writers' festivals try to brand 'literature' as a product for the elite by focusing mainly on 'literary' writing, the peripheral writers' festivals tend to focus on local issues (Stewart 2013, p. 271). The extreme focus on ideas and literature in the international festivals limits their potential to work as diverse sites of a contemporary public culture. Peripheral festivals, meanwhile, usually cover a wide range of subjects such as the local, the literary, broadly political, partly political, and celebrity (Stewart 2010, p. 10).

There are more than one hundred writers' festivals in Australia ranging from large international festivals to small peripheral ones (Moore 2018, p. 15). The NYWF is a peripheral festival, but has a number of characteristics that make it unique to other peripheral festivals, and which have been shaped by its roots in Newcastle.

The NYWF festival was established by Nick Beuret and Marcus Westbury in 1998. Westbury grew up in Newcastle, and in the mid 1990s, when youth unemployment was at approximately 40 per cent, 'a group of friends and co-conspirators each put $500 toward renting a warehouse and establishing an under-resourced, over-ambitious and unfunded arts and media collective, Octapod' (Westbury 2006, p. 51). Within a year, they had 'made a lot of things happen in Newcastle', including initiating a local multi-arts festival, running a recycling program to restore over three hundred bicycles, organising international speaking tours and hosting 'workshops on everything from the internet to non-violent protesting' (Westbury 2006, p. 51).

In 1996 and 1997, Westbury was the Internet Manager of LOUD, Australia's first youth media festival. A nationwide event funded by the Australia Council for the Arts, it offered Australians between the ages of 12 and 25 the opportunity to create and exhibit on radio, television, in print and online, and to be paid for their work. LOUD sought to 'give young people direct access to the mass media to present their media-based creative works' (Westbury 2006, p. 52) and aimed to 'redress the age imbalance in mass media production' (Pellow 1997, p. 13). It also allowed young people 'to have a say in the type of information that [was] presented but also the way in which it [was] presented' (Pellow 1997, p. 13). However, its top-down, government funded approach was a barrier. Westbury reflected, 'LOUD lacked the cred with young artists it desperately needed. It is almost a universal truth that the more an organisation strives to present a young face, the less likely it is to be in touch with and genuinely represent the interests of young people' (2006, p. 52).

Westbury coordinated the festival's online component, and as he travelled around the country he had a 'recurring sense of wouldn't it be great if they met each other. Like, I've met that group of people in Victoria and this group of people in New South Wales, this group of people over here, and there was no context that brought them together. And I think nowadays, that probably sounds a bit weird, because everyone is connected online, even if they're not connected physically, but at that point, there weren't really structures in place'.

Towards the end of his involvement with LOUD, Westbury read Mark Davis's *Gangland: Cultural Elites and the New Generationalism* (1999). Davis noted that there were few spaces 'in Australian media for people under the age of forty, or even fifty, to speak' (Chapter 2). While there was room for the 'comical etiquette column or the lifestyle column in a weekend colour supplement' it was as if young people did not have credible opinions, such was 'their general invisibility in the media and their lack of access to a wide "public"' (Chapter 2). To Westbury, *Gangland* was a 'revelation'. It illustrated that 'the culture and experience of my peers was legitimate, but was not – and not likely to be – validated by the mass media, as it did not correlate with their Boomer reference points' (2006, p. 53).

Nik Beuret notes that the idea of the NYWF came out of conversations between Westbury and Murray Armstrong, a writer at Macquarie University. With his experience of directing LOUD, Westbury established a 'youth-branded event', the key principle of which was that it should 'celebrate and validate the culture that young people occupied, not what was considered good for them or a waiting-room to welcome young people into the main game' (Westbury, 2006, p. 53).

In 1998 Westbury acquired funding 'to set up a digital network of young writers and have an event where they met each other … just reaching out to all of these communities of zine makers and publishers and writers'. The rationale behind this was to 'engage writers in pretty much any medium or form, taking zines, and self-published writers seriously … which wouldn't have had any place at all in a conventional literary festival'. Beuret recalled that he and Westbury 'roughly divided up space in the program and went about the sort of contacting people and inviting them in'.

The NYWF then came into being as a festival that:

> celebrated poets, novelists, zine-makers, filmmakers, comic artists, bloggers, self-publishers, squatters, media activists, pirate radio enthusiasts and scores of others

> who were occupying spaces relevant to the debates of our twenty-something lives. It was the first Australian event to treat electronic publishing seriously, and to put self-published comic artists on panels with award-winning novelists (Westbury, 2006, p. 54).

