

Talking Writing: The Body
Thursday 30 April

Event Transcript

Sarah Mott: [\(00:06\)](#)

So, um, if you, and we would really love it, if you participate in this event, um, we want to hear your questions, your comments, your thoughts. So feel free to do that in the chat box. So Lou and myself will be passing on any comments or questions directly to Tracy. And she will be asked to use it in the Q and A section at the end of the discussion. But, you know, if you're, if you're posting that during the event, that's kind of getting everybody thinking about further questions and stuff, so don't be shy to post it. We also ask that you don't post directly to the panelists because they're going to be in a discussion and probably won't be checking the chat, so probably won't see anything that you post. So just put it in the main one and then we'll pass it on at the end. We can't really offer any individual tech support from where we are, but, I mean the general rule is that if you're having issues, just log out and head back to the link and we'll get you back in the room as soon as possible. If you can't hear one of the panelists or can't see them, or there's something like that where someone else is having an issue that you can see, just write in the chat box and we'll try and fix it from our end. So to see the panelists, right now I've got you in gallery view where I can see all of you, but if you want to configure your screen, so you can just see the panelists while we're, while they're talking -- just the top right hand view, you'll be able to see speaker view and gallery view.

Sarah Mott: [\(01:38\)](#)

So I think the best thing would be to put it in speaker view while the event's on and maybe, you know, at the end, when, you know, when we all say hello and goodbye and chat and stuff like that, maybe we can put it back in gallery view so we can sort of see everybody. We're also recording this event. So if you drop out or if you have to leave early, or if someone you know, wasn't able to catch the event, we're going to post up this recording. So you can watch it on our blog later next week. Just one final thing before I introduce our amazing chair for this panel. Just a quick content warning, for the viewers, I had mentioned this in the email this afternoon, there might be some language and some possible themes that might not be suitable for everybody, it might be upsetting for some people, some explicit language, maybe some discussion around violence against the body and some explicit sexual scenes or

references. I mean, our panelists want to make sure that you're aware of what's ahead. I think it's gonna be a really exciting, interesting discussion, but just in case some of you might not want to, participate in that one, the panelists are happy to sort of do a quick warning ahead of any reading or anything or anything they're going to discuss as well, just so you can either put it on mute or whatever you'd like to do as well. So, okay. I'm going to introduce you to the chair of the panel, Tracy Sorensen.

Sarah Mott: ([03:07](#))

Tracy is the current Judy Harris writer-in-residence at the Charles Perkins Centre at the University of Sydney. And she's currently writing a cancer memoir from the point of view of her affected abdominal organs. Her novel, *The Lucky Galah*, was longlisted for the 2019 Miles Franklin award. She's a PhD candidate at the Charles Sturt university and is researching the role of handicrafts in climate change communication. So I would like to pass the panel over to Tracy.

Tracy Sorensen: ([03:39](#))

Hello everyone, and it's lovely to be here and to see you all here in this partly disembodied form. Before I go on, I'd just like to pay my respects to the Wiradjuri elders of Bathurst, which is where I'm beaming in from now. And I'd also like to pay my respects to the Yamatji people from around the Carnarvon area in northwestern Western Australia. And it's a place that I draw from continuously in my writing and I'd like to acknowledge them as well. Tonight, as you know, our panel consists of Eunice Andrada, a poet and educator whose debut poetry collection *Flood Damages* won the Anne Elder award in 2018 and was shortlisted in the Victorian Premier's literary awards in 2019. And her work is featured in the Guardian, ABC News, other media, and she's performed her poetry in diverse international stages from the Sydney Opera House to the UN climate summit in Paris. So that's Eunice Andrada, now we have Robin Eames, Robin is a queercrip writer, artist, and historian. Robin's work has been published by Cordite, Overland, Meanjin, Westerly, Southerly and Deaf Poets Society, among others. They are currently working on a PhD in history at the University of Sydney, examining madness and trans pathologisation in late 19th and early 20th century Australia. So that's Robin, and we have Peter Panagioti Polites, who is a novelist from Western Sydney. His first novel *Down the Hume* was shortlisted for a New South Wales Premier's literary award in 2017. And his second novel, *The Pillars*, which is here, back to front on your screen, probably, this has just won the New South

Wales Premier's literary award in the multicultural section. So yay and congratulations to Peter. So let's plunge straight in, and I would like to start with the C word -- C being the Coronavirus, of course. And I'd like to ask each of the panelists, what's this time been like for you? I mean, for me, isolation can be a wonderful thing and often a longed-for thing. And it's a great time to write, but at the same time, this time has been a very unsettled one. So just briefly, if I can ask each of you how you found it, this isolation period. Peter, would you like to start?

Peter Polites: [\(06:59\)](#)

I've I've been writing and I've been productive, but I've also been pretty low. I think we're all feeling that this is a crisis. I don't want to romanticise trauma, or people's horrible experiences in this situation, but I do think that when society's upheaving it's a really important time to be creative. And so I think it's imperative that I create and I document and I research now, because this is a time when artists need to do work.

Tracy Sorensen: [\(07:52\)](#)

Robin, what about you?

Robin M Eames: [\(07:56\)](#)

Um, I'm beginning to think I'll never write a poem again. [laughs] I've just, all my creative energy is, ah, very much sapped. The only writing I've been doing is writing up safety documents for mutual aid groups around Sydney. It's really strange for me because I got very used to being housebound when my health started deteriorating and I haven't felt this kind of isolation since before I had my wheelchair. And it's really odd because I thought I would have coping mechanisms because I've been here before, but it's honestly a bit of a mindfuck.

