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Reflecting on and Shattering My White Lens: A Critical Autoethnography on My Experience as a White Editor Working with Authors of Color

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Reflecting on and Shattering My White Lens:

A Critical Autoethnography on My Experience as a White Editor Working with Authors of Color

By

Kelsey Medlin

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the

Requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in

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Introduction and Literature Review

Since 2008, the publishing industry has made an effort to produce works by writers of color and about minority characters. Articles published in the industry's favored journal, *Publishers Weekly (PW)*, often discuss the desire the publishing industry and the professionals within it have for diverse titles, such as *PW*'s recent article about the 2018 BookCon panel on diversity where Young Adult (YA) critic and reporter Sandie Chen expresses how the industry is working "to move beyond Diversity 101 and have conversations that dig deep into various issues surrounding representation and inclusiveness..." (Kirch). The publishing companies, including the Big Five (Macmillan, Penguin Random House, Hachette, HarperCollins, and Simon & Schuster), broadcast loudly the wide variety in stories they have produced since 2013. In the YA market, HarperCollins's *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas received many awards and starred reviews from multiple trade journals including Booklist who described the novel about police brutality and a young black girl's attempt to stand up for justice in her community as "An inarguably important book that demands the widest possible readership" (qtd. in Thomas). Jesmyn Ward's, *Sing, Unburied Sing*, published by Simon & Schuster won the National Book Award for its portrayal of three generations dealing with race, violence, and love in the South. The children's market is no exception to the praise of diverse books as Penguin Books's *The Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt de la Peña climbed to the top of the New York Times Bestseller list in 2015.

Each of these books have dominated sales, awards, and reviews, proving that diverse titles sell well in today's market, yet research shows that there has been very little change made to tilt the scale from a white dominated title selection to a more balanced and diverse one. This is not to say that there have not been advancements in minority publishing (such as the works listed

above). The industry has made leaps and bounds when it comes to representation and inclusivity in many genres and markets. Still, the number of books written by writers of color and about characters of color is still drastically less in comparison to the majority of white authors and characters. Even after all of the heavy emphasis placed upon diversity in literature, why are white stories by white authors still the majority of those published each year?

Once a year, *PW* releases a salary survey that highlights how grim the diversity is within the industry's own workforce, and every year its results, which will be discussed in the literature review, reveal that the high percentage of white employees versus nonwhite employees has not changed much over the past few years. Thus, I wonder how that affects the kinds of diverse titles and authors companies choose to publish every year because what is, ultimately, at stake here is equity in publishing that allows all voices to be heard. This equity is especially important since we must recognize that our products are representing a diverse nation.

My research aims to reveal how the cultural biases of a white majority industry impact the stories they select for acquisition and how they are edited. I also came to this topic from my personal desire to see if my own whiteness affects the way I view writers of color, their stories, and the audience that the companies market to. Thus, the purpose of this project is to explore the current conversations on the topic of diversity within the publishing industry and whether the conversation is making a connection between the lack of diversity in the workforce and the lack of diversity within the titles published. In addition to this exploration, I aim reflect on my own bias and editing process through a critical autoethnography of three major editorial projects. Thus, I hope this literature review and my reflection with encourage my fellow white editors to think about their own editorial processes.

I. Diversity (or Lack Thereof) in the Industry Workforce

In 1994, Calvin Reid wrote an article for *PW* that reported the stark lack of diversity in the publishing industry, using percentages from the U.S. Census of 1991 and minority employees of many departments and HR employees' personal interviews of some of the Big Five publishing houses. By noting how the industry had nearly an invisible Hispanic population in the workforce, "it's a general insensitivity, a lack of knowledge of Hispanic culture and an ignorance of Hispanic literacy in mainstream publishing," and how stereotypical perceptions of African-Americans affect those employees, "there's a set of assumptions about blacks, and a tendency to underestimate black employees. Many white editorial workers have not had exposure to the full range of African Americans" (qtd. in Reid), Reid brought to light the biased perspectives that created a hostile climate in the industry in 1994. In response to this article, libraries and bookstores promoted diversity in their workforce.

Despite these reactions, *PW* made no attempt to include statistics about the racial divide in the publishing industry workforce (Milliot, "Measuring the Salary Divide"). The trade journal continued to limit the scope of their survey until 2006. This survey though focuses only on the gender gap and salary differences within the industry. The earliest salary survey that can be identified as having included racial identity in the survey questions is the 2013 Salary Survey, almost twenty years later, which stated that only eleven percent of the racial makeup of publishers were comprised of minorities (Milliot, "Publishing's Holding Pattern"). In connection to this change, the following year, 2014, was a monumental year for the publishing industry as the We Need Diverse Books organization was founded after a handful of authors created a rallying cry and hashtag on Twitter to encourage diversity in children's books (Kirch) and has continued to influence all publishers to expand their efforts in publishing diverse titles.

In the 2016 Salary Survey, *Publishers Weekly*'s Jim Milliot comments on the results of the study and how little they have changed in comparison to the 2015 results when it comes to diversity. He notes how there was only a one percent decrease in the number of employees in the industry who identified themselves as white (Milliot, "A Small Bump in Pay"). The results show "only 30% of all respondents said they thought publishing had made some strides in diversifying its workforce" (Milliot, "A Small Bump in Pay"). This survey calls attention to the lack of diversity in the workforce currently and begs the question as to how this lack affects the diversity of titles that are published each year.

In another survey conducted by Lee & Low Books, a publishing company that strives to produce diverse children's books, similar data was collected about the lack of diversity in the workforce. Cofounder of Lee & Low Books Jason Low presents on the company's blog their 2015 Diversity Baseline Survey results. The company dispersed 13, 237 surveys to reviewers and publishing employees, and 25.8 percent responded (Low). The survey covered many areas within the industry and categorized the answers under four sections: Race, Gender, Orientation, and Disability. In the Race section, the survey noted that seventy-nine percent of the industry overall is white. The other twenty-one percent was made up of large group of minorities, including African American, Native American, Asian, Hispanic, Middle Eastern, and Biracial (Low). Based on the survey's results, Low came to the conclusion that what is going in the publishing industry today is a "tendency—conscious or unconscious—for executives, editors, marketers, sales people, and reviewers to work with, develop, and recommend books by and about people who are like them." Low's conclusion can also be applied to the cultural bias that affects the production and representation of diverse titles in the publishing industry, suggesting

that a majority white publishing industry would produce their perception of diverse titles to an audience “who [is] like them” (Low).

While the industry as a whole plays a big role in the production and marketing of a book, no one can dispute the impact an editorial department has on authors and their stories. The editorial staff plays a major role in the relationship authors have with their stories and the authors’ intended audiences. In the 2016 Salary Survey, the racial makeup of editorial departments was not listed, but in the 2015 Diversity Baseline Survey created by Lee & Low Books, the results stated that eighty-two percent of the positions in editorial departments are held by white individuals while the remaining eighteen percent was composed of individuals from six different minority cultures: African-Americans, Native Americans/Alaskan Natives, Asian/Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latino/Mexican, Middle Eastern, and Biracial (Low). These results suggest that the lack of diversity in the editorial department—a department largely attributed to acquiring the stories that will be published and handles how they presented to the desired readers—could have a large effect on the number of diverse titles published every year and their representation. While this lack of diversity in the workforce must be recognized and addressed, another issue remains in the industry’s current state: why do writers of color struggle with getting published in a white majority industry, who desires and prides themselves on helping diverse voices to be heard?

II. Racism in the Foundation of Creative Writing

While the conversation about diversity in the publishing industry is so new to the field, the white hegemony over the publishing industry and creative writing dates back to colonization as white explorers and conquerors forced native peoples to conform to their religion, culture, and

language, and their writing was then published to show how “uncivilized” could be reformed, such as Phillis Wheatley’s poems paraded around white society by her master in the early 19th century (Poetry Foundation). According to an entry in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* written by scholar Matthew Sharpe, the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan believed that language has always been defined and critiqued by the majority and those in power. To Lacan, language determines the way human beings perceive the world. Language creates structure and law, order out of the imaginary, but the “father” determines language (Sharpe). The “father,” or the creator of the language rules, can be pinpointed in history as the majority, the dominating civilization that forces change and colonization. This domination of one culture’s view over thoughts and ideas can also be said for the current standard of creative writing. Since English is an Anglo-Saxon based language and maintained through white authorities overtime, the standards by which “good” creative writing is perceived and taught are defined by the white dominant culture.

In an article for *The New Yorker*, the Dominican-American author, Junot Díaz, writes about his experience as a student of color during his Masters of Fine Arts at Cornell, calling it “too white.” He notes the struggles that he and his fellow students of color experience learning from all white professors, who teach only a white, heterosexual, and masculine style of writing:

This white straight male default was of course not biased in any way by its white straight maleness—no way! Race was not a natural part of the Universal of Literature, and anyone that tried to introduce racial consciousness to the Great (White) Universal Literature would be seen as politicizing the Pure Art and betraying the (White) Universal (no race) ideal of True Literature. (Díaz 4)

Like the philosophy of Lacan, Díaz argues that the fundamentals of creative writing, which are defined by the dominant culture, affect the way writers of color tell their stories and ultimately lead to writers of color giving up on trying to break the barriers placed by the “Great (White) Universal Literature.”

Prompted by the current social justice movement, Black Lives Matter, David Mura attempts, like Díaz, to connect the ways whiteness controls the way writers of color express themselves and the way their writing is perceived by their white colleagues in his article, “Ferguson, Whiteness as Default, & the Teaching of Creative Writing.” Focusing specifically on minority writing within a workshop setting, Mura states that writers of color are scolded, shunned, and even shut down if they use ethnic vernacular or call upon their experiences as a person of color. Mura attributes this devaluation of student writing to the lack of appreciation and study of writers of color within academia. Mura also notes the power white culture has over standard literary practices, exemplifying this power with “the absence of a racial marker [meaning] the character is by default white” (40) in contrast to writers of color who have identify their characters with some kind of notification to the reader. Essentially, Mura argues that white standards affect the way writers of color identify themselves in their writing and that white writers need to acknowledge their privilege, particularly how race affects their own writing in order to dissolve the white standards that rule literary practices. This acknowledgement in the foundation of creative writing could change the way the majority white publishing industry evaluates stories of color.