Westbury recalls that the first festival 'probably had a few hundred people come to it'. It was dedicated to the memory of Murray Armstrong, who died before the festival began.

In 2008, ten years after the festival's inception, the number of attendees had swelled to 4,700 (National Young Writers' Festival Inc., 2008). In 2020, the NYWF shifted online due to Covid-19, a move which resulted in the festival becoming the 'most attended and most accessible in its 23-year history, with 6641 views of festival events' (National Young Writers' Festival Inc., 2020, p. 4).

The festival's seeds in the grassroots organisation Octapod, and its deliberate focus on youth, grew into distinct facets of the festival. Other facets that manifested in the interviews with participants include: attention to young writers and their development; the blurring of the boundaries between artist and audience; the capacious definition of 'writer'; and the capacity for risk-taking.

THEMES

A DISTINCTIVE FESTIVAL

Respondent 3 observed that the NYWF is 'very different to other writers' festivals given the fact that it's run by young people'. Respondent 5 commented that a number of people were responding to *Gangland* as a call to action, 'you know, young people have been denied cultural capital. They should be given space and listened to. Let's claim that space. And there was quite a bit of "kick the old fogies out!" too. NYWF seemed radical at that time for being about young people, by young people, for young people, and asserting legitimacy'. Importantly, it allowed many young people to see themselves as writers for the first time. Respondent 3, for example, was 'about to finish high school' when they first attended the festival. They knew they 'wanted to write and work in creative spaces' but few options were presented to them (one included jewellery design at TAFE). For them to attend the NYWF, and meet people working in comics, or as comedians, or in television, was a revelation. They

commented: 'finding that community of people who were kind of wanting the same things, and also, there were just so many options, that it opened so many doors for me both personally and professionally. And that impact … I feel it every day of my life'.

Larger writers' festivals tend to appeal to an outward facing audience of non-writers. Defined as 'assemblages of in-the-flesh author interviews, talks, readings, panels, performances, workshops and, at times, behind-the-scene rights trading business, held over consecutive days' (Stewart 2013, p. 263), the status of writers' festivals are 'traditionally pegged against the festival bill's most prestigious literary author' (Stewart, 2013, p. 263). By contrast, the NYWF, in Respondent 1's words, 'is legitimately a festival for writers'. Respondent 1 continues, 'there's always a bit of conjecture about writers' festivals, because they have tools that feature writers, but they are really literary festivals. And the audience is mostly readers, so writers are a minority in the audience'. The NYWF's purpose, they add, is about developing writers, 'either as arts workers or as artists'. Respondent 8 thought the festival was 'much more for writers than for general mainstream audiences, you know, people wanting to engage with craft'.

The focus on developing craft is evident in the NYWF's programming. In 2011, panels included 'Getting Published,' 'Critiquing the Critics', 'Don't Press Send: Editor-Writer Relationships' and 'Hey, That's Mine! (Protecting Yourself in the Wide World of Intellectual Property)'. The 2015 festival featured a 'Nailing Sex Scenes Workshop', discussions on issues such as 'Press Freedom, Whistleblowing and National Security' and 'Up for Debate: Are Young People killing the News?', and panels on 'Women of Colour'. The 2019 festival's panels included 'Decolonise Academia' and 'Black/Indigenous/Women of Colour Closed Forum.'

Respondent 10 commented that the festival's closed forums allowed minority groups, such as transgender people or people of colour, to discuss topics relevant to their identity, such as tokenism. The forums allowed writers to 'come together as peers and say, we're being programmed this way, do we take the money? What's ethically the right thing to do? How do we approach our careers? Obviously, we want to make it as writers, do we go down this channel? We were able to actually talk to our peers and platform these ideas and concepts further than our work of just navigating a career in the arts as well.'

Respondent 10 also spoke to the NYWF's smallness as a factor in this support: 'I'm so passionate about accessible and safe community spaces. I think it's possible for big festivals to do that, but I don't think they know how'. While these larger festivals often 'present the

literature community to the wider community', they continue, the NYWF 'was by community for community.'

The NYWF's intimate and supportive atmosphere was generated by the blurring between audience and artist. Respondent 7 commented that the festival 'didn't really have much "audience" … almost everyone was a participant as well. Because there were so many events, and it's all free.' Respondent 6 stated that unlike the big festivals, which 'maintain a distinction between a writer and the audience', and gives the public 'access to writers', the NYWF 'gives writers access to each other. And it might do a couple of public facing things, but actually, it's about writers talking to each other'.