Tracy Sorensen: [\(08:42\)](#)

Yeah. Um, yeah. I find myself moving in and out of productivity and complete listlessness and a sense of doom and, um, that the world's in a very bad state. Now do we have Eunice with us or have tech problems intervened? I've got a feeling we might have technical issues with...

Sarah Mott: [\(09:10\)](#)

Yes, Eunice's dropped out for a sec. We're just getting her back on. So I'll let you know.

Tracy Sorensen: ([09:18](#))

Alright. So when Eunice comes back, we will reengage with her. So what we've been asked to kind of discuss tonight, or why we've all come together is to discuss the body. And fortunately all of us in this virtual room have some kind of embodied body. They're all very different. And we were sort of thinking about the notions of the normal and the abnormal body, whatever that might mean for all of us. What should this thing look like? What should it do? What should it be used for? Um, if it's not normal in some way, how is it seen by others and treated by others? So we've asked each of the three writers to read out a piece of their work that somehow addresses this theme. Maybe just briefly explain how it addresses the theme, or if you like, just plunge in and start reading from your work. And then after that, hopefully we'll have a juicy discussion. Okay. So, um, Robin, would you like to go first?

Robin M Eames: ([10:38](#))

I feel like all of my writing addresses embodiment in some way, because you can't escape from crip embodiment, queer embodiment, trans embodiment when you're writing -- it doesn't go away. People might not be able to read the sort of codes and signals in there, but they are there. It's really strange, I realised today I have never done an online poetry reading, and I'm always so used to the prior context of me rocking up as a wheelchair user. And a lot of my poems, like all of my trans poems are sort of having to explain like, 'yes, I'm also trans', [laughs] but all of my crip poems, I usually have the opposite problem, I feel like they need exposition on the page because people don't have that context on the page. So it's throwing me a little bit. The first poem I'm going to read, this is incredibly wanky, I'm so sorry, but I'm reading from the poetry journal in which it was published, which is the most recent edition of Australian Poetry Journal edited by Andy Jackson and Jennifer Harrison. It's a special disability issue, it's called DIS--. There's some bloody excellent poems in here. So read it if you have the time. This one's called 'Oracle'.

I have perfected a certain busied appearance
mien of semi-urgent somewhere-to-be
wheeling too swiftly for strangers to stop and ask
What's wrong with you ?
or perhaps What happened (to you)
(to your legs)(to make you different) ? or
Why (the chair)(your legs)(are you here)

(are you like this)(are you alive) ? ? ?

Each question pierces something deep inside me,
leaves me cradling a wound that I try to hide
for fear of being further exposed, of showing
weakness before a predator whose hunger for
justification won't be slaked with my discomfort.

Against the slurry of abled inquisition I raise
my own defences: a certain glint in my eye,
a lifting of hackles, a tightness to the corners
of my mouth, and if these fail I have one final
weapon in reserve: a quizzical tilt and question
of my own: Why do you ask ?

All this not from spite but simply because my heart
is already so swollen with various woes that further
distension would make me unable to move at all,
pin me to my bed and prevent me from rousing,
and I love the world and do not want to leave it.

I want to give my heart more room for love
than grief. I want to keep space for warmth
and not that sudden pit of cold that fills my body
at these innocent cruelties. If they want to know,
then let them voice the truth. The madwomen of Delphi
delivered prophecies of nonsense phrases,
inscrutable, opaque. When asked impossible questions
they gave impossible answers.

You have to figure these things out yourself.

And I have two more, which hopefully won't push me over time for our
schedule. This one is a little more traditionally, I suppose, okay, this is probably
THE body poem of my poems. [laughs] It's called 'crip mythic'.

my body is not my body

but a metaphor in someone else's mouth
a curse, a broken destiny, a terrible doom
a disappointment

my body is a fate worse than death
for those who have never fought off death
to live in my body

in the half-light of morning my body hallucinates

warped figures in shadow, oracular warnings
my body answers enquiries
hidden behind ciphers
drugfucked & divine
 my body is an aching heart
a spectre of someone it hurts to recall
i am all grandfathers
all elderly parents, the occasional aunt
or sibling struck down by disease
haunting the text
 you forget that i live in the ghost
i am here, if you look closely
buried beneath the page
 my body survives

One last poem, which is I suppose a little more personal, a little less arcane. It's got an interesting interplay. I think a lot of my poems, some of it sounds like metaphor when it's actually quite literal and this is one of them. And I had to request permission to write and publish it, from my family members because they are implicated. It's called 'Circe's Potions'.

After the surgery
my father is different in inconsequential ways,
the same in all important respects.

His heartbeat is a little faster now
accommodating the unfamiliar valve,
transplanted from a pig. He still eats bacon,

is still forgetful, still stubborn, still
thoughtless in the way he always was
still lacking in tact

or meaningful filter, even more so
since the stroke, since he has become concentrated
inwards. For myself

we are considering a mechanical heart,
because I am younger, because it is expected to last

for longer, require more maintenance.