Many writers of color have stated that when fellow students, professors, and editors evaluate the writer’s work they also evaluate the writer’s experiences, his or her voice, and his or her identity as a minority. Associate editor of the academic journal, *Callaloo*, and professor of

English at University of California, Los Angeles, Fred D'Aguiar admits in his article that even during a creative writer's growth they must defend their identity:

The idea of defending their [writers of color] race, group, or mental space was a corollary of their artistic location [creative writing education], a sort of trade-off between the gifts offered by a professional setting for the improvement of their art, versus the static of always having to defend a mental and creative space defined by the particulars of their ethnicity, gender, race, or ability. (86)

This statement suggests that the hegemonic standards placed upon creative writing have become the norm and force writers of color to face more criticism beyond their ability to write than white writers. D'Aguiar goes on in his article by explaining that "in terms of diversity, this partial or bias frame for training writers has promoted whites by excluding blacks, Hispanics, Latinos/Latinas, Pacific peoples, and people with disability in a roughly patriarchal, ableist white supremacist model passed off as democratic pedagogy" (88). The author finds, though, that this model is not just upheld by white "gatekeepers," but rather by minorities in authoritative positions (D'Aguiar, 88). He argues that this repetition of bias needs to be analyzed thoroughly, and I strongly agree. In order to breakdown the hegemony that has been established, the industry and the education that cultivates the growth of these writers must acknowledge these closed off standards in order to truly create a democratic literary world for both creative writers and publishers.

In agreement with Mura, Diaz, and D'Aguiar, Claudia Rankine argues that white supremacy within creative writing forces writers of color to feel alienated and erased from all forms of narration. The Frederick Iseman professor of poetry at Yale University explains that white institutions and structures invite writers of color to the "playing field" (48) of creative

narratives, yet those same writers of color feel under attack when they attempt to express the truth of their own realities, which do not comply or fall under the standards set by white society. When writers of color express their experiences and stories in their writing, Rankine notes how the authors' works are labeled as political, racial, or sociological because white readers cannot relate and move past the "nonwhite" surface they portray. Rankine suggests these labels are due to a philosophy that controls the way literature is valued: segregation forever. Because of this philosophy, the standard for literature is made binary, dividing narratives between the default "white" perspective and the "other" nonwhite perspective, which must be identified as such within the stories the writers are telling. This binary can be found in diverse titles published today, creating a separation instead of an inclusion that is desired by the industry.

III. Effects of a White Industry on Publication of Diverse Titles

In this predominantly white industry, many authors of color have expressed their struggles with recognition and publishing of their stories by editors who do not seem to fully understand and relate to their experiences, like the experiences Mura, Díaz, D'Aguiar, and Rankine reveal. Author of the book *Hungry for More: A Keeping-it-Real Guide for Black Women on Weight and Body Image*, Robyn McGee expresses in an article for *BitchMedia* that because her publishing company was unfamiliar with a black audience only a small portion of their marketing budget focused on authors and stories of color. She talks about the connection between the Lee & Low Books' 2015 Diversity Baseline Survey and *Publisher Weekly's* 2015 Salary Survey, noting the very obvious lack of diversity and how that affects authors of color. She points out that many authors of color resort to other alternatives to get their work published:

Because of all the hoops writers must jump through to get their book published, many Black authors opt out to either self-publish their work on Amazon or turn to small pay-to-play presses and literally sell books from the trunks of their cars ... [thus, without the backing of major publisher,] self-published authors are at a distinct disadvantage.

(McGee)

Her statement proves that while the number of diverse titles getting published may be increasing they are not receiving the high quality representation many white authors receive, making it harder for their stories to generate attention from their intended audiences. McGee also quotes author Desiree Kannel, who argues that the small percentage in diverse books and authors is because “white agents and editors may shy away from multicultural texts, feeling that they are not qualified to judge or just scared of taking on subjects, topics with which they are not familiar” (qtd. in McGee). Her beliefs connect back to Mura and Low’s beliefs that acknowledgement of this bias has been missing from academic and trade conversation.

Young adult author of the book series, *Hotlanta*, which was published by Scholastic, Denene Millner agrees with McGee and Kannel when she explains few publishers have “dedicated their resources to publishing black teen books.” Millner suggests that the publishing houses have a lack of understanding of existing audiences beyond white culture therefore do not venture to spend their money on marketing strategies that will not bring in sales. She notes how even after the books are released, they are hard to come by, and thus black teenage girls must resort to reading books about wealthy, rich white girls with whom they cannot relate to or books that misrepresent their own racial identities. According to Millner, there is a stereotypical perception of black authors in society, the idea that black authors only write about the hood, drug deals, prostitution, and gang violence. Millner notes how there is a lack of titles, specifically

black teen titles that depict black characters and black experiences without emphasizing stereotypes and tropes. Many white audience members—including teachers, librarians, and booksellers—believe that all books by black authors fall under these stereotypes and refuse to take chances on books for black teens. Millner calls for publishing houses to publish and promote modern, everyday stories geared toward black teens outside of the common slavery and ghetto childhood tales. She suggests that by supporting stories that present a variety of three-dimensional young black teen characters, the stereotypes can be broken and the doorways for more diverse books will be opened. This collective frustration with the publishing industry begs the question: why do publishers not fund minority books when they so adamantly encourage diversity within titles?

Mira Jacob, Indian American creative writing professor at New York University and author of the critically acclaimed *The Sleepwalker's Guide to Dancing*, experienced the erasure of her own culture when her editors felt that “her audience” would not understand her terminology or connect to her characters’ names. This act of erasure suggests that a lack of diversity in the publishing industry limits the range of audiences to which publishers market; thus the assumption is that the only audience that buys books is a white audience. She discussed this experience in a keynote speech at *Publishers Weekly's* Star Watch event in 2015. After the event, Jacob wrote an article reflecting on that experience. She expresses, in the article, her excitement to speak about race in the publishing industry to a crowd of publishing professionals that night, but her voice was unheard due to a horrible sound system and an uninterested crowd. She notes how the few minorities in the crowd congratulated her after her speech and whispered, “We wish they had heard it” (Jacob). By reflecting on her experience, she calls for publishing companies and for publishing professionals to recognize the apathy towards “the

statistics” (Jacob) these voices of color have become in a field that strives for inclusion. This apathetic response to a cry for recognition is universal for writers of color. Like the response to Calvin Reid’s 1994 article previously explored, this response suggests that tuning out is easier than making changes. Jacob is not as easy to ignore as Reid’s statistics though; she is begging for white publishing professionals to take action:

You are the ones who are already pushing the boundaries of what this industry takes on, you are the ones that need to know what I have found out again, and again and again, with every piece I publish: American audiences are capable of so much more than some in your industry imagine ... White Americans can care about more than just themselves.

They really can. And the rest of us? We are DYING to see ourselves anywhere. (Jacob)

With this call to action in place, Jacob and many other writers of color are begging for white editors to open their own critical lenses to discover more than the audiences the editors themselves can relate to and include the audiences of all nationalities and races.

Since statistics from *Publishers Weekly*’s salary survey and Lee & Low Books’s diversity baseline survey have proven that the majority of the industry is made up of white individuals, one can connect the pleas for change in diverse representation made by authors of color to those white individuals who make up the majority of the industry. This connection calls for white editors to reflect on how their conscious and unconscious biases are affecting the way diverse titles and authors are being perceived and represented in books. Unfortunately, few white editors and publishers have written on this topic and expressed how their own lack of experience affects the way they review submissions and their marketing strategies for audiences they do not fit their own.

In my experience as a white editor, I believe separating one's reading lens from one's editing lens is hard to do, especially during the first read-through of a new piece. More than this, however, I do believe the way that we develop our reading skills and tastes as children—whether in or outside the classroom—influences the way we view stories for the rest of our lives.

Recognizing the lack of published material on this topic and my own desire to be an effective editor, I aim to use my critical autoethnography as a reflection on my own cultural bias and how it affects the way I critique and help develop works by authors of color. Professor of communication at University of South Florida, Dr. Carolyn Ellis explains the usefulness of autoethnography by quoting American essayist Sven Birkerts: autoethnography is a “way to reflectively make sense of experience—using hindsight to follow the thread back into the labyrinth’ and to move readers to ‘contemplate similar ways of accessing [their] own lives’” (13). My autoethnography will analyze my editorial experience with three projects: Green Card Voices organization’s book, *Green Card Youth Voices: Immigration Stories from an Atlanta High School*, and Dr. Regina Bradley’s two upcoming books, *Chronicling Stankonia: OutKast and the Rise of Hip-hop in the South* and *The Ghosts Come Home*. Working with Green Card Voices, I helped lead a small team of student editors through the transcription, essay development, and line editing of twenty high school students’ immigration stories over a period of four months. In contrast to this editorial project, for Dr. Bradley’s two projects, one nonfiction book and the other fiction, I provided feedback on clarity, expansion, and structure of the first drafts of each book over the course of two semesters. Each experience challenged my editing approach and made me question the reasons behind my decisions to change or query a part of my authors’ works, and I will reflect on how these challenges helped me to develop the skills to defend the authenticity of the author’s voice while providing outside support for the development

of the stories being told. As an editor, the autoethnography helps me evaluate the decisions I make in terms of effectiveness, necessity, and essentially, the ethics. This reflection aims to place my experience in conversation with the many points discussed by the writers mentioned previously in the literature review.