Respondent 3 reiterated this observation, suggesting that 'so much of the festival happens outside of the official programming. There's a really fine line between artist and participant in many ways, and a really even playing field.' This was related to the festival's programming, and in particular its readings. Respondent 3 noted that the readings were events 'where people can get up and share work, and you discover new people that you really like, and then often you'll have a drink with them later, and they'll become a friend'.

Related to the flexibility of roles offered by the NYWF is the flexibility of what defines a writer, or writing. Respondent 3 observed that the festival 'accepts writing in all its forms, you know, like, I've never written a novel, and most people who go to the festival have never written a novel. So it showcases writing in a really, really broad sense, which I think was something that I had never seen before'.

Respondent 6 affirmed this:

> I think that there's a lot of validation that comes from being able to turn up and call yourself a writer, even if you haven't published anything. What the festival offers, or at least in the versions that I was involved in, is a kind of authorisation. You don't have to prove that you're a writer. You could just turn up and go to the panels and participate in things or propose a panel and just be a writer. You could just spend the time at the festival all day talking to people learning from other people without feeling as though you have to cross some threshold and be given the title. It really is a self-authorising space.

Respondent 10 also commented on this aspect of the festival, stating that 'to identify loosely as a writer was all that was really required for you to make an application to the festival. And the beautiful part of

how that added to the culture of the festival was that it was innovative, it was experimental, it produced a lot of events and ideas and concepts that were not at other festivals who were programmed by seasoned people in the industry, but at the same time, had access to those people. So it was really truly that breeding ground of pushing the envelope of programming, or the art form itself in any field'. The effect of this was transformational for some participants. Respondent 3 said that it 'changed the way I saw writing'.

COMMUNITY AND CREATIVE EXPERIMENTATION

Not only did the loose definition of 'writer' foster experimentation and risk-taking at the festival, so too did the NYWF's strong sense of community. Respondent 2 referred to the festival 'more as a community and less as an event'. Respondent 1, who felt closer to the NYWF participants than those they had worked with at the larger, more formal Melbourne Writers' Festival, suggested 'there's something about the youth nature of NYWF that make those connections, I think, feel a bit stronger'.

Respondent 3 noted that the NYWF is 'a kind of place where you can fail in some ways', which Respondent 9 echoed:

> I think it's a place where young people can come and make mistakes in a supportive environment. And I think that's really important. There's no expectation that you should be professional when you're there, particularly as a participant on a panel or something like that … it's always been generous towards the taking of risk.

Respondent 9 also notes that the capacity for failure is facilitated by the festival's nurturing ethos, adding: ''[I]t's a generous audience, because it is composed of a like-minded crowd. And so they have that generosity of being at the same time of their lives'. Respondent 3 echoed the sense of safety that the NYWF generated, recalling 'I did a lot of things that I was not completely confident in, but it always felt like a safe space to do that. And like, you messed up, people would catch you. I think it gave me the opportunity to try out a lot of things over the years'.

Respondent 9 also observed that the 'spirit of generosity was kind of linked to the spirit of anarchy'. Respondent 1 testified to 'the atmosphere, the risk taking, the immersion in place, the spirit of it being just a little bit more wild'. They added that fun is 'baked into it.

And, you know, it's a bit more experimental, and you can do kind of silly things and transgressive things … it really feels like a festival because it's a bit of a party, a carnival kind of atmosphere'.
This sense of anarchy is summed up in a vignette from Respondent 7, who with their now-partner suggested an event called 'the Badness Hour' which was 'like bad performance art, like as bad as possible'. They continue:

> And so it was very bad. Like, there was bad synchronised swimming in a paddling pool, and very bad costumes and, like, super-offensive jokes, so offensive, the kind of stuff you could never say now. But it was part of a cultural moment of things like Team America and Borat and a lot of independent theatre being super shocking and grotesque and bad taste. There was a very bad ventriloquist act, and 'Bad Magic', but then it finished off with us … stripping nude in front of however many people, one hundred people, whatever. And we're singing 'Memories' from Cats… And then we started meowing it like we were cats, then we got some cat food and started smearing cat food over each other. And then we had cans of cat food – no, cans of tuna that we put cat food labels on – and we ate them. Everybody thought we were eating cat food. Meanwhile, the stage lights were cooking the cat food. We hadn't thought of that. So, this horrible smell of cooking cat food was wafting into the audience, and people were literally running outside vomiting. It was super messed up and I slipped over and I nearly came down on my face, on an open metal can. And then it was like, 'Okay, now there's gonna be some spoken word' – and the whole place stinks of cat food. But, that was sort of, I mean, we were pushing the envelope, obviously. But there were a lot of people pushing a lot envelopes, right?