My diet, unlike his, will change
dramatically, excising alcohol, gaining
an additional regime of medication

to add to the handful of pills I toss back
every morning. Unlike my father, a hybrid of human and swine,
I will be a hybrid of human and machine,

more like Hephaestus than like Circe's
drunken visitors. Seething with honey-wine
the vengeful witch-queen turned men into pigs,

but their essential souls remained the same.

Tracy Sorensen: ([16:58](#))

Thank you. Thank you Robin, and I guess I'm just twinkling [jazz hands/Auslan
applause] here as a way of, um, the audience can applaud in this way, I'm sure,
if you feel moved to. Thank you very much for reading those pieces and I might
get the other two panelists to read from their work. Um, and then we can
launch into, um --

Robin M Eames: ([17:27](#))

Eunice is back.

Tracy Sorensen: ([17:27](#))

Eunice is back! So Eunice, are you ready to read out a bit of your work?

Eunice Andrada: ([17:38](#))

Hi everyone. Would it be okay if Peter did it first? I'm just balancing two laptops
at the moment, I'm trying to get it all together. Thank you guys.

Tracy Sorensen: ([17:47](#))

Yeah. Yep. Okay, Peter.

Peter Polites: ([17:53](#))

I might go against my publisher's wishes and actually read an essay that I've
published online on the Sydney Review of Books. Um, maybe, this is a story --

this is a memoir essay and it's about domestic violence and filicide so if you, if that's a bit confronting for you, feel free to just log off. I'm happy, I probably won't go too long, but it is a bit confronting. And it's really about the body at its core because it's about women's bodies being controlled.

Mama told me that she never divorced my Dad because she was scared that he would kill us kids. I was driving her to physio when she confessed this. She was sitting next to me in the passenger seat and we were looking out of the front windscreen. The car rolled to a stop, and at the pedestrian crossing, a woman in torn jeans pushed a Bugaboo pram over the zebra stripes. Mama has always had an 'I Need to Say Something' energy. She talks with a flow that needs to be expunged. Mama reflected on her time in Greece recently. She saw many single mothers. I pointed a finger to the sky: 'Actually Mama! Divorce is common in present day Greece! Greeks changed with the times, unlike here, where the peasants froze!' Mama gave it back. She wasn't scared of what the community thought of her. She was scared that my father would take his double barrelled shotgun and shot me and my sister. She was scared that he'd search for us like a hunter. I turned to her, and she was looking outside the passenger window. I could only see the back of her head – a helmet of grey hair. She let out the tiniest snort, followed by a laugh that was so dismissive that it could have crushed marble.

When I was a child and couldn't sleep, she sat on the side of my bed and told me the myths. Her sleeping attire was an oversized t-shirt with a frayed hem. Its neckline was warped and exposed her milk white collar bones. I remember the column of long black shiny hair she used to have. The white skin and black hair were supernatural, they were more than Greek. Strands of black hair would fall upon me as she tucked me under a green and gold doona that had a picture of a boxing kangaroo on it. I'd hold her ransom until she would tell me stories of Hercules and his Twelve Labours. I remember him killing the lion with the gold fur, seeing him run across the plane of her thigh. The black hairs on her leg were stones. The dip under her knee was the valley he hiked through. I'd fall asleep to the rhythm of her voice.

The other night I worked till 2am earning minimum wage at the bar. I put a suburban and coke on the counter of the bar and copped a perve at a gay guy's chest through his open shirt. In between his pec line was a gold medallion of Medusa's angry face and snake hair. Medusa is associated with contemporary gay culture because of Versace, but most gay men identify strongly with a monster that can give you a death stare.

I've always preferred Medea.

I love her unhinged at the breakup of her relationship and then her transformation in the second act into the terrifying producer of her own drama. I imagine my mother as Medea, her waist-long hair jet black and shiny. Medea came from Colchis which is modern day Georgia. It's a country of the Caucasus and the people there share Mama's colouring. Mama with her skin paler than any Mediterranean. She could be a barbarian of the Baltic. When she first arrived in Australia no one could guess my mother's race. She arrived in her late twenties when she had black hair down to her waist. She inherited pale white skin from her vlach heritage. Australians, who are notoriously bad at guessing people's heritage, could never clock her. Men would stop her in the street – 'Excuse me are you Indian? Excuse me are you Irish?' – and her eyes would fix forward and she would walk away furiously, a cape of black hair trailing behind her.

Thanks. That's my essay, it's on the Sydney Review of Books. It's called 'Mama Becomes Medea' and it's my infatuation. And, it's an essay about turning the traumatic experiences that I experienced as a child into myths as a way of them becoming floating narratives that don't hurt me. That's all.

Tracy Sorensen: ([22:47](#))

Thank you, Peter. Eunice, are you with us at this point?

Eunice Andrada: ([22:56](#))

I'm here. Thank you so much for reading, Peter, and everyone for your patience. I'm going to read three short poems. One of them is from my book, Flood Damages. In the book I deal a lot with the effect of state violence on the body, as well as the kinds of intergenerational effect that domestic violence can have within a family. This poem deals with the former. 'Autopsy'.