Critical Autoethnography

I. *Beyond the Great (White) Canon: Looking at My Own White Readership*

I was in my bedroom with its bright purple walls covered with posters of the *Twilight* movie and my Hollywood crushes. I was in my early teens, probably thirteen or fourteen. My best friends and I were hungry for vampire novels and all things supernatural as were most teenage girls in the mid to late 2000s. We devoured every creature of the night story we could get our hands on—*Interview with a Vampire*, *Dracula*, and the *Twilight* series—and ultimately ended up with our introduction to the supernatural romance genre.

I was staying up late to continue reading *The Damned* by L. A. Banks, which had sucked me into its gripping plot: a tough heroine facing an evil vampire in order to protect her community, friends, and loved ones. My head tucked under the covers with a Dollar Store flashlight that barely shone through the darkness in hand and prayed that my parents wouldn't catch me and scold me, "How many times do we have to tell you, Kelsey? It's a school night. You have to go to sleep!" But I couldn't put that book down. I hadn't even gotten through the third chapter, and I was already hooked on the wicked fights scenes set in gritty underground bars, which traveling to made me feel all grown-up even if I was just experiencing them through a dimly lit page.

My eyes followed the light across the yellowish paper quickly. I turned the pages as quietly as possible so I wouldn't wake my little sister who slept in the twin bed across the room. Being only thirteen or so, this book was one of the many five-dollar paperbacks that introduced me to the world of womanhood—an awakening of sorts—but I wasn't quite prepared for the awakening that I received.

I remember reading that the heroine returned home from slaying monsters and crawled into bed with her partner, their dark skin entwining with each other—I stopped. *Wait a second. The main character is black?* My small-town, Southern-white-girl mind found itself in a state of shock. I read the line over again. Maybe I had miss read it. My flashlight revealed that I was not mistaken.

I closed the book, turned off my flashlight, and sat in the dark. There was an uneasy pit in my stomach. I had never read a story from the perspective of a black character before. I was used to *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* by Christopher Curtis Paul and *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry* by Mildred D. Taylor. Both focused on how black people dealt with racism in historical time periods but never gave me insight into the contemporary black experience. The stories I was given in school focused on topics that I was comfortable learning about: the Civil Rights Movement, the Antebellum South, and the Harlem Renaissance. I knew how to picture those stories—how to distance myself from the characters’ experiences yet still get what I felt was a full immersion in the story—since they were children’s historical fiction. In these books, the authors’ intention to deal with the topic of race in a way children could understand, making the stories easier to consume. Plus, I was reading them in a predominately white school. It was a safe environment where a white adult taught me how to process these new experiences through their interpretation of these characters. In contrast, this supernatural adult novel felt different to me because this story did not call attention to the protagonist’s experience as a black woman, instead just a woman, forcing me to process my interpretation of this main character’s black experience all by myself. My interpretation ended up connecting myself with the character so strongly that without any indication from the author on how the character’s skin tone affected her life, I had imagined up until that very moment a protagonist that looked like me: white, which to me at the

time meant middle-class and unaffected by the topic of race. As a young white girl in my small southern town, no one judged my white family or I by the color of our skin economically, socially, or politically. Our community judged us by our character and character alone. I was comfortable with being able to see skin tone and accept the person for their skin tone, but any further acceptance or understanding threatened to damage the walls that separated me from others.

That night I placed the book back on my shelf and never picked it back up in an effort to ignore the crack in my white lens and how it would begin to spread as I developed as a reader, a writer, and an editor.

It is with deep shame that I look back on that moment in my life. I hadn't thought about that book and my experience with it until I began evaluating where my own bias comes from when critiquing stories and the effects they have on the reader. I remember talking about the book with my closest friends, the ones who I trusted not to make fun of how uncomfortable I was with the way the book made me feel, but we never dove deeper into why I felt that way. Our discussions never looked past the surface level shock and asked "Why?" Instead, we laughed it off to the truth that we didn't want to deal with questioning our own unconscious racism. At the time, we convinced ourselves that we weren't being racist or close-minded by saying that the book just wasn't for us.

Over the next few years, I expanded my reading material to include experiences outside of my own and topics of races that would challenge my comfort zones. I devoured stories like *Noughts and Crosses* by Malorie Blackman, which explored the Civil Rights Movement in an alternate universe where Blacks were the dominant class and whites the minorities, and *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, which taught me what it was like to grow up as a

Latina girl in world that didn't like her brown skin. Those books helped me recognize the racism, and ultimately ignorance, in my closed-minded reading experience at an early age, as I was never challenged to see or recognize any other culture's experience outside of my small town, Southern white experience before. So when Jason Low writes about white editors choosing to produce to an audience who is "like them," I understand exactly what he means by editors gravitating to stories that are comfortable for them because, for a long time, I read only books by and whose protagonists were white like me, such as Clary in *City of Bones* by Cassandra Clare or Bella in Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight*. These authors' stories lacked any urgency to discuss race, despite having minor characters of color in their cast, because their main characters lived lives that weren't affected by the color of their skin. Therefore, these white female protagonists who never needed a racial marker like the color of their skin or any other physical description except the color of their hair or how ordinarily plain they looked were my comfort zone. I, like many other young white teens I knew growing up in my small town at the time, could identify with these characters in a way that didn't disrupt my understanding of what made me different from people of color. I call attention to this moment in my own reading life now is to pick apart why my expectations, as a white reader, were rattled by this revelation that I could connect with a character of a different race despite my privileged, narrow experience.

I ordered Banks's book again while writing this capstone, so that I could experience the story with new eyes. While making my purchase, I looked over the cover once more, and I can clearly see why I was attracted to the book in the first place. A strong, sexy woman is shown from just below the eyes down to her hips. She stands powerfully with her hands on her hips, skin exposed by her midriff and cleavage. Her leather jacket and metal cross necklace in hand are the visual cues of a kick butt, vampire romance heroine. Yet I seemed to miss her dark skin

tone that would have told me immediately that I was about to read a book outside of my culture. So why did I still picture a white woman as the lead, and why was I so unraveled when my expectation was disrupted?

When David Mura discusses the “default white” of creative writing, I pondered my own reading experience. I never questioned why only authors of color had to racially mark their characters. As I explore my career as an editor, I am still wrestling with the question of how to find equity in editorial decisions such as this. Is it even necessary to distinguish skin tone in descriptions of characters, or is it better to place racial markers on all characters to ensure fairness for all characters? But these questions would not have surfaced during my career if it hadn't been for *The Damned*. After experiencing this disruption in my little white bubble with Banks's novel, I became aware of more stories by authors of color as I moved away from my supernatural phase. Books like *Noughts and Crosses* and *The House on Mango Street* awakened me even further about the experiences of people of color and confirming for me that I do indeed live a privileged, white Southern life that narrows my experience of the world around me. My love of reading ultimately led me to pursue a degree in English and a career as an editor, but it was not until I entered the Masters in Professional Writing program at Kennesaw State University (KSU) that I began evaluating my role as a white editor working with authors of color two years ago. Through my scholarship in the program I came across Mura's article, and it brought me back to my memory of *The Damned* by L.A. Banks, like most parts of life clouded by my white privilege, which is to say that I have lived comfortably in a life that is not challenged economically or socially because of the color of my skin.

The unspoken creative writing standard remained an unconscious yet accepted part of the way I viewed creative writing: white characters do not need racial markers to be identified by the

readers but characters of color do. I do not recall if there was a racial marker written in Banks's story before the scene with her lover or if I had completely blown over it as I was so veraciously reading the intense storyline and action-packed scenes. I obviously enjoyed the story and the author's ability to tell it with her mastery of pace through a whirlwind of fight scenes within the first few chapters and her excellent world-building as her protagonist moved from one setting to the next, but my reading experience had never been pushed outside of my comfort zone before this book. This book, while I could not recognize this at the time, forced my thirteen-year-old self to admit that characters outside of my own race could make me feel the same way white characters could, that I could imagine their experience outside of the caricatures created in the white canon taught in school. The biggest revelation though was the admission that people of color are more than just the exotic experiences stories portray them as.

Stepping outside of my comfort zone, outside of the white literary canon, changed many of my perceptions of the way I view the world and others around me, which not only helped me to develop compassion and empathy as a human being but the ability to recognize the similarities between characters of color and the white protagonists that my thirteen-year-old self thought were the only relatable heroes to me since I could relate to how race never really affected their lives whereas in most books I read about characters of color the topic of race was unavoidable because race so heavily affects people of color socially and economically. Toni Morrison, in her book *The Origin of Others*, was able to put into words what my thirteen-year-old self couldn't formulate:

Language (saying, listening, reading) can encourage, even mandate, surrender, the breach of distances among us, whether they are continental or on the same pillow, whether they are distance of culture or the distinctions and indistinctions of age or gender, whether

they are the consequences of social invention or biology. Image increasingly rules the realm of shaping, sometimes becoming, often contaminating, knowledge... These two godlings, language and image, feed and form experience... routine media presentations deploy images and language that narrow our view of what humans look like (or ought to look like) and what in fact we are like. (35-37)

Her description of how language affects our perception of others hit home for me in two ways. First, I now better understand how my limited reading experience affected how I separated my experience from the experiences of people of color. Second, I understand as an editor how important it is to continue to uplift and support authors of color and their stories as their words shape the readers like the books I read shaped me, and how can we best uplift these stories if we limit our experiences to reading only stories about people like us and by people like us?

In my editorial experience, I have learned that editors take their own social constructs and make their decisions based off of them. John K. Young affirms this by explaining that these constructs are built on false foundations and the editor ends up changing the author's work to fit the editor's image of what the audience will want from the piece (19). My social constructs while reading Banks's novel were built by my limited reading material. Like most American high schools, my literature classes focused on a predominantly white canon that did not truly introduce me to the experiences of cultures and characters outside of my own race, or at least those stories that were not already accepted by the white standard Mura discusses in his article. Young notes that this white standard, which he analyzes specifically during the Harlem Renaissance, has created this idea of "double audience" for authors of color: those on the "inside" and those on the "outside" (19). According to Young, authors of color are forced to write for two audiences by using racial markers and explaining aspects of their culture in ways

that white writers do not in order to appeal to a white audience. This need to appeal to a generalized “white audience” stems from a systemic belief that the only consumers of books were educated white readers (Young), which during the time of the Harlem Renaissance may have been a logical assumption for a white editor due to the lack of economic and educational resources accessible to the majority of people of color then, but that is not the case today.