This envelope-pushing differentiated the NYWF from both peripheral and mainstream festivals. Respondent 1 observed, 'NYWF is really about the experience of the festival, as opposed to a festival that's trying to be a sort of stepping stone'. The Emerging Writers Festival, which is a peripheral festival, is perceived by Respondent 1 as 'wanting to be like Melbourne Writers Festival, but … not quite there yet'. Respondent 7, who was an attendee and panellist at the Melbourne Writers Festival in the noughties, commented 'I was the only person under thirty and it was just so dry'.

As well as a degree of wildness and transgression in events, the NYWF broke ground in discussions about diversity. Respondent 8 commented that it was a festival that 'tries very hard, unlike others, to talk about difficult things. And it's not worried about, I guess, upturning the apple cart in terms of sensitivities, or in terms of asking difficult questions'. They continued with an example:

> It seems a bit obvious now. But I, in my first year, had a panel about diversity in Australian television … people weren't talking about this stuff, fourteen years ago. Diversity on TV, no one was talking about it. And I had Nazeem Hussain, Gary Foley and Benjamin Law on that panel. And then it was just a really almost honest conversation about racism that I had not seen anywhere else. That I heard people talk about in like kind of back rooms, but never on a platform like that.

In 2009, twenty-five young people connected to the Bankstown Youth Development Service (BYDS) travelled to Newcastle on the international day of non-violence for the launch of their publication, *Violence*. Hosted by Olivia Boateng, a Sierra Leonian journalist who fled with her children to Australia, the event involved the screening of a making of documentary and discussion between staff and the young contributors about the project. The highlight of the event was the young people reading their work out to the audience which was the largest audience for any of the festival's discussion-based events in 2009 (National Young Writers' Festival Inc., 2008).

The focus on young people, the spirit of safety and generosity created by the NYWF, the space it cultivated for different forms of writing, experimentation and experiences, the blurring of artist and audience, and the attention it gave to diversity, all facilitated strong, supportive networks that furthered the careers of many of the NYWF participants.

CAREER TRAJECTORIES

Respondent 3 suggested that the NYWF's community is 'really one of the things that it does probably better than anything else', and that this is particularly important in fields aligned with writing, when connections are important. They observed that 'there's something really special about making those connections when you're at the start of your careers. And you're building something together and then continue to lift each other up over the years that follow'.

A number of respondents reiterated this observation by testifying to the longevity of their NYWF connections. Respondent 1 observed that 'my fellow staff, like fellow co-directors, we're all very much in each other's lives now'. Respondent 6 'formed a number of lasting friendships that are also artistic or intellectual relationships, as well as people who have also gone on to be academics or writers in some way. And I maintain relationships with them'. Respondent 10 identified that the 'lasting impression' of the NYWF is 'all due to culture and community'. At the NYWF they developed close bonds with a number of artists, and continued to draw on these in their current role: 'I still in my programming know who to go to, to talk to, because I remember this person that I met and spoke to about this many years ago and now I have a community wanting to hear about something similar'.

Respondent 2 also referred to 'this network of culture and community that wasn't there before' after years of the NYWF's existence. Working for the ABC, they said, they noticed 'these people pop up later in different media, like, I know where that connection started … I certainly saw writers, publishers, and saw that manifested, [it] went all the way through to novels coming out and other things. So I think it was fairly clear to me fairly quickly. I would have no sense at all of what the relative weight or extent of that is over time, but I'm really aware, even to this day, I'm seeing connections that I can trace back'.

These connections were pivotal in respondents' later careers. Some respondents, like Respondent 10, relied on the NYWF to open up connections and career opportunities that overcame the geographical isolation of Perth, where there weren't many opportunities for them and their peers to perform or share their work. They first learned of the festival via Facebook, and when they discovered 'that it was accessible to people who didn't necessarily have an established career yet, we applied and we got in'.

Beyond making the connections that assisted with careers as writers, arts administrators, academics and library leaders, the NYWF shaped some participants' careers in specific ways. Respondent 10, now a community programmer in Perth, stated 'The only reason I have a career in the arts now is because of the National Young Writers' Festival'. For Respondent 1, the NYWF 'made me realise that working in literary festivals is actually something you can do'. Their experience as co-director of the NYWF, they observed, 'probably led me to having a job in literature', as they subsequently obtained a role working for the Melbourne Writers Festival.