Ma loads her gun with aratelis berries
shoots at Noy till the wildfruit explode
against his hair, then keeps shooting.
Syrup and rind spray against
their too-small shirts,
curl into the webs of their toes.
It is just after siesta and their backs
have been clapped with talcum powder.
The air is overripe

everything bruised and liable
to burst at the slightest touch.
Point of sale.
When dark begins to pour
around their laughter,
they abandon the wreaths of mosquitoes
that call them holy.
Splotches of juice blacken the soil,
punctuating the walk
to the dinner table.
In that festering summer, Ma learns
the futility of sweetness.
Ma is at work in another continent
when a dictator is buried in the Heroes Cemetery.
State-sanctioned killings begin
in her hometown. Twenty-six shots
to the head, chest, thighs
of two men.
I complain about the weather here,
how the cold leaves my knuckles parched.
Ma points to the fruit she bought over
the weekend, tells me I must eat.

That's the first of the three poems. The rest I'm going to read from a laptop, so there's going to be a glow on my face. So I think my writing journey now is more, dealing with the kinds of effects, the kind of effect that medical surveillance can have on a body as well as the body as it is subject to medical knowledge and medical institutions. This is a new poem, so it's just currently untitled.

[unpublished poem omitted] I feel like leaving it there. [laughs]

Tracy Sorensen: ([27:10](#))

Thank you Eunice, um, yeah, there's so much, there's so many rich images and beautiful sentences and phrases. Um, and all three of those pieces. Very striking images, yeah. Um, well, would any one of the panelists like to comment on any of the works that have been read so far? ...Yep, Robin?

Robin M Eames: ([27:44](#))

Peter, I'd read your essay before, but hearing you read it is something else.

And Eunice, oh my god, just beautiful poetry. But I feel like we all have a thread of the mythic, and something outside ourselves when we're, when we're speaking. And also I think, all very conscious of the state systems, capitalist systems, structural marginalities, that invade our, our daily lives and our relationships with very personal things like our bodies. Um, and wondering how you balance that, sort of the, the outside world and the interior world. I know that I'm always very conscious of not wanting to individualise things when I'm writing about pain and oppression and, um, not wanting it to seem like it's speaking to a singular experience rather than an experience that's shaped by the culture we live in. I'm wondering if you have any thoughts on that?

Eunice Andrada: ([29:01](#))

Yeah, I think I agree with that as well. I'm very wary in my writing of not of my command of the pronoun 'I'. I feel like I have the power to claim that pronoun... and I have, I feel like I try to not, uh, talk from the pronoun 'we', because I don't have command of that, I'm not personally responsible for that narrative. So I, I feel like, with those kinds of poems where I talk specifically about the experience of my body, you know, I never say 'our bodies' or 'this is the experience of my people' or 'everybody who looks like me'... Um, I try to be very aware of that.

Tracy Sorensen: ([29:49](#))

Peter, did you want to add anything at this point?

Peter Polites: ([29:55](#))

No, I'm okay. What about you, Tracy? What do you think of what, um, Robin said? I'm curious about [audio overlap]... Because you're writing about...

Tracy Sorensen: ([29:59](#))

Yeah, yeah. Um, well, I really love that idea of trauma into myth as a way of, um, like I don't write therapeutically, I don't think, but at the, but perhaps I do, because at the bottom of all of this is this theme of, you know, alchemising trauma into some kind of mythology, and it might be just a personal mythology, might be just completely nutty, like, you know, getting my internal organs to speak on their own behalf or something. Um, yeah. And I'm interested in all those questions about, you know, whether we can speak as 'I' or 'we', and where we start and finish and what we're responsible for and not responsible for, and who, and what we can represent in our writing. Um, and, you know, it's

all, it's all an open, ongoing question, but it's one that I'm constantly grappling with -- and Robin, yes?

Robin M Eames: [\(31:20\)](#)

Um, I feel like I am constantly spruiking this essay wherever I go and in every conversation I have, so if anyone I know is tuning in, I'm sorry but not sorry. Linda Alcoff in the eighties [actually 1991] wrote this absolutely fantastic essay called 'The Problem of Speaking for Others' and in it, um, it's very dense. So if you go and read it and it's, and it's just like, 'Ugh' -- sorry. Um, but in it, she sort of lays out this thing where you obviously can't speak on behalf of groups that you do not belong to, but equally it's quite hard to, to speak only for yourself or only for your community or marginalised community, because that always overlaps with other marginalised communities, because you can't approach any of these things in isolation. And in the end sometimes saying you're only speaking for yourself sometimes ends up just as an abdication of responsibility. But obviously trying to speak on behalf of -- also that, yeah. But what she comes to is this idea that firstly, you have to look at the material effect of what is spoken. It's not just about who's speaking in subject position, although that is important, but it's about what the outcome is. And secondly, she suggests that what you need to do is speak 'with' communities, rather than 'about' or 'for', it's about a conversation. And it's such a good essay! [laughs] But yeah. I feel like it's really shaped my thinking to a lot of the representational issues in my work.

Tracy Sorensen: [\(33:04\)](#)

Yeah. Um, well, we can continue to sort of, uh, I guess take up this thread, um, as we go on, I just wanted to just place the bodies and writing sort of somewhere, on the ground somewhere, even though we're in this disembodied space. I mean the different places that we're writing from might be Western Sydney, the Philippines, domestic interiors, there's all these questions about, um, how one leaves and comes back to a place and, you know, the privilege, or not, in being able to even do that. And yeah, so just wondering, um, if people want to comment, maybe starting with Peter on place. And I love your Western Sydney in 'The Pillars'. It is, uh, a fabulous, energetic and vivid portrayal of a place. Do you want to start with that?