According to a survey done in 2015 by the Pew Research Center, seventy-six percent of white participants reported they had read at least one book in the previous twelve months, while sixty-six percent of Blacks and fifty-nine percent of Hispanics said they had done so as well. These close percentages call attention to the fact that readership and the racial makeup of the publishing industry’s market has changed since the time of Harlem Renaissance writers and editors.

So in recognizing that the markets for books no longer consist of predominately educated individuals who do not identify as persons of color, my fellow white editors and I should recognize that we must approach the manuscripts we work with through a lens that encompasses more than the “like us” to which Low refers. Former senior editor of St. Martin’s Press, Michael Denny argues, “pandering to the marketplace negates the reason you [the editor] would sign up such a book in the first place—your delight in the power and freshness of a voice and message that expand your own horizon” (247). If white editors truly stand behind movements like We Need More Diverse Books or organizations like the Children’s Book Council, then we have a duty to preserve the integrity of our writer’s voice. To do so, we must represent our own culture but so many others as well. This representation will allow us to provide the text with the most thorough review, even if we may not have the knowledge or experience to determine what those outside our culture would expect of the manuscript. I explored this reviewing process through my own lack of experience while working in the fall semester of 2017 as an editorial

intern with Dr. Regina Bradley on her nonfiction book, *Chronicling Stankonia*, about OutKast and the rise of hip-hop in the South.

II. Watch Out for Pitfalls: Testing My Own Ability (and My Bias) as an Editor

In the summer of 2017, I traveled to London and presented my literature review on the topic of diversity in the publishing industry at the Great Writing International Creative Writing Conference. I had spent months and months prior to the conference reading scholarly and trade articles on the topic of racist feedback from editors, limited funding provided to books by authors of color, the demographic make-up of departments in the industry, and more. Thus, in the literature review, I focused on editing and the recent reveal of racist feedback from editors to authors of color today. I spoke with fellow writers and publishing professionals from around the world while I was there, which excited me to see how race in the publishing industry affected other countries. Speaking to these fellow writers and professionals solidified my desire to explore this topic further as my capstone, so when I learned that Dr. Bradley was looking for an editorial intern during the developmental process of her book, I knew right away what I wanted to explore in this internship: how I would really react in a situation where my bias and lack of experience was tested.

On the day of our first meeting, I remember how afraid I was to admit how narrow and limited my understanding of how seemingly different the black Southern experience was from my own and how practically nonexistent my knowledge of rap music and its history was when I began my internship with Dr. Bradley. I sat on the hallway floor outside of her office since I had gotten there really early. I wanted to make a good impression. I was eager to develop my relationship with her on a strong foundation. Ready to employ the research that I was exploring

about equity in the publishing industry in my literature review, I was eager to explore the best editorial practices.

Yet as I sat in that hallway with the sounds of others students passing me droning in my ear, my brain began to question why I was there in the first place: Was I even the right fit for this internship, especially this piece? Shouldn't a person more qualified, a person who could relate to the Southern, black female experience be the one to give Dr. Bradley comments on how to revise the drafts of her text, which related much of her scholarly work to her upbringing in Georgia? After all, I am a white woman whose experience of the South, I presumed, was extremely different from Dr. Bradley's as I had never been forced to see the South for its deep-rooted racism through its civil war and plantation tourism and how that affected people of color. I feared that my ignorance of her experience would lead me to provide feedback that would insult and other her work rather than respect and uplift like I wanted to. Little did I realize that my anxiety over working with an author of color for the first time one-on-one and my desire to respect Dr. Bradley distanced my perception of Dr. Bradley and her work from my abilities as an editor and, ultimately, as another human being. I ended up othering Dr. Bradley before I even met her.

I had gotten so caught up in all the research and stories I had read about editors insulting and tokenizing their authors that the excitement for this internship was morphing into self-doubt. Nerves began to build up in my stomach, knotting and twisting my insides. What if I unintentionally said something that was racist or biased? I had read so many articles and Twitter conversations that summer about white editors making comments that were so obviously racist that I couldn't fathom how someone in the industry could think those comments were acceptable

responses. For instance, my research led me to an article for *The Booklist Reader* about Leonard Chang's experience where an editor rejected his novel for not being exotic enough:

The characters, especially the main character, just do not seem Asian enough. They act like everyone else. They don't eat Korean food, they don't speak Korean, and you have to think about ways to make these characters more 'ethnic,' more different. We get too much of the minutiae of [the characters'] lives and none of the details that separate Koreans and Korean-Americans from the rest of us. For example, in the scene when she looks into the mirror, you don't show how she sees her slanted eyes, or how she thinks of her Asianness. (qtd. in Chang)

While I could never imagine myself writing something so blatantly racist as this editor's feedback to an author, I found myself fearing another quote from another editor rejecting his manuscript that he mentioned: "What fails for me is that it [that] virtually nothing is made of the fact that these guys are Koreans. I suppose in the alleged melting pot of America that might be a good thing, but for the book it doesn't lend anything even lightly exotic to the narrative or the characters" (Chang). As a white editor, I could imagine myself making this kind of comment with the intention to highlight the uniqueness of a culture outside my own without realizing that I would be playing into what Chang calls "exoticism for exoticism's sake." As it was so early in my career, my first time working with an author of color one-on-one, and being so eager to promote diversity through my position, I could imagine myself unintentionally enabling tokenism, which according to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* is "the policy or practice of making only a symbolic effort (as to desegregate)" ("tokenism"). It's possible that I could lose sight of the genuine need for diversity in the industry and tokenize the author's story in order to make an increase in sales or to make the publisher look inclusive. I would other my author's

culture rather than honor and respect her culture like I had truly intended to. Thus, my fear bubbled up in that moment on the floor outside of Dr. Bradley's office.

The room around me felt so far away that it took me a second to realize Dr. Bradley was standing in her doorway. With a warm smile, she asked, "Are you Kelsey?"

Her southern drawl made me feel at home, yet there was a hint of something that was farther South than my small town of Social Circle. The sound of her voice was honeyed, relaxed, and deliberate in the way she rolled the words out of her mouth.

"Yes, ma'am," I replied.

"Well, come on in, Miss Editor," Dr. Bradley said and waved me into her office.

Having just started teaching that semester at Kennesaw State, Dr. Bradley's office wasn't quite as "lived in" as I had seen many of my other professors' spaces. But the few items that I did see told me a lot about her, particularly her large bookshelf full of books by black scholars and writers, a picture frame with a photo of her and her husband resting on her desk, and an unboxed Pop! figurine of Marvel's Black Panther superhero on the shelf behind her. Seeing that figurine behind her settled some of my nerves since I am a collector of Pop! superhero figurines myself, and I knew that if she was as big a nerd as I was that we were going to get along just fine.

In our first conversation, we spent sometime getting to know each other. I learned she was from Albany, a small town in the far southern part of Georgia, and just as I suspected, she was a big fan of superheroes and all things "nerd." We connected over our small town experience and our love of sci-fi and Marvel. Once we got comfortable with each other, we started discussing our plans for the semester.

Despite my racially charged concerns, I knew that I wanted to set up our work together on equal terms. I wanted to make sure that Dr. Bradley knew she could use me as a resource during her drafting process, but I also wanted to advantage of the vast knowledge that Dr. Bradley had of her topic to make up for what I lacked in experience. So I came prepared with a list of questions. To make sure that I could be the best resource for her, I asked Dr. Bradley what she wanted to accomplish with *Chronicling Stankonia*, who she thought her audience was, and what she expected out of the feedback I sent her.

“I want to know where I could expand on sections of the work, where things are muddled or confusing,” she told me, and I knew I could give her such feedback. I also knew though that I would probably be confused about more of the topic than her intended audience would be.

“Well, truthfully, I don’t know much about hip-hop or OutKast,” I admitted even though I was worried that it would make me look unqualified for the job and make Dr. Bradley regret her decision to take me on as her editorial intern.

“That’s okay,” she said. Her smile never wavered. “That will actually be really helpful in the editing process because you could point out where I needed to develop or further explain my ideas for an audience without a background in southern hip-hop or OutKast. Have you ever listened to OutKast before?”

“I don’t think so. I don’t really listen to rap other than the few songs that come on Star 94.” I felt silly admitting that my exposure to most music was through the local pop radio station.

“You probably have,” she said and chuckled. “Look them up on Youtube, and listen to some tracks. You don’t have to listen to them all, but playing a few should help you familiarize yourself with their music. I’m not expecting you to be an OutKast scholar.”

That night, I went home and made myself a playlist of some OutKast songs on Spotify. As the music played, I realized that I did know them and that they sang songs like “Hey Ya!” and “I Like the Way You Move,” which my mom blasted at full volume in our mini van on the way home from school. So when I received the outline of her book and the rough draft of her introduction later that week, I dove into her writing with a bit more confidence than I had while sitting in the hallway a few days before.

Recently, I read over the comments I made on the first draft she gave me, and I noticed how careful I was with my wording:

- “Not sure the ‘For example’ is needed. It halts the flow for the reader.”
- “Is the intended audience supposed to be familiar with this statement [by hip-hop artist, Pastor Troy] and his music? Do you go on to explain later in the work about the overall themes of this rapper?”
- “Feels like the end of the sentence is missing. Since you say ‘not only,’ the reader may be looking for the ‘but...’”