Respondent 6, now an academic, states 'I wouldn't have my career without the festival'. They explain:

> I wrote my PhD on zines. Because I discovered what they were in 2000 when Amanda [Kerley] said, I want to have a zine fair… Then after I discovered zines, at the festival, I thought, well, no one has studied zines as literature … and I was really convinced that they were a form of literature. So I applied for a scholarship at Newcastle Uni to do a study in literary studies that would demonstrate the literary potential of zines … that also meant that I was in Newcastle for another couple of years doing my doctorate and I continued to be involved in the festival. So I mean, it really gave me the topic for my doctorate. I still write about zines and my intellectual career is kind of a continuation of this question of what counts as literature and who writes it?

For some respondents, the NYWF crystallised what they didn't want to do. Respondent 5, after becoming a co-director of the festival, commented 'I remember after it, I kind of went, you know what, I don't want to manage artists, I want to be one'.

For some respondents, such as Respondent 7, the social capital afforded by smaller publications, such as The University of Melbourne's *Farrago* magazine, acted as an entryway into the NYWF. In turn, some respondents' first jobs after graduation, such as Respondent 8's, were a direct result of the connections made at the NYWF. The festival, they commented, 'gave me a really strong network in the writing and editing world', leading to a role at the Melbourne Writers Festival, which in turn led to a role at *The Age*.

Not only did the NYWF facilitate openings, it also offered valuable industry experience, acting as a training ground for those early in their career. Through the NYWF, Respondent 1 learned about applying for government funding, and it was, they said, the 'first time that I'd ever done that, [the] first time that I've ever been exposed to that and started to learn about the funding environment'. Respondent 4 reflected that 'the blurring of lines between curator and participant or management and the audience is amazing, you know. Like you'd go one year as a punter, the next year, you'd be the director'.

A SENSE OF PLACE

The city of Newcastle grew the NYWF and became key to many of the respondents' experience, as their encounters extended beyond the festival to the city itself. Respondent 10 suggested that the NYWF's strong sense of community was because 'no one was really local, whereas you have like Sydney Writers' Festival, Melbourne Writers Festival in the city, people tend to go to events and then go home'. Respondent 4 commented that 'it felt like everyone was convening in a neutral place from all over the country … and I think that is quite unique', while Respondent 1 described it as a 'real pilgrimage where people from all over Australia, although probably at the time, mostly Melbourne and Sydney would descend onto Newcastle, and so you would meet people from different parts of Australia'.

Newcastle's natural features, particularly the ocean, featured in a number of interviews. Respondent 4 observed that the festival's location in Newcastle 'made it special because of its geography, you know, you go to the session, and then you go for a swim'. Respondent 1 also commented on the festival's closeness to water: 'the fact that the beach is there, and the baths, the ocean baths … I don't know if it's ever officially in the program, but the fact that you go and spend your evenings, at night in the ocean baths, is an integral part of the experience'.

Class is another critical element of the NYWF. Newcastle, a city of close to 169,000 people (2021 census) located 160 kilometres south of Sydney, has a strong working class history. Respondent 4 reflected on the sense that 'we could contribute to the local economy because I don't think there was a year we visited when Newcastle wasn't economically struggling in some way, shape, or form to different degrees. So it felt like we were activating spaces and locals were really kind to us and appreciative of that'. Respondent 6 echoed this, stating, 'I think it's really important that it was happening in Newcastle, and then it was run by someone like Marcus … I think it was partly about trying to shift the idea of who owned literature and who was practicing literature away from this idea that it's a kind of upper middle class practice. I think it was really significant that it was happening in Newcastle, right at the time that the steelworks closed, you know, this is a working class city... the National Young Writers' Festival was happening in a town that was not really known for its culture'.

In 2008, Westbury established Renew Newcastle in response to a 'sense of decay' in Newcastle. Around this time, there were approximately 150 empty buildings in the two main streets of the city.

Westbury activated these empty spaces by arranging their hire to makers and artisans, who developed micro-businesses from their artistic skills (Westbury, 2015). Respondent 8 described the impact of this initiative as ‘really special’: ‘we would do readings in the old jail and in the kind of Gun Club and places that a writers’ festival would normally never happen, and they lead to character and history and just a sense of being on an adventure together’.

For Respondent 4, the location of the festival at Newcastle, with its working class roots, also distinguished it from the Emerging Writers’ Festival. They observed, ‘it was very important and I hope it still is, that the message, the kind of broader message that the festival was sending the local community as much as the national community was that writers can come from anywhere. And writers can write about anything. And certainly, that was one of the reasons why I was so passionate about it as a working class person myself. To me, that's very important. I think that is what distinguishes it from, for example, the Emerging Writers’ Festival … to me, that was always going to be a key difference, that the Emerging Writers’ Festival would be in Melbourne’.