Peter Polites: [\(34:18\)](#)

It's really hard not to be creative when you're writing about Western Sydney, just because it's so vivid and dynamic and it's, I would say that Western Sydney

is probably one of the most cosmopolitan places in all of Australia. In one building you can find people from so many different nationalities. But I think in terms of where I think this panel is relevant for my work and Western Sydney, where this intersects is with the body, right? And I think, well, I really guiding theme of when I wrote 'The Pillars' was this concept of homonationalism. And it's a cultural theory. And the concept of homonationalism is when minority rights, sexual and gender minority rights overlap with the powers of the nation. So in a classic example of that was w America invaded Afghanistan. And to all the Democrat states -- so, so all the Republicans were obviously quite pro the invasion of Afghanistan, but to get the Democrat states on side, one of the tactics that George W. Bush used was 'we're going there to free the woman'. So when these, uh, military powers... Another example of homonationalism is Israel saying, Oh, we are a gay beacon of gay rights in the Middle East', but meanwhile, they're actually bombing and outing gay Palestinians. So it's about using like the rights of women gays, lesbians, trans, bisexual, sexual minorities in relation to power. And in 'The Pillars', what I try and do is I try and say that white gay men may actually have more social, economic and cultural capital than minority Muslim communities. And I think that's how I'm kind of like interpreting the body in my work, you know, because for so long specifically, gay white, cis men have been discriminated against because of their body and particularly white women as well. And now we're seeing this reversal where gender and sexual minorities actually have more power than some people in the nation.

Tracy Sorensen: ([36:55](#))

Yeah. Um, that's right. Um, it's, you know, complicated and layered at at every point. Eunice, would you like to comment on place and the importance of place, our bodies in place?

Eunice Andrada: ([37:17](#))

Sure. I think in my writing the relationship to place is quite ambiguous. I say that because in 'Flood Damages' I don't actually mention the Philippines or Australia. Um, and it's only people knowing my background that they sort of associate my body as being in certain spaces. But I think in talking about place in my writing, I'm also very aware of where my body sits in that space and how much space it occupies. For example, if I'm in the Philippines, I'm aware that I have more, my body has more social as well as economic mobility than others and others of my gender, as well as my age. And that social and economic mobility changes when I'm in Australia. So I feel like the writing itself comes

from this place of in-between-ness, but also a deep awareness of the tensions between one place and another.

Tracy Sorensen: ([38:29](#))

Yeah. And Robin, place and movement around territory or, the physical world. How does that appear in your writing? Or have you got any comments?

Robin M Eames: ([38:46](#))

I mean, obviously mobility is just such a huge factor in my life. Um, and when I was growing up, my family moved around a lot, um, too much, it was extremely stressful. But then when I started getting really unwell, my world just narrowed down, and the place I lived at the time, which I'd been really invested in this idea of, of building a home and not moving around so much, but the place I lived was very inaccessible, and it meant that things got worse, very bad, very quickly. But then when I got my wheelchair, my world just opened up again, but Sydney had changed for me. And all the places that I knew, the routes that I knew, were completely different because I'd go to the grocery store that I'd been going to for years and I couldn't get in anymore. And I just, I could not believe how many places had stairs that I'd never noticed, and how many curb cuts that didn't exist, and how many rocky pavements that I just completely never had any reason to see at all. And by, you know, my map of these familiar places just disappeared. And I had to, like, rethink all of it. And that's obviously, that sort of speaks to, if anyone has heard of the social model of disability, it's the idea that... The medical model is like 'you're disabled because there's something wrong with your abnormal body'. And the social model of disability is 'you're disabled by an unsupportive society, by the state structures that are building stairs and not ramps'... And... Yeah, I feel like, again, just, I had a thought earlier when you were speaking, Peter, just about that, the ways in which we... just, our politics being shaped by our relationship to the state and about that thought about homonationalism. And it just got me thinking about, just about human rights frameworks in general, because I think sometimes they can be quite fraught because essentially it's an appeal to the state to deliver rights. And one really interesting example for me is that, um, gay depathologisation, because homosexuality used to be considered a mental illness. It was in the DSM, which is the American, technically it's an American manual, but it's used worldwide. And it's sort of the List of All the Mental Illnesses, but they update it every few years... because they change. But the year that homosexuality was taken out was the year that Gender Identity Disorder was added in. So gay depathologisation came at the expense of trans

pathologisation. And sometimes with rights frameworks we're always only really acquiring rights at the expense of others, at the expense of non-citizens, non-residents. And even just a very current example being that the coronavirus supplement has been extended to all of the Centrelink payments, except for the disability payment, the carer payment and the age payment, um, which surprise! Cost of living is super high, and also very likely to die! Um, but also Centrelink and welfare is just something that non-residents and non-citizens can't access at all. So they're just totally boned. And, uh, tomorrow is Labour Day. So get on it. [laughs] That's, I've been talking for too long, but, um, lots of thoughts.

Tracy Sorensen: ([43:03](#))

Thanks, Robin. Would you like to add anything, Peter, to that? Nope. Okay. I might move on to what I've kind of just, well, I do want to open it up for questions, Q and A, so while people are thinking of their questions and someone's typing them up for me in that chatbox there, copying and pasting them in. I'm just, I'm kind of interested in this idea of the terrifying body, the body that's 'not normal' in inverted commas being kind of terrifying. And certainly when I was in the throes of, you know, being treated for cancer and, you know, I was bald and looked ill there was a look of kind of horror and terror, you know, um, it destabilises people. But I mean all of, all of the writers here tonight have made me think of that. I mean, I'm just thinking of like Peter talking about the brown and hairy body, you know, there's all these other elements of the body that's kind of scaring people just by, just by being there, like not even doing anything else, just, just, being. Anyone want to comment on that? Yep, Eunice?