In my comments, I asked many questions about Dr. Bradley’s audience, guessing I perceived what the reader might expect but never outright stating “change this to that.” My editing process reveals a self-awareness of my limitations to connect with the work my author was producing. By asking questions and using less powerful phrases like “suggest,” “not sure,” and “feels like,” I stepped down as an authority figure on writing and acknowledged the writer’s own control and power over what she had to say. Prominent editor of the *Chicago Manual of Style*, Carol Fisher Saller tells upcoming editors in her book, *The Subversive Copy Editor*, that “in most editing projects, there will be issues should leave to the writer, and doing so doesn’t hurt your [the editor’s] credibility” (27). While I was embarrassed by my lack of hip-hop knowledge in that

moment, I found that my author never judged my editorial abilities instead she welcomed my questions and trusted my editing abilities just as she said she did in our first meeting.

In each of my edits of her drafts, I divulged in my feedback what I struggled to understand as a reader, which revealed what I lacked knowledge of personally and what I felt might need more explanation for readers who didn't have prior knowledge on the subject. After she reviewed my feedback, our weekly meetings about my feedback and where she was at in the drafting process allowed me to be a sounding board for her ideas, what she intended to say in each chapter, and what she would need to add or change in order accomplish that goal. Saller suggests upcoming editors "use [their] experience to suggest changes that will help the generalist reader, if it's appropriate" (Saller 30). Keeping this advice in mind, my feedback evolved over time. A month or so into our work together, I began referring to the experience that I did have and asked, "Looking at this from a [KSU] Writing Assistant POV, it bothers me that his quote is not attached to your own words. Is this intentional or something that you planned on coming back to", and acknowledging what I didn't know by stating, "In this paragraph, I think as a reader I need a clear explanation of what Jones's book is about. I can see that it is about black slave masters but what is the main story. Earlier, you break down *Django* (2012) in such a way that if I didn't know the movie already I could still understand what you meant by your analysis. Since I don't know the book, I think it's necessary to do something similar so readers like me can follow your meaning." I felt that it was appropriate to tell Dr. Bradley that I, as a reader, was unable to follow her meaning through out the chapter and ultimately lost sight of her purpose. By focusing on her use of examples from outside sources and transition of thought, my feedback kept in mind what Saller calls the "generalist reader" rather than my lack of cultural experience.

Often, I had to question whether my queries were really worth querying. In one of her chapters, Dr. Bradley writes, “Both Big Boi and Andre buck the status quo, signifying upon the lack of familiarity with past and current Southern sensibility.” The “upon” in the sentence made me pause. I read the sentence over a few times, thinking that the use of the word didn’t make sense. Was there a word missing or did she mean “that” instead? Knowing that even my author’s academic and formal writing tone clearly had it’s own unique sound, I wondered if the phrase “signifying upon” was a dialect phrase that I was not accustomed to. After all, I thought that I had heard the phrase before, but I couldn’t remember where.

Instead of striking the “upon” out and marking the word as “incorrect,” I made a note to the side to come back to this part of the chapter when we discussed my feedback in our next meeting. I also wanted to do a little research to find out where I had heard it before and whether it was a phrase other readers would either recognize or be able to research it’s meaning easily. At that time, I was reading Young’s *Black Writers, White Publishers*, and in his introduction, he quotes Henry Louis Gates definition of “signifyin(g)” as ‘the figure of the double-voiced’” (qtd in Young 25). Once I realized where I had heard the term before, I wondered if this definition gave me a little more context as to what Dr. Bradley meant by her statement about Big Boi and Andre. I wondered if her audience would see the double-voice Dr. Bradley was exploring in OutKast’s lyrics. I imagined that her intended audience would, but I needed to know if her unintended audience, which I had to include in my understanding of the generalist reader, could still find meaning without further explanation. Plus, my search hadn’t helped me determine if “upon” was needed.

My research of the phrase lead me articles on Gates’ book, *The Signifying Monkey*, and straight to the book itself, which made me feel good that readers who would be unfamiliar the

term's use (like myself) could easily find access to its definition and more information should they wish to explore it further. I still couldn't figure out addition of the "upon" though, so I consulted *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* to remind myself of the word's use as a more formal version of "on" and decided that I would bring up with Dr. Bradley that as an editor I didn't think the word was necessary.

While it may seem like I spent a lot of effort to look into one word, I was very glad that I did comb through my research for information on "signifying." Saller states, "efficient editors know how to look things up" (56), and as Dr. Bradley's editor, I wanted to educate myself before questioning my author to better understand what a reader could do while diving into her work. Despite this focus on the generalist reader and my use of research though, I found myself assuming what that reader would expect, which may not have been the most appropriate action in that moment.

Even though I was trying to stay self-aware of what I felt I needed to provide feedback on and how I gave that feedback during my editing process, I still slipped and phrased my feedback as if I were the writer. Halfway through the semester, I got too comfortable and overconfident in areas of her book that I had prior knowledge about. In one draft of a chapter, Dr. Bradley analyzes the use of hip-hop in films and TV shows, like Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* and WGN's *Underground*, to rewrite slave narratives. I had seen Tarantino's film a few months, and it had left a big impact on me. I thought I understood what the film was about, the significance of Tarantino's dark humor, and how the film reminded American viewers of the atrocities that were daily life of slaves in our history. Thus, I felt pretty confident about reading and critiquing her analysis of it because I could follow along her explanation easily. I knew what Dr. Bradley wanted to say, or at least I thought I did. So, I wrote comments like "Yeah, I think I

would change ‘via hip-hop track’ at the end of previous paragraph to something like ‘via West’s lyrics... I would mention how this is something only related to modern viewers which like the music uses the familiar for viewers to understand the unfamiliar.’” In writing these comments, I forgot what Denny calls the “Supreme Rule of Editing”: the book was the author’s, not mine (245). I should have phrased these suggestions better. I should have turned them into questions that informed my author about how I, as a reader, was curious about a statement and asked if she planned on going into further detail later in the piece. I should have mentioned how as I read, the transition between the paragraphs confused me and asked if she could clarify the connection she was making between the two thoughts. Saller teaches editors that the first habit they should build is to “ask first and ask nicely” (16). In the culture of editing, asking for clarification from the author is best way for us, especially white editors working with authors of color, to avoid assuming and overstepping their bounds as the voice of the book. In my confidence, I lost sight of my purpose as her editor and my job to uphold her intentions for the work.

By working through my assumptions and learning to ask more questions though, I developed an open relationship between Dr. Bradley and me. This relationship threw out the stereotypical roles of authoritative editor and stubborn writer that often limit the openness of the author-editor dialogue during the production of a book. In our mutual relationship, Dr. Bradley’s intentions for her work could be heard, and I could truly uphold and defend the integrity of the manuscript because I knew what the author’s, therefore the story’s, purpose was. I recognize that our weekly in-person meetings are not the standard for the editor/writer relationship in the publishing industry. So what happens when the relationship between the editor and the writer cannot be explored through constant communication? In the spring of 2018, I experienced how hard it could be to uphold the authenticity of the author’s voice without constant communication

when I worked as an editor for the nonprofit organization Green Card Voices' upcoming collection of immigration stories from high-school students in Atlanta, Georgia.

III. I Give You My Word: Recognizing the Trust Placed in Me as an Editor

“Should I change this?” Emma, one of my junior editors, asked me during our editorial round table day. Emma was the fourth or fifth person to have had their hands on the essay before me. Months before hand, representatives of the nonprofit organization, Green Card Voices who aimed to publish the stories of young immigrants to promote change in the way Americans viewed immigrants, interviewed and recorded high school immigrants about their immigration process and lives before moving to the U.S. Next, the audio files of those interviews were given to student editors from Kennesaw State University (KSU) to transcribe with explicit instruction to “retain as much verbatim phrasing as possible... [to] keep the ‘voice’ of the student present in the essay.” The editor’s task was to rearrange the flow of the essay, pairing themed paragraphs together before the story was printed out and brought before the high schooler for a meeting. Together, the author and the editor revised and expanded the draft’s already reorganized structure, to transform it from an interview to a more cohesive narrative essay. By the time it got to Emma’s hands, the story had been manipulated by both the author and the editor multiple times, but there was still more work to do. After all, my team had been instructed to edit through twenty-five essays just like this one in one day, cutting some down by thousands of words or copyediting sections for clarity. So we were running on a tight schedule, to say the least.

The small room was packed with five student editors and myself as we poured over stacks of papers. We had been calling out to one another with questions and concerns and working furiously as we attempted to have all the essays in a matter of hours, and the task turned out to be more challenging than we had anticipated as my junior editors sought my guidance for

decisions they weren't sure how to handle, just as Emma was doing with this one particular essay.

"Let me see," I said, taking the paper she held out to me. I read a few lines before the sentence my junior editor had marked with her pencil and a few line afterwards to better understand what the high school author was trying to say. Discussing her immigration process from Rwanda to the United States, the author wrote, "Some people from America came to take us in interview, so we do interview in two years." As I read over the line again and again, I kept wondering if the author meant that her family was interviewed for two years or if her family was chosen for the interview but the interview didn't actually take place until two years later.

For other essays, our team had decided not to make any changes to grammar or verb tense if the author's meaning was still clear. Saller suggests, "Being super focused on following the rules can cause us to lose sight of what's important and what's trivial in producing a clear and readable document" (58), and when it came to minor grammar and style changes, we felt that areas, such as "we're gonna come to the US" or "We had food, drinks, and we danced all night," in the essays were appropriate places for us to disregard grammar rules in order to protect the authors' stories. In keeping with Green Card Voices's commitment to the authentic voice of the story, the representatives had explained my fellow student editors and I that they were "not interested in poetic prose, [they were] interested in the ways the students express their stories with the words they have at their disposal." So we maintained the goals of our publisher.