Respondent 4 also described the festival as ‘definitely grassroots’, which was echoed by Respondent 5, whose later career roles gathered around film, education and public libraries. They observed that they kept coming back to 'values-based, grassroots, collective organising of culture, and that's what the festival was for me’.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The NYWF’s ecosystem was born from Marcus Westbury’s experience with the digital realm, but its heart pulsed through face-to-face interactions. When the NYWF moved online with Covid-19 in 2020, it benefitted participants who may not have been able to physically travel to the festival. This is a characteristic of other festivals, such as Birmingham Literature Festival. Curated by Writing West Midlands, it reached an audience of nearly 5,000 people in the UK, USA, India, South Africa and beyond, making the festival the most accessible it has ever been (Doche, 2023, p. 2).

However, some elements of the NYWF also changed when it moved online. For example, much of the festival relies upon the identification of new leaders. Respondent 10 noted:

> A lot of the co-directors and the future leadership were tapped on the shoulder or identified as artists who were part of the community, and that really assisted in the legacy, or the culture, of the festival continuing, and that's what was broken a little bit during Covid. It was the being in person, you got to know other people's works, and you got to know them on a more personal level, to identify those leadership qualities, or those administrative or those programming qualities … after that, because of Covid, and just a digital festival, we just had to open up the applications. I'm not saying necessarily it's a good or bad thing, but it just meant that there was a little bit of that core culture lost and the festival took on a new life. That's not a negative thing. We evolved, and we moved with the times.

Respondent 3 observed that one of the post-Covid challenges for the festival is making sure it finds a new audience, 'because after having a couple of years off, that's probably going to be a bit challenging, because as I said, it's so much word of mouth. It's people bringing their friends back the next year, and then they bring their friends and it kind of rolls on. So to have that gap, I think it's going to be quiet'.

In *Kill Your Darlings*, Lisa Dempster dwelled on the closure of the Feminist Writers Festival and the Wollongong Writers Festival after pivoting online during 2020. She writes, 'despite knowing that some of Australia's best minds are working furiously against it, I fear that the closure of the Wollongong and Feminist writers' festivals are the harbingers for the disappearance of the niche, the independent, the hyperlocal, the marginalised and the experimental segments—in other words, the best bits—of our sector'.

Given its distinctiveness as a festival, its nurturing of the networks that support young people and lift them into writers and/or arts workers, its experimental edge, the loss of the NYWF would mean the loss a critical part of Australia's literary ecosystem. Where one of the routes to publication is tertiary education, which is becoming increasingly expensive to access, the NYWF offers an accessible, nourishing environment in which to grow Australia's next generation of authors.

In Respondent 4's words:

> I think for many of us why it's so important and why there's so much affection for it is, it felt like a vital part of our coming of age. Not just as writers but also just as

> people involved in the arts. It was a meeting point where we got to clock that there are people as invested as us in this project of telling stories. It's where we made so many friends, found lovers, made enemies probably as well. I think a lot of us might not have necessarily gotten that from high school and some of us probably from university, and I think that's something that's really special and warrants care.

Without the NYWF, Australian literature will be poorer and mundane, and Australia's young authors will take longer to gain traction, if at all. Just as the NYWF has supported thousands of writers, so too is the festival deserving of support to ensure its survival. Recognising and sustaining its symbiotic relationship with Australia's authors will, in turn, support Australian literature in all its permutations.

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APPENDIX I

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How did you hear about the National Young Writers' Festival? How did you become involved with it, and in what capacity?

2. How does the NYWF distinguish itself from other festivals?

3. How did the NYWF inform your career trajectory or choices in any kind of way?

4. What does participating in the NYWF help writers do? Especially if they are starting out.

5. Have you met anyone in NYWF who made a lasting impression on you?

6. In your opinion, is there anything that NYWF can achieve that big festivals cannot?

7. Is there anything that NYWF can do differently to achieve its goals more efficiently?

NYWF ALUMNI

A selection of NYWF alumni, listing the first year of their attendance as participants or staff, and subsequent achievements.