Eunice Andrada: ([44:36](#))

So I've been grappling with this notion of the terror of the terrifying body on various levels. And I think what was really jarring to me, you know, thinking of that concept of what it means to have a terrifying body was coming back to Australia and suddenly being a woman of colour and suddenly being racialised as Asian again, in the time of coronavirus, you know, with the rise of anti-Asian attacks all over the world. I think that's what really struck me, because, you know, in the Philippines, I'm not a woman of colour, I'm just a woman. But that those kinds of labels become imposed upon you as you move through different spaces, as well as those kinds of perceptions. I think in the poems, I also talk about the kind, uh, I guess I talk about accepting parts of my body that others might find terrifying. Ao I have poems about, uh, a dark cunt for

example, because, you know, that was a very alien concept to me growing up. I grew up in the Philippines, which is 80% Catholic and because it's 80% Catholic, there's absolutely no sex education. And as, as many young kids, do they get their sex education from porn and the internet. And, you know, you're bombarded with these images of like perfect pristine vaginas that are completely pink. So I think, you know, as always, getting older, just reckoning with that fact that this is not... That is not the only acceptable kind of body, that there are other kinds of bodies out there, and it's all completely normal. Those are the kinds of things, the kinds of terrors I've had to reckon with in the writing.

Tracy Sorensen: [\(46:50\)](#)

Yeah. Thanks, Eunice. Peter, would you like to comment?

Peter Polites: [\(46:56\)](#)

Yeah.

Tracy Sorensen: [\(46:56\)](#)

I noticed a lot of depilation in 'The Pillars'.

Peter Polites: [\(47:00\)](#)

Depilation, what do you mean by that?

Tracy Sorensen: [\(47:03\)](#)

Ah, hair removal.

Peter Polites: [\(47:04\)](#)

Ah, yeah. That's a, that is a really big thing for young men in the Western suburbs. There it's just a phenomenon. I think one thing that I tried to kind of convey in 'The Pillars' is I write a lot of sex scenes. And I think when I'm trying to write a sex scenes, there's two things that I'm trying to do, right. The first one is to make the readers horny, right? And to me, that's important because when you're reading a book and you get a visceral response from the writer, that to me is the highest compliment. So that visceral response doesn't only apply to sex stuff, but say, if you're reading a romantic novel, you're reading, maybe a Sally Rooney novel and you project your identity onto the character, that is similar and you start emotive, you start an emotional feeling. That's another aspect of like, the body reading the novel. And so when I tried to write these sex scenes and try to make people horny, or I try and make people laugh, it is

because I want people to hold my book, pick it up and respond. I want that physical response to the texts that I've created. And that to me is how I kind of like try and locate the body in my writing by trying to crave responses of other bodies. I think, and also it kind of upsets me when people just kind of like, trivialize my writing of gay sex. And like, I come from an era where my body was criminalised. Like, the acts that I did were considered illegal. So for me to kind of like, still write this, especially as a, you know, from someone from a conservative community. It's still quite, it's radical for the context I come from. But also like if you read deeper into the sex scenes of 'The Pillars', I deliberately use military language in them. And I did that because I wanted to kind of reference this kind of hyper-competition between gay men and this kind of, part of the homonationalism as well.

Tracy Sorensen: [\(49:30\)](#)

Thank you. Yeah. I'm just looking here now to see if there's any questions from the audience directly to our panelists while you're reading them.

Robin M Eames: [\(49:42\)](#)

Can I jump in? I had some thoughts.

Tracy Sorensen: [\(49:44\)](#)

Sure. Sorry, go ahead.

Robin M Eames: [\(49:46\)](#)

So on the terrifying body and on representation. I have never seen and probably will never see a trans wheelchair user in a film. The vast majority of wheelchair users, are there, because they're evil, or they're Stephen Hawking. Disability is just used so frequently as a visual signifier for morally flawed, for scary. Like every Bond villain has like a facial disfigurement or a disability, or a physical disability, every, you know like Detective Pikachu, like just like every childhood villain, um, Scar from the Lion King. Like it's always... It's also very racialised, um, it's like darker skin, often queer coded, and, and often like physically 'flawed'. And I find it really strange reckoning with that just in my day to day life. Because in so many ways I feel like I have immense privilege around not being received as threatening, except for being a wheelchair user, where I've had [laughs] I've had some very silly interactions that I'm glad I can laugh at. But like at one point I was zooming along and at like a distance of about three metres, I had a neighbor and her small child who were blocking the pathway, and I called out 'excuse me'... And I had space to stop if I needed

to. She screamed so loudly! And like pulled her child out of the way as if she was pulling a child out of the path of an oncoming truck. And I just like fled into the distance cackling as I went. [laughs] Um, it's really strange how people will either, either they go the pity route, like the guy who tried to fist-bump me while I was buying cup noodles at 2 AM at the servo, or they go like the terror route and they find me like physically scary, and physically just like intimidating... Which I do aspire to. But returning to Stephen Hawking actually, he said something, well, there was a wonderful anecdote about him, which was that he'd run over the toes of Prince Charles. And he always used to say that his one regret in life was not getting to roll over the toes of Margaret Thatcher. So... I suppose my point here is that I hope to channel the terrifying energy of cripple forebears and roll over Scott Morrison.