For tougher cases like this essay though where we had no idea what the author was meaning to say, we would look to the student editor who transcribed the essay since they were our indirect line to the author's desire for the essay. Unfortunately, this author's editor wasn't there that day. As the senior editor of the team, I ultimately had to make a call on whether to

leave the author's writing as is for the sake of authenticity or change the structure of the sentence for the sake of clarity for the reader. In the moment, I decided to change the structure to "Some people from America came to interview us, so we were interviewed for two years" in order to provide a clearer picture to the audience as to what the author's experience was truly like. My decision to clarify that the author was interviewed for two years was based on the experience of other authors who emigrated from Rwanda who had explained that their interview process had taken a long time, some even years. So I inferred that this author was trying to convey her process was similar. I also chose to make this structural change because I understood that our target audience for the book, according to our publisher Green Card Voices and the senior editors, would be non-immigrant American citizens and that our goal for the collection of these stories was to humanize the experiences of immigrants and refugees. Thus, I put the book's purpose above the author's voice.

I look back on that decision and wonder if I made the right one. Denny argues, "It is the integrity of the writer's voice and vision alone that can provide the editor with a true standard for the editing process... The goal of the editing is to make the book better, not different" (247). While I agree with Denny's statement, I could not know what the writer's vision was without any direct communication, and my decision to change the structure was not made with the intention to make the story different but ultimately better for the reader so he or she could truly understand what the author had experienced before coming to the U.S. In contrast to my editing process with Dr. Bradley, my team and I did not have the luxury of querying every part of the story that we needed more clarification about what the author remembers doing and what she was meaning to say with this statement. We ultimately had to make what we felt were the best decisions in order to meet our deadline.

While we were given the freedom to rearrange the structure of these personal narratives and copyedit these non-native English speakers' grammar, we had to remember our responsibility to make our changes and corrections with caution and care. These authors trusted us to present their personal stories in the best light. As transcribers and editors, our position "to champion the writer and protect her project", as Saller (9) defines it, weighed even heavier on our shoulders, especially for the stories that belonged to the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA) students. At the same time these students were sharing their immigration stories, American government had shut down that January due to indecision over what the fate of the program and these students' futures would be. Back in September of the year before, President Donald Trump had threatened to end the program if Congress didn't terminate the program or find another solution for the protection of thousands of unauthorized migrants who entered the country when they were minors, like the students in our collection (Bryan). The government finally passed a bill that funded the Pentagon and domestic programs but did nothing to protect these students (Bresnahan, Scholtes, and Caygle). I was personally assigned one of these Dreamers' stories: Yehimi, a teacher from one of the schools involved with the project who had an incredible story to tell.

I had never transcribed anything before this experience, so I was thankful that Green Card Voices provided a link to a free download for transcription software. The software had the ability to slow the audio down so that I could listen and type at the same time, which I thought was pretty cool since I was afraid that I would have to speed up my typing skills. So the first night I started on the project, I tucked myself away in my room, away from all the noise of my home, and put on my earphones. I pressed the play button and was presently surprised by Yehimi's voice. It was warm and friendly, but her tone was very serious. I assumed this was

because she recognized how important sharing her story was in the country's current political climate. She started out telling her interviewer, Green Card Voices Executive Director and Cofounder Tea Rozman Clark, about her homes back in Mexico, how over time her father would return from the U.S. to build them out of wood or concrete, and what she remembered about leaving in her community. I spent the first few minutes of the audio file stopping and rewinding as I got use to listening to slower-paced speech as well as familiarizing myself with her voice. This process was frustrating for me as it took me ten minutes to work through the first three minutes of a forty-minute audio file. I was starting to realize I was in for a long night.

Because Yehemi has been in the U.S. far longer than the most of her students, her English is as fluent as a native speaker's, so I had little reason to change any grammar or sentence structures. Throughout her story though she would share conversations she had with her parents or other family members in Spanish before translating them to English. I spent more time reviewing these parts of the file than any other because I have a very limited Spanish vocabulary. I haven't taken a Spanish course since I was in my freshman or sophomore year of high school, which I only took to fulfill my college application requirement. My inability to comprehend the language plus the slowed-pace of the audio exaggerating her vowels and consonants made my teeth grind. I hated not being able to decipher what she was trying to say. At one point I got so frustrated with listening to a line, I waited until she gave the interviewer the English translation. Then I typed out the English translation into the Google translator online and pressed "translate." I used this tool to give me at least a hint as to what she was saying in Spanish and how I was supposed to spell it out. Like I mentioned earlier, Saller claims that "efficient editors know how to look things up" (56), and in this moment, I need to pick up my efficiency. Depending on the transcription software and my ears alone, the process was too tedious and infuriating for me to

really feel like I was getting anything accomplished. So I used the only resource at my fingertips: the Google translate website. I was very aware though how untrustworthy the online tool was since it wouldn't be able to identify colloquial terms or provide the most accurate translation. So I made sure to highlight the sections I translated so that Yehimi could correct my spelling and transcription in our one-on-one meeting.

My frustration only rose I tried to determine where sentences ended and where others began, which is a typical struggle when converting a conversation into a written document I know. I kept pausing and rewinding and listening to parts of her complicated and visceral story over and over again. I was exhausted from the constant stop and go, but at the same time, I began to feel so strongly involved in Yehimi's experience that I didn't want to change the order of the story when I had finished transcribing the interview weeks later. Her story was so personal; how could I change it for her?

Knowing I would get her opinion after I had made the changes, I did as I was instructed and reordered her story in what I felt was chronological order. I made notes to myself to ask her if the sections that I moved that pertained to her childhood in Mexico up to the beginning of her draft made sense or if she had a different vision in mind. I also saved the original transcription as a separate file so that her original structure was maintained in its purest form. Thinking about the reader and the purpose of the book, I also felt that the most powerful parts of her story should go at the end. I remember listening to Yehimi tell about how much she appreciated her parents' sacrifice in order to build a life for her family in the U.S:

I think it's [my parents] who lost the ability to see their parents. My mom's dad is here, but I remember when I was in elementary school, like almost right after we came here, my mom's sister committed suicide. So they lost the ability to see their family members,

who were struggling. Or for my dad, he couldn't see his dad except for up until the moment he was about to pass away because he had cancer. I believe the most human thing is that when your relatives are passing away or when they're sick that you can be there and provide support and just enjoy that time with them. And my parents didn't get that, and so I think it's them who have lost. It's because of their sacrifice that I want to use my voice to speak out. (Cambrón 110)

Her words made my heart heavy, and I had to take a break from transcribing for a while to let them sink in. As an editor, I wanted the reader to feel the power of her statement and her experience the way I did, and I knew that her words would do the job. But rhetorically, I felt that they would have a stronger impact towards the end of the essay rather than the beginning where she told this part of her story in her interview.

On February 15th, 2018, I drove to Cross Keys High School in Atlanta, Georgia with the images of distraught teenagers flashing in my mind. Just the day after the horrific high school shooting in Parkland, Florida, I wondered how hard it would be to get into the school to speak with Yehemi about my draft of her essay. Would the school security be heightened? Would they even let me in? Before I could really worry about that I first had to find parking after dealing with the wretched Atlanta traffic that made me ten minutes late. There were no signs directing me to a visitor's section. I actually had to park in the back of the school near the trailers between two buildings—one that I thought had to be the main school building as it was long and continued down towards the front of the school and another that I thought had to be the cafeteria since there seemed to be a smell of sausage or bacon coming from the vents suggesting that breakfast had been served not too long ago. I tried to breath and calm my nerves as I grabbed my

laptop bag out of my car and walked across the cracked parking lot toward the sidewalk. I would just have to admit that the struggle to find parking made me later than I had planned.

Many students were running late too as they pulled their cars into the same lot and parked next to mine. While I have been mistaken as a student on a high school campus before, I felt very out of place walking across that parking lot, and it wasn't because this time I was dressed in nice slacks and heels. A young Hispanic boy hopped out of his car and rushed into the main office with his backpack slung wildly over his shoulder. Three young black girls walked from the main building to a trailer in the distance, their laughter carrying over to me on the February wind. At my own high school in Social Circle, Georgia, I was one of many white kids in a student body of roughly five hundred students. Here I was one white woman amongst a student body of "80% Hispanic, 11% Black, 6% Asian, 1%, [sic] White, and less than 1% other racial groups, including 2 or more races" ("About Us"). As I was buzzed into the school, my awareness of how much an outsider I was in this environment became more concrete. This school was the students and my author's safe zone to be who they are without fear of judgment from people who chose to see only skin deep, and by walking through those doors, I was taking on the weight of that honor and responsibility.

These students' trust sat heavily on my heart that day as I stood before the front office receptionist and told him why I was visiting. The devastating story of the Parkland shooting and the innocent lives lost still rattled through me, and I could sense that it was affecting the school's staff as well. When I told the receptionist that I was one of the editors with Green Card Voices, he recognized my reason for being on the premise since this wasn't the first day of visits, but he was still wary of me when I told him who I was there to see.

"Yeh-hee-mee."

I admit I felt silly trying to pronounce her name. I'd never seen a name like hers before, so I pronounced it like it was spelled, which I thought was the most logical decision at the time.

"I don't have anyone on my list with that name," he told me, looking over his tinted computer screen at me.

"Really?" I asked. I started to panic. I looked at my planner to make sure that I had written down the right school.

Meeting at Cross Keys at 10:00 A.M. on Thursday, February 15th with Yehemi.

"Are you sure?" I asked. "My notes say that she's from Cross Keys and I was supposed to have a meeting with her at ten."

"What's her name again?"

"Yeh-hee-mee."

He looked at something on his computer once more. "Do you have a last name?"

"No," I said though I tried to remember if they did give me her last name on any of the documents. "We were only given first names and the schools they would be at."

Before he could reply, his phone rang, and his attention was pulled away from me. I could see the parents waiting behind me were starting to get irritated. Finally, the receptionist hung up the phone and said, "Yeah, I don't have any students with that name on my list."

"Oh, she's not a student. She's a teacher."

"She's still not on the list," he said. "Do you know what class she teaches?"