Marcus Westbury (1998): founder and creative director of Renew Newcastle and Renew Australia; author of *Creating Cities*; writer and presenter of the ABC TV series *Bespoke* and *Not Quite Art*; CEO of the Collingwood Arts Project. **Nick Beuret** (1998): researcher and lecturer at the University of Essex on climate politics and degrowth. **John Birmingham** (1998): author of 11 books of nonfiction (including *He Died with a Felafel in his Hand*) and 25 novels. **Anita Heiss AM** (1999): author of 7 novels, 4 nonfiction works, 5 children's books, 2 volumes of poetry and 4 edited collections; lifetime ambassador to the Indigenous Literacy Foundation. **Ben Oquist** (1999): Executive Director of the Australia Institute; former chief of staff to Bob Brown and Christine Milne. **Christos Tsiolkas** (1999): author of 5 novels (including *The Slap*); winner of the Commonwealth Writers Prize, ALS Gold Medal and the Melbourne Prize for Literature. **Vanessa Badham** (1999): playwright and author of 6 books; regular columnist for *The Guardian Australia.* **Amanda Kerley** (2000): independent filmmaker and editor. **Anna Poletti** (2000): associate professor of English Language and Culture at Utrecht University in the Netherlands on life narrative and youth cultures. **Richard Watts** (2000): National Performing Arts Editor at ArtsHub; Chair of La Mama Theatre's volunteer Committee of Management. **Belinda Castles** (2000): author of 4 novels; editor of essay

collection, *Reading like an Australian Writer*; lecturer in Creative Writing at The University of Sydney. **Markus Zusak** (2000): author of 6 novels (including *The Book Thief*), which have been translated into more than 40 languages. **Alicia Sometimes** (2001): author of 2 poetry collections; previous editor of *Going Down Swinging*; broadcaster. **Hoa Pham** (2001): author of 6 books and 2 plays; founder of *Peril* Magazine; winner of Seizure's Viva la Novella prize in 2014. **Vanessa Berry** (2001): author of 4 books; lecturer in Creative Writing at The University of Sydney; zine maker and podcaster. **Courtney Collins** (2001): author of *The Burial*; screenwriter. **Ben Eltham** (2002): lecturer in Media and Communications at Monash University; arts journalist. **Briohny Doyle** (2002): author of 4 books; lecturer in Creative Writing at The University of Sydney; Fulbright Scholar. **Heather Taylor Johnson** (2002): author of 2 novels and 6 poetry collections; editor of poetry collection *Shaping the Fractured Self*. **Tom Cho** (2003): independent arts producer; creator of *Sweet Valley Zine* and author of *Look Who's Morphing*. **Nic Low** (2004): author of 2 books; programme co-director of WORD Christchurch Festival of Books, Storytelling and Ideas. **Benjamin Law** (2005): author of 2 books and a Quarterly Essay; editor of *Growing Up Queer in Australia*; award-winning screenwriter; host at ABC Radio National. **Ali Cobby Eckermann** (2005): author of 4 poetry collections, a verse novel and a memoir; winner of the 2017 Windham-Campbell Literature Prize. **Anna Krien** (2005): author of 3 books and 2 Quarterly Essays; awarded the Sidney Myer Fellowship in 2018. **Anwen Crawford** (2005): author of 2 books; winner of the 2021 Pascall Prize for Arts Criticism; *The Monthly*'s music critic between 2013 and 2021. **Jared Thomas** (2005): author of 6 novels and 2 plays; South Australian Museum and UniSA Research Fellow. **Tom Doig** (2006): author of 3 books; contributing editor of *Living with the Climate Crisis: Voices from Aotearoa*; lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Queensland. **Geoff Lemon** (2006): author of 3 books; sportswriter and broadcaster. **Jess Hill** (2006): author of *See What You Made Me Do*; winner of the 2020 Stella Prize. **Josephine Rowe** (2006): author of 4 books; 2017 *Sydney Morning Herald* Best Young Novelist; winner of the 2016 *Australian Book Review* Elizabeth Jolley Short Story Prize. **Laura Jean Mckay** (2006): author of 2 books; winner of the 2021 Victoria Prize for Literature and the Arthur C. Clarke Award. **Alice Pung** (2007): author of 2 memoirs, 2 novels and an essay collection; editor of anthologies *Growing Up Asian in Australia* and *My First* Lesson; adjunct professor in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT. **Chris Somerville** (2007): author of short story collection *We Are Not the Same Anymore*. **Clementine Ford** (2007): author of 3 books; broadcaster; podcaster. **Kris Kneen** (2007): author of 10 books, including 6 novels, 3 memoirs and a poetry collection. **Ronnie Scott** (2007): author of 2 novels; teaches at RMIT University. **Chris Flynn** (2007): author of 4 books; editor-in-residence at Museums Victoria. **Fiona Wright** (2008): author of 4 books; editor at Giramondo publishing; podcaster. **Chloe Wilson** (2008): author of 2 poetry collections; winner of the 2018 Harri Jones Memorial Prize. **Maxine Beneba Clarke** (2008): author of 14 books; winner of the New South Wales Premier's Literary Award; Peter Steele Poet in Residence at the University of Melbourne. **Tara June Winch** (2008): author of 3 books; winner of the 2020 Miles Franklin Award. **Alexandra Neill** (2009): writer and critic; producer for Heywire. **Bhakthi Puvanenthiran** (2009): editor at ABC