Tracy Sorensen: ([52:52](#))

Righty-o. Yeah. I like the idea of channeling energy. I might just read out a question from the audience. So this comes from Margot and Margot says, um, place is inherently social and the body exists both as something individual, but also as something that's shaped by the social, social model of disability, construction of race, sexuality, et cetera. When you're talking about the relationship of the two, how do you think that the social/individual dichotomy plays out? Is it similar in both directions? How do those thoughts influence your writing? Yeah. So, um, yeah, anyone want to have a go at that one? This, um, social and individual dichotomy and how they play out in writing. Peter, do you have some thoughts this time?

Peter Polites: ([54:00](#))

That's a really hard question. How does the social and individual... I know that when I'm researching novels, because of my extremely political background, I often go to structural philosophy initially because I just... Maybe it's because I'm Greek, I dunno, I love philosophy, right? I'm going to read everything to cultural issues, but then as an individual, you know, I try and construct narratives that, where the social forces are primarily the most important aspect of the character development. So I think if you read a lot of American kind of, uh, narratives and character fiction based stories, I think they're obsessed with this whole, I think manifest destiny has infected their brains in a really terrible way. And, you know, Americans just, you know, overcome every obstacle and they believe in themselves and you know, the great individual that triumphs over the land, over the natives, over the, you know, foreigners, all that stuff, right. Whereas I think I kind of look towards more, when I'm constructing fiction, I'm

more interested in the social forces that mold people's characters. So to me, something like, how does patriarchy construct a gay male identity? How does, you know, homophobia exemplify someone's kind of traits, those social factors are so much more important than kind of, an individual's choices. And also it's a political point for me as well. It's like, it's not important what happens to us as individuals, it's not about my individual rights. It's, and this is what my whole problem with the gay marriage stuff as well, which came out. I had a problem with gay marriage because it was this fundamentally neoliberal right. It was about individuals making a choice. And personally I'd be more interested in advocating for something like getting gender affirmation surgery completely on the medical registrar, on Medicare completely. You know what I mean? That's a more important political issue than, you know, sorry to be homophobic, I can be, but you know, some rich fags getting married so they can have some like horrible tacky ass wedding and then a divorce two years later...

Tracy Sorensen: ([56:22](#))

I love, I love in 'The Pillars' there's a discussion amongst some gay men and they just murmur that they're thinking of getting a place in Bowraville. [laughs] I just think those small observations are just gorgeous. Ah, yes, Robin?

Robin M Eames: ([56:41](#))

I too am homophobic. [laughs] Despite being a raging queer! But yeah, like with something like the gay marriage thing, the issue for me is the structures again, it's a rights issue that the structure is attaching rights... like citizenship rights, like right to visitation in hospital, all of those things that are attached to this heteronormative framework, um, of marriage. And it comes back to, if we're approaching things on this, on this individual level, like, yeah, like people want to have a big gay wedding and it's beautiful and lovely and all power to them. But also when we're thinking about things structurally... Like, who, who are we leaving behind in that? And one issue is that a lot of people on welfare, and a lot of disabled people who need to access certain social support schemes, can't legally get married. Because otherwise welfare gets slashed very dramatically. Also can't live with a partner. And, or you get denied certain - like essentially lifesaving social supports. And there's some very horrible cases of, you know, people in their seventies having to get divorced so that one of them can get healthcare interventions and disability supports. But I think that question of the interplay between the social and the individual for me as a writer comes back to responsibility. And again, returning to thinking about the

purpose of my work and how it's going to be received, what it's going to do in the world. What that material outcome will be, what I'm bringing into being with my writing. And so I kind of think about, I think a lot about audience, I think a lot about who'll be reading it. I think to an extent there's some things out of my control. I think people are always gonna see disability and go, 'Ohhhh' [pityingly], or 'Ehhh' [uncomfortably] [laughs] but I hope to kind of interrupt that at least a little bit. But yeah, I do struggle with it and I don't think I've reached that balance yet. But I think a lot of the time, my most 'individual' poems are the most dreadful ones and they're the ones that I put in a drawer and never show anyone. But at the same time it's really hard to try and speak to that social experience without just sounding... um, overblown, and I try to just kind of speak with a sense of solidarity, responsibility, purpose, um, and just trying to do the best that we can with the time that we're given, with the resources that we have, the energy that we have. Yeah.

Tracy Sorensen: ([59:49](#))

Yeah. Thank you. Uh, Eunice, would you like to say something here?

Eunice Andrada: ([59:54](#))

Yeah. So I think there is no divide, or if there was a divide, it'd be very blurry. I think as a writer, I write about my private life as well as my public life, but those bleed into each other, um, you know, in my private life, I'm just Eunice Andrada, and in my public life, I am a queer Filipino immigrant and you know, what happens to my body in public, the kinds of structural violences that it's subject to, those follow me into my private writing. Um, so I don't think those can be divorced from each other that easily.