"I think Art?" Though I couldn't be for sure.

"Oh wait." A light bulb seemed to go off in his head. "I think I know who you are talking about. Hold on a few minutes."

I sat in one of the seats by the front door while he got back on the phones and the parents behind me moved up the line. When he was finally through helping the parents, the receptionist turned to me and said, “Yay-mee wasn’t informed that you would be here at ten, so she’s having to rearrange her classes. You can head on down to the library where they are holding the meetings, and she will meet you there when she can.”

I nodded and headed down the hall he pointed to. *What did he call her? Had I been mispronouncing her name this entire time?* Heat flooded my cheeks. Well, there went the trust she could place in me. Out the window. How could she trust an editor who couldn’t even pronounce her name correctly? I tried to remember how the receptionist said her name while I waited in the back room with some of my fellow editors. If I remembered and said her name correctly in person, then I could just pretend that I didn’t just spend thirty minutes trying to make the receptionist find a person with the wrong name. But her name escaped me.

So when I finally met this bright, joyful young teacher, we introduced ourselves and asked Yehimi teach me how to say her name, admitting my blunder earlier and the trouble it caused me. She laughed and said, “That’s how most people try to pronounce my name.”

“How is the editing process going?” Yehimi asked from where she sat in the student desk next to mine. It felt strange to be seated in these kinds of seats once more. I wondered how I ever survived a whole seven hours a day in these hard, metal and plastic chairs.

“Well, so far I’ve only done the transcription part, and this was my first time transcribing anything. So that was pretty difficult and I can already say that I probably didn’t get everything you said down right. So please don’t hesitate to correct anything I may have misheard,” I said as I pulled out the printed copy of my version of her story. I handed it and a pen to her. “I’ve

changed the order a bit to fit a more narrative structure, but we can rearrange it whichever way you like.”

“Oh no worries,” She said with a smile. “I trust you.”

Trust.

That word was echoing through me again. She hadn't even read my changes yet and already believed that my decisions were the right ones for her and her story. As an editor, I held a position of authority—of power—in Yehemi's eyes that suggested that I knew all the answers, that I knew what was best for her story, even more so than she did as the author. As a writer myself, I have a hard time trusting anyone with my stories, and I couldn't imagine trusting another person so whole-heartedly the way she was trusting me. Former vice president and executive editor of G. P. Putnam's Sons, Faith Sale explains that an editor “must earn the author's trust, make the author feel comfortable with [her and her] perceptions” (269). Yehemi had given me her trust before really getting to know me, before seeing for herself how I manipulated her story to fit the narrative structure I felt would be most impactful and appealing to the book's intended audience. I decided that I would not take advantage of her trust and stood firm as I encouraged her to let me know if she wanted to take out or reorganize the structure. At this stage in the process, Yehemi's story was one of the longest essays, and we would need to cut sections in order to reach Green Card Voices' desired word count for the essay. So I asked Yehemi to keep an eye out for sections of her story that she would feel comfortable cutting in order to meet this word count.

When Yehemi finished reading the draft, I held my breath and waited for her to tell all that she wanted me to change. I was surprised that she liked my organization, which seemed to reaffirm her trust in my abilities as her editor. She made notes to cut away sections of the draft

that referred to her childhood in Mexico and her journey to the United States. While I agreed with some of the sections she wanted to cut, the sections about her father building each version of their home and the memories she had of her mother selling tortillas on the streets felt important to me as the editor. They not only informed the reader about what her life was like in her home country but also started the thread of a major theme for her narrative: her parents' sacrifice to better their children's lives. I shared why I felt those sections were important. She agreed with my reasoning not because I was the editor and she the writer but because our communication was building a deeper relationship that made that trust sounder. Sale contends, "both author and editor benefit from listening as well as speaking/writing" (270), and this dialogue, like my weekly meetings with Dr. Bradley, allowed me to get to the heart of what Yehemi wanted to say with her essay to the book's intended audience: to prove the readers (and to her students) that her parents' sacrifice made her the woman she is today and that that woman would make a difference in her community through her teaching and her art.

Hearing her intention, I felt more confident that I could be the champion for her narrative and for the rest of the book. While I had the ability to build a relationship with Yehemi that affirmed her trust in me as her editor, my team and I also had the trust of the other writers of the book resting on our shoulders as we edited their words through the book's final stages, and it was our responsibility to acknowledge and respect their voices as we made our editorial decisions. This acknowledgement was the only way that we could be what Sale calls "the book's (or an author's) advocate—its nurturer, defender, supporter, mouthpiece, bodyguard" (269). This confirmation was extremely beneficial, I believe, as I transitioned between editing for Green Card Voices to Dr. Bradley's fiction novel, *The Ghosts Come Home*.

IV. *Just You, Me, & the Words: Becoming the Manuscript's Champion*

Dr. Bradley and I talked about *The Ghosts Come Home* long before I knew I would continue as her editorial intern during the Spring semester after working on *Chronicling Stankonia*. In December of 2017, we chatted about her future writing plans and how ready she was to move from her scholarly work to her creative work. She was planning to develop one of her shorts stories, “The Beautiful Ones,” from her collection *Boondock Kollage: Stories from the Hip-hop South* into a full-length novel.

“It’s haunted me ever since I wrote it,” she told me. “I was inspired by the disappearances of young black boys in my husband’s hometown—who are still disappearing—for unknown reasons, and their families never get answers. Sister and Stinney’s story still has more to say.”

In wake of the countless deaths of young black men brought to light by social media, the founding of the Black Lives Matter movement, and the increase in attention to African-American young adult literature, I knew Dr. Bradley’s story would add to the heavy and important conversation taking place in our society. I also knew that this story could be just as powerful a story in the hands of young adult readers as the award-winning novel, *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas.

In the fall, she asked me to I read the short story version of the story and tell her what I thought would be the best audience for the book. She told me I wasn’t the first person to mention such a story would do well in this market, so she wanted me to give her a more informed opinion rather than just hearing her summarize it. After reading the short story for the first time, I felt even stronger about my opinion as I had fallen in love with the protagonist, Sister’s youthful voice and felt for her struggle to find her brother in an era where social media celebrates the loss of young men then the attention on their loss moves on to another topic without finding a

resolution for the families impacted. But Dr. Bradley wasn't sure if she was writing for a young adult audience. She wasn't sure if her style of writing fit that demographic, yet I saw the marketability of this story in an industry that was blossoming with powerful stories such as Nic Stone's *Dear Martin* or Jason Reynolds's *All American Boys*, which were expanding the conversations about race relations in young adult literature. I wanted to make Dr. Bradley see the potential that I saw, but at what cost?

During our first semester, Dr. Bradley and I had talked a lot about my desire explore the topic of race in the publishing industry. She directed me to an article by her friend and fellow author, Kiese Laymon, about his experience working with an editor whose vision of manuscript's young adult audience strayed heavily away from the original idea of a meta-fiction novel that uses time travel to explore complicated themes in rural Mississippi. Laymon explains his editor's feedback after the fourteenth revision over a span of four years:

—I think you should start from scratch but keep the spirit. Does the narrator really need to be a black boy? Does the story really need to take place in Mississippi? The Percy Jackson demographic," he wrote. "That's a big part of the audience for your novel. Read it over the weekend. Real black writers adjust to the market, bro, at least for their first novels.

Laymon goes further to explain how trying to meet the expectations and desires of his editor, and ultimately the publisher, led to his own physical, psychological, and emotional neglect. He lost sight of his story's purpose. Incidentally, Laymon's editor was an older, black man who was suggesting Laymon change his story multiple times to please an assumed predominantly white, young adult readership.

In contrast to the editorial decisions of Laymon's editor, I couldn't imagine asking Dr. Bradley to revise her draft fourteen times until it could no longer be identified as the original story I was excited to work with in the first place. After all, esteemed editor James O'Shea Wade advises, "If you suspect you are going to distort, even unwittingly, the author's ideas and expressions for whatever reason (your "expertise" or your moral evaluation or even hazy issues like taste), then you have no business editing that book" (74). I didn't want my ideas for the market to affect the type of feedback I gave Dr. Bradley throughout the early stages of her draft. So I didn't press my ideas upon her and her story. We decided to keep this question in the back of our minds as we began working on her novel in the spring.

Editing fiction has always been the more enticing and comfortable form of literature for me to edit. Focusing my Masters degree on creative writing made me confident in my understanding of narrative structure, world-building, character development, and so on. Thus, I began my editing process with Dr. Bradley confident in my abilities and fueled by the strong relationship we had built up the semester before.

Like our previous semester, Dr. Bradley and I planned to meet weekly to go over my feedback on her chapter and answer any questions we might have for each other. I was excited to receive the first draft of the prologue in my email a week into the new semester and immediately found myself asking questions about the characters' dialect when the characters referred to terms like "bama" or "pitchin' woo." I returned to the ever-present question in my editorial process: would the generalist reader understand what these terms mean without an obvious explanation in the text?

In our first conversation about this book, Dr. Bradley informed me that the setting of this book, like the setting of her short stories, would be a fictional version of her hometown of

Albany called Dougherty Springs, so I knew that her characters would speak in her community's deep South vernacular and reflect what Dr. Bradley's scholarship in the Dirty South, a movement in hip-hop that highlights what Dr. Maurice Hobson explains is "the grit and the grime of the black masses" (xi) in juxtaposition to gentrification, which ignores the struggles of the poor, working class. I knew that in order to advocate the authenticity of her characters' voices in their setting I would need to get clarification from Dr. Bradley what these terms meant. Once I knew what the terms meant, I had to determine if readers who wouldn't be familiar with those terms could infer their meaning by the context clues in the scene or was it even necessary for the reader to understand the meaning. For instance, when her character Till helps her protagonist, Stinney, out of a thick tar-like substance in the ground, he sticks his hand into the tar and states, "I ain't pitching you no woo." He then laughs as he pulls Stinney out of the gunk. I had to stop reading after that phrase though. I was puzzled. What could she possibly mean by "pitchin' woo"?