Everyday. **Bonny Cassidy** (2009): author of 4 books; co-editor of *Contemporary Australian Feminist Poetry*; senior lecturer at RMIT. **Nakkiah Lui** (2009): writer of 8 plays, 4 TV shows and 2 films; actor in *Preppers* and *Black Comedy.* **Marieke Hardy** (2010): author of *You'll Be Sorry When I'm Dead*; 2018 and 2019 Artistic Director of the Melbourne Writers Festival. **Liam Pieper** (2010): author of 4 books; winner of the Fellowship of Australian Writers Christina Stead Fiction Award. **Rebecca Giggs** (2010): author of *Fathoms: The World in the Whale*; winner of the 2021 Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Nonfiction. **Zoe Norton Lodge** (2011): author of a short story collection and 4 children's books; co-developer of BBC One comedy series *Queen of Oz.* **Ben Jenkins** (2011): writer and presenter on ABC's *The Checkout*; podcaster. **Zoya Patel** (2012): author of 2 books; former editor of *Lip* Magazine; founder of *Feminartsy*. **Aimee Lindorff** (2012): co-founder of production team *Inside Voice;* content producer at Screen Australia. **Ellen van Neerven** (2013): author of 4 books; winner of the David Unaipon Award, the Dobbie Literary Award and the NSW Premier's Literary Awards Indigenous Writers Prize. **Dan Ilic** (2013): comedian across TV, film, radio and stage; winner of Best Comedy Podcast at the Australian Podcast Awards in 2020 and 2021. **Ben Pobjie** (2013): author of 3 books; columnist for *The Sydney Morning Herald*. **Michelle Law** (2013): playwright of *Single Asian Female* and *Top Coat*; co-star and screenwriter for web series *Homecoming Queens.* **Jessica Alice** (2013): Chief Executive Officer of Writers SA; Chair of the Arts Industry Council of South Australia; Chair of the National Young Writers Festival. **Jessie Cole** (2013): author of 4 books; shortlisted for the 2013 ALS Gold Medal. **Rachel Toop** (2014): business development manager at the University of South Australia; **Alice Grundy** (2014): co-founder and editor in chief of *Seizure*; associate publisher at Brio Books. **Luke Carmen** (2014): author of 3 books; awarded the 2014 New South Wales Premier's New Writing Award. **Omar Musa** (2014): author of 3 books of poetry and the novel *Here Come the Dogs*; musician with 3 solo hip hop records. **Yassmin Abdel-Magied** (2014): author of 5 books; co-writer of theatre production *United Queendom*; 2015 Queensland Australian of the Year. **Sian Campbell** (2015): co-founding editor of *Scum Mag*; **Eliza Henry Jones** (2015): author of 3 novels and 2 young adult novels. **Katerina Bryant** (2015): author of *Hysteria*: *A Memoir of Illness Strength and Women's Stories throughout History.* **Izzy Roberts-Orr** (2016): Creative Producer for Red Room Poetry; author of *Raw Salt*. **Khalid Warsame** (2017): essayist and creative producer at the Footscray Community Arts Centre. **Raelee Lancaster** (2018): librarian and winner of the Nakata Brophy Prize for Young Indigenous writers. **Jesse Oliver** (2019): 2017 Australian Poetry Slam Champion; Chief Executive Officer of Express Media. **Isobel Marmion** (2020): artistic director of Festival of Voices; creator of interactive performance *BUMBLING* and *Afterlife*. **Lur Alghurabi** (2021): winner of the AM Heath Prize for Prose and the Scribe Nonfiction Prize for Writers under 30. **Haneen Mahmood Martin** (2021): Creative Producer with Next Wave, Artistic Associate at Brown's Mart; co-facilitator of Regional for Regional Arts Australia,co-founder of *Teh Cha*. **Alex Kidman Jones** (2022): Executive Assistant and Governance Manager at The Wheeler Centre. **Chloe Mills** (2022): founder of literary zine *Concrescence*.

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