Tracy Sorensen: ([01:00:36](#))

Yeah. Yeah. Thank you. I've just had a couple of, um, I'm aware of the time now. So I think we should be conscious of that and possibly start winding up, but I have had, I have had just before we go, I have had a couple of questions asking me about my memoir written from the point of view of my bodily organs. And in some ways this is a bit of a thought experiment because it's like, how do you write something that radically decentres the human subject, you know? And it's like, this is an extreme way of doing it, so that, you know, there's these organs that are chugging along inside, telling the story of cancer rather than the 'I', you know, 'I've' been diagnosed with cancer, and as soon as I started thinking of it like that, it just opens up the world in a very different way. So I'm sort of having fun with it. And it's kind of quite, you know, nutty, but I'm naming

all my different organs and, you know, I kind of, I guess it's to do with personification and personification being a way of creating empathy, you know? So you know, thinking about it like that is kind of, it's kind of really interesting, but I have, you know, the huge problem with that is this question of agency, like Peter was talking about the, you know, the rampant individual who overcomes all the obstacles when you've got organs, just sitting there doing their thing in a body, how much agency can they possibly have? So, you know, does that defeat storytelling, you know, if you don't have agents trying to overcome obstacles. Um, anyway, I think we are beginning to wrap up. I might just see, I might just kind of go over to the audience and/or Writing New South Wales about whether we should be winding up right now or whether we can linger for one...

Sarah Mott: ([01:02:47](#))

A couple, couple more questions.

Tracy Sorensen: ([01:02:50](#))

Yep. A couple more questions. Okay. So I see that this is a very disembodied being on my screen in front of me. It's the 'W', the writing 'W', okay, saying a couple more questions. Okay. This is Amanda, asks, how can we write divergent bodies back into a sense of power? Okay, Robin?

Robin M Eames: ([01:03:26](#))

I don't think it can be done by writing alone. I think it has to be accompanied by action and action outside of the literary realm. I think it's so important to have both, you can't have action without narrative, and you can't have narrative without action. And if you want to enact change in the world, you need to come out beyond yourself. And... Uh, I had a thought, it's gone. Sorry, I'm so spacey tonight. Um... it's gone. [laughs] Back to the others.

Tracy Sorensen: ([01:04:07](#))

Yeah, no worries. Okay. Anyone else got something to say on that one, writing divergent bodies back into a sense of power? Eunice?

Eunice Andrada: ([01:04:18](#))

Oh, I've been on this entire time. Sorry. [Eunice & Tracy laugh] I think my first, uh, my first response to that question was, who is the 'we', who is doing the writing? And I think that matters a lot, who is claiming that space for this group of divergent bodies. I think, you know, there's a, there's an expression on the

stage where you pass the mic. We need to be passing on the pen to the people who need to be doing the writing as well as, you know, Robin, I agree with Robin as well. It is structural. We have to be, it's not enough to have those have, people of divergent bodies writing their stories. They need to be given the platforms and the resources for those stories to be out there in the world. As well as, uh, another response to that is, to how we can write divergent bodies back into a sense of power is -- we write, we write about them truthfully. I think there's so much, so much of writing the body is about rewriting the body. Um, and that comes with challenging those colonial and patriarchal narratives that are imposed upon divergent bodies. So if the right people were writing about these divergent bodies and challenging those narratives, I think that's a step in the right direction.

Tracy Sorensen: ([01:05:49](#))

Yeah.

Robin M Eames: ([01:05:53](#))

Yeah, like I think that there's absolutely something really powerful in representation. And I think it's, the value there is in a point of connection, and ultimately I think poetry is a form of communication and it can be a really powerful one, but equally, I don't think it helps anyone just like putting marginalised sort of token efforts. You need to, like Eunice said, you need to have marginalised, divergent people in the editorial room. You need to have them in decision making processes. And ultimately it's hard to empower anyone when we're not in a position of power. But equally the people in power, like the whole structure itself denies us that agency. So I think it comes back to speaking to each other and finding each other and working alongside each other to change things for the better.

Tracy Sorensen: ([01:07:17](#))

Yeah. Thank you, Robin. Peter, did you have any more words? Um, I think there is a, there is an interesting question there from, um, Maree Walk. Yeah, just, it's an interesting question. I think everyone can see it there in the, in the chat. But I think we might've run out of time now at 7:45. So sorry about that, Maree. Yeah. And I would just like to thank our three panelists, Peter, Robin, and Eunice, and I would also like to thank Writing New South Wales for giving us the opportunity to have this conversation. And it was a great honor to be in the guinea pig group for this conversation. And don't forget everybody that you can get a 10% discount on various books to do with this theme from Berkelouw

Books. And yeah, thanks everyone for coming along. And we can just twinkle like this. [laughs] [jazz hands/Auslan applause].

Sarah Mott: ([01:08:36](#))

Thanks, Tracy. That was fantastic.

Tracy Sorensen: ([01:08:42](#))

No worries.

Peter Polites: ([01:08:45](#))

Thank you, Tracy, so much for that. That's such a hard job to do, to look at all the people talking and then read the questions. It's just, it's a it's a [audio glitch]

Tracy Sorensen: ([01:09:00](#))

I don't know if I managed to read the chat properly, actually. That was, I might've missed stuff there. Sorry, but yeah. Thank you. Thank you everyone.

Peter Polites: ([01:09:10](#))

Bye everyone.

Sarah Mott: ([01:09:11](#))

Thank you for coming, goodbye.

Peter Polites: ([01:09:19](#))

Buy my book, bye. [everyone laughs]

Eunice Andrada: ([01:09:19](#))

Goodbye everyone, thank you so much.