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## The Cycle of Book Publishing through a Queer Lens

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The Cycle of Book Publishing through a Queer Lens

by  
Aly Gilmore

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Professional Writing  
in the Department of English

Norman J. Radow College of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Kennesaw State University  
Kennesaw, Georgia

2022

## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	3
<b>Introduction</b> .....	4
<b>Methods and Methodologies</b> .....	10
<b>Literature Review</b> .....	19
<i>Preserving the Problem: The Publishing Industry Past and Present</i>	
<b>Considering Important Definitions and Concepts</b> .....	34
<i>Universal Story</i>	
<i>Audience</i>	
<i>Diversity</i>	
<b>Primary Research</b> .....	65
<i>The Own Voices Movement</i>	
<i>Interviews</i>	
<b>Autoethnography</b> .....	91
<i>Part 1: Unpacking My Guilt</i>	
<i>Part 2: Lesbian Necromancers in Space</i>	
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	106
<b>Works Cited</b> .....	109
<b>Resume</b> .....	118

## Acknowledgments

I'm not even sure how to thank my capstone advisors for all the work they put into my capstone, my education, and my development as a writer. Dr. Smith-Sitton, without you working by my side throughout this last year, I would not have been able to see the potential of this project. You taught me so much about the publishing world and what my place could be in it. By showing me what I was capable of, you gave me a drive to be a better writer and researcher. Garrard Conley, thank you so much for working with me on this project, then letting me work with you, and offering me a position with the Georgia Writers. You saw so much potential in me that I couldn't see on my own. Whatever successes I see in the future will be because both of you believed in me. Thank you both so much, for everything.

As for my counterparts, Kevin, Aneka, Maura, Haley, Kyra, and Tennant, being a TA with all of you was the only thing keeping me together. We had some difficult times and some wonderful moments that made this last semester so hard without all of us in the office together. As a special thank you, Marielena, you were my editor, peer, and closest friend throughout all of this. Every time I needed someone, you were there. You noticed when I needed help and jumped right in before I even had to ask. To all of you, thank you so much. I never thought I could have found friends like you.

Finally, to my family I owe you everything. It was not an easy decision going back to school, and it was even harder to finish, but with you, I did it. Tommy, thank you for all the late-night movies. Alan, Amanda, Courtney, Anthony, and Olivia, thank you all for taking me away from my computer and making sure I remembered how to socialize. Last, Mommyshun, for every phone call, for every dinner, for every moment you stood by me, thank you. Without you, this would not have been possible. I promise I will make this all worth it.

## Introduction

Through television shows, movies, and books, I have found a connection with the world that, at times, I missed in daily interactions. As a child, the way I made friends was through imaginary games in which we would play out the lives of some of my favorite characters. Initially, they were television characters from *Teen Titans* or *Spy Kids*, but as I grew out of friends who would be interested in such games, I found a new world with books. I did not engage with the same interpersonal experiences as my peers; books and narrative became my way of understanding the world around me. It would be a long while before I really understood my own social anxieties. Therefore, in my teenage years, I learned about relationships of families, friends, and lovers through *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, *Twilight*, *Shiver*, *Harry Potter*, and more. These books were my gateway to the world and to myself for many years.

Unfortunately, the stories I needed when I began questioning my sexuality weren't there. When I began dating boys, I knew from my books that I loved the idea of being loved and being in love with someone, yet when they held my hand or kissed my lips, I wanted to leave my body. Those books told me what love was meant to be, while my family showed me what love could not be.

My mother raised me for ten years with my grandparents supporting her. The only men who were consistent in my life were my grandfather and my uncle. She dated a few people, as many single people would, and only two of whom I met. The first, Jeff, was a man built on masculinity and power; he needed to be in control of everything in his life, including those around him. He didn't last. But the second, Tom, did.

She married him when I was ten. Their story is one of patience. Before I was even an idea in her mind, she dated him in college. Tom was kind and courteous, but she didn't want that at

the time. She was in love with the idea of loving a man with power and desire. Makes the whole Jeff phase make sense. They broke up and she dated his friend; the man who would leave her alone with a child, and nine years later Tom called her and said he needed to see her again. After years of not finding the right person and thinking she knew exactly who this man was, she only had one request when he came to see her:

“Bring a ring.”

It took a while for the cracks to show. Fights and lies filled the hole that I thought should fit a father, and my mother thought would fit a husband. They unknowingly left me with a choice: is love what I read or is it what I see?

When the boys I dated made me feel uncomfortable, I assumed it was me... that I was not capable of the love I read about. There were times when I questioned my own sexuality. Times that I couldn't bring to my mother because, while she seemed to accept other people being gay, she would end those conversations with “thank God it's not you though.”

It wasn't me. I knew that. I *knew* that.