Dr. Bradley laughed when I asked her about it as if I had discovered an inside joke from her childhood within the text. She told me that "pitchin' woo" meant to flirt with or try to get the attention of someone you were interested in romantically. Knowing it's meaning, I laughed too, now that I understood why Till would make this joke with Stinney. In context, I wasn't able to interpret that meaning. So I suggested in our discussion that Dr. Bradley add Stinney's reaction to that statement or possible a reaction to Till's hand reaching into the thick gooey substance that the reader could understand why Till would make such a joke. Dr. Bradley nodded with a smile and made her notes for revisions for the next draft of the chapter.

Sale says that "editing fiction is an organic process, a back-and-forth exchange... it becomes a building process, often deepening or enriching what already exists" (270), and I did see the novel grow as our meetings and correspondences took place. Having worked with this

hip-hop scholar on her academic text, I noted in the first draft I read of this novel how Dr. Bradley's creative work is largely influenced by her scholarly work and ultimately her passion for hip-hop and its place in the South. Her descriptions employed evocative sounds that play with one of the five senses that often overlooked by creative writers. One meeting I made a comment about how each chapter seemed to start off with some distinct sound that grounded the reader in the scene from the first sentence. I made sure to let Dr. Bradley know how much I loved this part of her descriptions, how it made her writing style her own. Yet, I wanted further exploration of her description of the environment, visceral details that made me as the reader feel like I was in Sister's or Stinney's shoes as they moved throughout their spaces.

My feedback avoided phrasing these descriptions like Chang's editor, "We get too much of the minutiae of [the characters'] lives and none of the details that separate Koreans and Korean-Americans from the rest of us" (Chang). Instead I focused my feedback more on the world-building: "Does it look like they are out in the middle of nowhere? Or in town? Are there any buildings around them? I love the color and the mist, but I'm curious if this kind of purgatory they're in resembles anything like real life." I felt that Dr. Bradley connected with these comments, nodding her head and letting me know she knew exactly what I was talking about. We laughed, knowing that these drafts were just the roughest versions, but each new chapter Dr. Bradley gave me dove a little deeper into those descriptions I was looking for until I received a scene that truly employed her mastery of all five senses vividly. Those descriptions allowed me, a reader who couldn't connect to her characters on a personal level as I had and would never truly experience what it would be like to be a young black girl in the South, the ability to feel what Sister felt in that moment staring at the pool and envisioning her brother in

the water. This connection could all be done without tokenizing Sister or her surroundings, by just simply painting a more detailed picture.

V. *What I've Learned: My Final Thoughts on My Experiences and This Autoethnography*

Throughout this capstone and my development as an editor in this past year, Gerald Gross's *Editors on Editing* has been a constant companion, imparting wisdom and often a bit of scolding for my editorial practices. In the first chapter to this book, late editorial consultant Alan D. Williams refers to the famous Maxwell Perkins' letters to authors we have now deemed a part of the great American canon as guiding examples for the future generations of editors: "With their warmth, eloquence, total empathy with authors, and gentle but keenly persuasive suggestions, these letters stand alone as lasting beacons to those who would follow" (8). This description of Perkins' letters does inspire me, as a young editor, to be the kind of tool and inspiration he was for many of his authors, and I do believe this critical autoethnography has given me the opportunity to strengthening my skillset so that I may champion all works I encounter over the course of my career and be the best asset to writer as I can possibly be.

Call to Action

While some efforts have been made to increase the diversity within the editing and publishing in order to expand the number of diverse titles published each year, the industry still has a way to go, and so does the exploration of my own biases and critiques of writing as a white editor. In terms of the industry, the most ideal solution would be to expand the diversity within the editorial departments of publishing companies to provide more perspectives and revise the definition of “good” writing. Rachel Deahl discusses in an article for *Publishers Weekly* “what a stronger commitment to diversity hiring might look like” by suggesting that “companies create internal targets around diversity hiring” and incentivizing human resources employees to meet these targets. She also notes how the Association of American Publishers is already working with companies to establish “diversity councils and [revise] their corporate vision statements to include diversity” (Deahl), but she recognizes that industry will also have to address the structural racism at its core and recognize that many employees working in the Human Resources department unconsciously uphold systemic racism. Overall, she notes that the industry move past words and take action in order to make the changes desired.

While these suggestions are sound, I don’t believe there is a simple or even clear answer to make the needed changes in diversity within the publishing industry. At the end of her article, Deahl mentions a publisher in the Midwest that strived for diversity in his workforce, but in the end of a long search for an editorial assistant, the position was given to a white woman instead of one of the three people of color who were also up for the job. She noted that his reason was that “there’s no room for tokenism at [our press]” (Deahl). This suggests that publishing companies face the struggle of tokenism—choosing to hire people of color as only a front instead of a true change in systemic beliefs. If tokenism is chosen as a course of action, is the industry truly being

fair to the men and women of color who are hired or published? Will they not become invisible in the sea of white that dominates the industry workforce and titles? Thus, research will need to continue to dive into readings on the possible course of actions companies can take to make a difference within their diverse staff.

My own employer, a small children's publisher in Atlanta, is taking strides to encourage diversity in the industry by hiring more interns of different races, ethnicities, backgrounds, genders, sexualities, etc. to provide our own company with newer perspectives and provide opportunities for future generations to rise into positions of leadership. But these kinds of changes take time and will require more than one small independent press to take the reigns. We still need white editors, like myself, to acknowledge our conscious and unconscious biases in order to provide fair and thorough editing to our authors of color who we are so seeking out so desperately.

While there may not be a large collection of literature available at the moment from white editors discussing their editorial processes with authors of color, my exploration and reflection on my own editorial process has led me to meet many individuals are exploring equity in the publishing industry as well. In July 2017, I presented on this same topic at the Great Writing International Creative Writing conference in London. There I met Dr. Lauren Hayhurst, who was at the time finishing her doctorate and exploring her role as a white author writing stories about characters of color. In her presentation, she suggested that collaborative projects between white writers and writers of color could be the source of authentic and respectful representation of cultures and experiences in the publishing industry. I was intrigued by this new perspective to a part of the topic of diversity and equity in stories that I had yet to venture. Our conversations throughout the rest of that conference has led to our own collaboration with other scholars from

the conference on a future project she calls, “Words are Morality.” This project will explore how collaboration can be employed to create equity in the industry and produce authentic and fair representations of groups of people.

With this upcoming project in the works and a recognition that this capstone is just brushing the surface of a conversation that I wish to continue throughout my career, I plan to expand and dive deeper into my reflections and make connections with other scholars in a book in order to provoke current and future editors to reflect on their own social constructs. And while the industry continues to search for a successful tactic to implement this change, the current state of the industry has a lot of work to do make sure that diverse voices are heard without “whitewashing” their stories. As many authors of color today plead, we as white editors must recognize that there are audiences outside of those we belong to that wish to hear the stories these authors tell, that stories are universal without having to make them “relatable” to one specific culture. This change in perception of stories of color could start with the standards that separate “good” writing from “bad” writing and continue to grow with reflections on our editorial processes. Through our reflections, we must redefine the norms and force the doors of “Literature” open so that the language encompasses not just white, straight, cisgender male perspectives. I fear that, without these changes in our white hegemony, the publishing industry will continue to suppress the voices of color or only lift up the token voices. Mira Jacob’s call to action haunts me ever since I read her article, and I know it must ring fervently in the ears of the current publishing industry: “It is [the white majority’s] job. Get in here. Be a part of this [change]. You will ignore us at your own peril –to the industry’s peril.”

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Resume

Experience

Subsidiary Rights and Sales Assistant at Peachtree Publishers Feb. 2017- Present

- Handles domestic permission requests
- Manages rights guides for book fairs and for new season titles for domestic rights customers and domestic customers
- Mails review copies, contracts and files - both domestic and international
- Assists in pre and post book fair follow-up for Frankfurt, Bologna and BEA
- Handles miscellaneous requests from sub-agents and licensees

Graduate Writing Assistant at KSU Writing Center Aug. 2016- July 2018

- Created and maintains Desire2Learn Graduate Writing Group, an online writing resource course
- Reaches out to incoming graduate orientations and classes to obtain active student participation in the Writing Center
- Edits and writes for the website, brochures, flyers and other marketing projects
- Tutors graduate students in grammar, style format, and other writing and research processes for capstones and theses

Editorial Intern for Dr. Regina Bradley at Kennesaw State University Aug. 2017- May 2018

- Provided developmental feedback on Dr. Bradley's nonfiction book, *Chronicling Stankonia: OutKast and the Rise of Hip-hop in the South*, & fiction novel, *Ghosts Come Home*
- Edited works for organization, voice, plot development, clarity, and sentence-level errors
- Held in-person discussions about feedback and corresponded via email on a weekly basis

Editor for KSU English Dept. & Green Card Voices Partnership Project Feb. 2018- Apr. 2018

- Transcribes audio interviews into essays ranging from 800- 5,500 words for the upcoming book, *Green Card Youth Voices: Immigration Stories from an Atlanta High School* (April 2018)
- Organizes and oversees 10 editorial assistants through the copyediting process
- Edits bluelines of the book before production

Professional Presentations

- *New Writing from Atlanta: Invited Reading*. (2018). Original Short Story presented at an Association of Writers & Writing Programs Conference Offsite Reading hosted by Inkwood Books, Tampa, FL.
- *White-washing Creative Writing: How a White Publishing Industry Affects Minority Creative Writing*. (2017). Paper presented at the annual Great Writing International Creative Writing Conference, London, UK.

Education

Master of Arts in Professional Writing from Kennesaw State University Expected July 2018

GPA: 4.0 Major Concentration: Creative Writing Minor: Applied Writing

Bachelor of Arts in English from Kennesaw State University

May 2016

GPA: 3.68