Pages in my diary told me that I wasn't gay. I didn't like women. I couldn't like women. I *knew* that.

It was my social anxiety that kept me from dating people in college. It was my job that kept me from dating people. It was *me* that kept me from dating people. I was the problem. I knew that.

I love my family, and I know they love me. They love me so hard; I know that my life means more to them than it does to me. Some very difficult times in my life showed me how much they would sacrifice for me. But I didn't know how to love another person from what they had shown me.

I went back to my books; though, I could no longer stomach the love that poured from those pages. At least until I read Adrienne Rich: “I want to show her one poem/ which is the poem of my life. But I hesitate,” (Lines 7-8). Her poems of love and conflict speak to me like no other has before. She understands who she is meant to love and yet fears, “hesitate[s],” sharing that love. Her words did not yet define who I loved, but her poems provided a new outlet of what love meant and how the outside world affected her own ability to love. If my connection to the world came from books, then she opened the doors for me to understand how love is not either/or. A fight or a song. Desire or fear.

Love is something in between the lines of those books that I had not read.

One book, one poem, opened the doors for me to begin to understand what Rich meant when she wanted “to move openly together / in the pull of gravity, which is not simple” (Lines 14-15). But my sexuality was built from lived experiences that did not match up with the stories I had read. From a girl who looked at me in the way a friend never had. From a party. From a kiss. From a night that is only remembered by the pink parking ticket left on my car.

Those moments often started off as friends, as all good stories do, but had it not been for those fantasy romance stories, I may not have realized that their flirting was always intended for me and not constrained within my imagination. There was always a moment of hesitation in which we both had to ask ourselves if this was real or if the other person actually meant what they said in the way we understood it. A lot of moments felt like a dance of a conversation, deciphering a queer code that only we could understand. Like a scientific experiment to confirm the same results over and over again, because we cannot risk being wrong. But would this be different if representation was not just a diversity section in a library?

When discussing narrative, both visual and written, the term “diversity” is often preceded by “forced,” meaning the diversity itself was pushed onto the audience. The word “forced” implies that the audience’s “natural” identity aligns with heterosexual whiteness, which obviously does not map to demographics within the United States and is therefore an inaccurate bias. This capstone will then explore the interpretations of the publishing industry's readership bias and how their understanding of audience expectations is disconnected from the narratives that need to be presented.

Currently, popularity in more diverse storytelling has grown, through the use of hashtags such as #OwnVoices or #WeNeedDiverseBooks on social media sites like Twitter or TikTok, however, authors and storytellers find it difficult to share their stories and open the doors of these industries. This project will seek to answer why this is happening by speaking to authors and individuals who work within the publishing industry to try and understand why some doors close, while others are beginning to open. Further, my research will also evaluate the current status of the industry in connection with these concepts and what led to the current climate that will be discussed. Finally, I will conclude with an autoethnography, evaluating my personal experience as it relates to writing, reading, and Queer representation in the publishing industry.

This project has been incredibly difficult for me. Over the past year I have immersed myself in Queer authors, the publishing industry, and reflections about my own life and experiences. This project has led me to hate a lot of what I have written. Throughout this work, I felt as though I was often pitying myself; that this work would make others feel as though I have been affected by the same struggles as others. But that is not true. I have a lot of privilege coming from where I do. I am a white woman from a middle-class family who was never scared to go home. I was not afraid to go to school. I was not bullied or hated for who I was. Yet the



world I grew up in left me so alone in my thoughts. I could not figure out who I was until much later in life, and this project helped me understand why. Therefore, while I may discuss difficult things in my life, this should not replace the feelings or experiences that others have had. I am lucky to be in the world I am in, but so many others do not share that same privilege.

This capstone assesses the current landscape of the publishing industry with regard to Queer authors and stories that have been published within the United States. It will start off with a literature review utilizing secondary research upon the current publishing landscape, as well as the rules that guide how writing craft is constructed and taught. Within this section, I also unpack personal experiences from working in a local bookstore and integrate information from interviews from individuals with connections to the publishing industry. The project concludes with an autoethnography, in which I reflect how my own experiences intertwine with the knowledge gained from my literature review and research.

Throughout this paper, you will notice a heightened attention to detail regarding specific terms and their usage. For example, I will be unpacking how “diversity” and the “universal story” are defined from writing and publishing perspectives. As such, the use of “Queer” throughout this work is intended to encompass both sexuality and gender identity. Queer has been defined in many ways throughout history, but the at the moment has settled to express anyone who is not heterosexual or does not fall within the gender binary (*OED Online*). That is how it will be used within this paper. Queer is the term I use to define my own sexual identity and, at times, my gender identity. I use it with love and compassion because it contains the same fluidity as gender and sexuality do.

The stories that I will discuss herein would not have fixed my life or saved me from myself, but they might have given me—and could give others—outlets to ask questions about

themselves or to learn about others. Therefore, these stories warrant a conversation not only about their importance but also how they were created.

## **Methods and Methodologies**

The publishing of Queer literature lends itself to multiple facets of research. To form a comprehensive survey of the subject, this capstone will explore the following topics regarding Queer diversity within the book publishing industry: the “universal” story; effects of the Own Voices Movement; American Publishing House Practices regarding diversity, Queer authors and audiences; and the effects of white Queer narratives upon Writers of Color (WOC) and People of Color (POC). While each of the topics seem to build upon one other, this research seeks to understand the impact of Queer stories and how they are ushered into the publishing world. Considering that many of the Queer stories discussed often focus on white Queer stories, developing an understanding of the impact of the LGBTQIA+ story upon white audiences versus POC audiences needs to be addressed in order to garner a more thorough understanding of the importance of representation in writing.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided my capstone:

1. How are Queer stories currently being processed in the publishing industry and what can be improved?
2. How has censorship within the work of writers limited the representation of Queer stories and characters?
3. Where is diversity evident in the 21st-century book publishing industry and what impact is it having?

In discussing this project with my mentors, many of these conversations have included the question of how to get published, and, in particular, how marginalized authors and stories get published. As such, one of the primary tenets of this research led to a need for understanding the

current landscape of the publishing industry and how stories enter that landscape. While this capstone was not designed to be a guidebook, I do seek to provide nuanced insights into ongoing conversations surrounding diversity in publishing.

## **Methods**

Due to the kinds of questions that need to be addressed, this project utilized both primary and secondary research methods and sources. The secondary research encompassed academic and scholarly sources, online references engaging in the ongoing conversation around diversity and writing, and relevant books upon the subject of writing and workshopping for diverse storytelling. The literature review will break down each facet of the book publishing cycle by assessing the current landscape of major and minor publishing houses, identifying writing practices that affect storytelling, understanding audience and how to write towards an audience, and an analysis of the Own Voices Movement. Each of these ideas are intended to coalesce to expand on why Queer authors and Queer authors of color are unable to publish the works they wish and the importance of these works for the LGBTQIA+ Community.

The primary sources for this project were three individuals: authors and those who worked within the publishing industry or participated in the book publishing process. Each individual was chosen based upon their own connections to the focus of this project and their knowledge that enabled them to provide needed information in line with my overarching research questions. Many of the authors spoken to were discovered or contacted through recommendations from my advisors: Dr. Lara Smith-Sitton and Professor Garrard Conley. My goal when speaking to authors of notable LGBTQIA+ focused novels was to understand their perspective of the publishing industry as well as their writing process with regard to modern audiences. Further, speaking to those who have helped in the publishing process, rather than as

the authors of the books, helped to address concerns with biases within the research by addressing any conflicting responses in the questions. Additionally, these conversations may help fill in any gaps for understanding how diversity is discussed in the publishing industry.

The interviews were conducted pursuant to Institutional Review Board approval, IRB Study IRB-FY22-308. Each interview question was reviewed by my advisors to address key themes throughout this project and build upon the ideas discovered in the secondary sources. While it is a broad topic, the goal of this research is to build a comprehensive understanding of the importance of Queer literature, what is being done to integrate it, and how to encourage more contributions to LGBTQIA+ literature.

## **Methodology**

To better understand the impact of the field of Queer publishing, I started my research with secondary sources related to topics of diversity, the writing process, the publishing cycle, and LGBTQIA+ representation in media. *The Publishing Business: From p-books to e-books* and *Literary Publishing in the Twenty-First Century* provided a basic understanding of the publishing process, while also highlighting many of the problems that keep authors from diverse backgrounds from publishing their works; even still, many of the ideas addressed in these texts with regard to diversity, were broad, leaving the information vague at best. Therefore, it became imperative to define relevant terms to the project at the start.

## *Terminology*

To clarify terms like “diversity,” I reviewed scholarly sources and online repositories including many mirroring definitions like the American Library Associations (ALA) in their policy manual:

The American Library Association (ALA) promotes equal access to information for all persons and recognizes the ongoing need to increase awareness of and responsiveness to the diversity of the communities we serve. ALA recognizes the critical need for access to library and information resources, services, and technologies by all people, especially those who may experience language or literacy-related barriers; economic distress; cultural or social isolation; physical or attitudinal barriers; racism; discrimination on the basis of appearance, ethnicity, immigrant status, religious background, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression; or barriers to equal education, employment, and housing. ("Defining Diversity")

Even with a definition of diversity as detailed as the above, I felt just as confused as when the definitions were less specific. Words like "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" may accurately identify important aspects of diversity, but they also seem, at times, to become a generic catch-all for the very identities they hope to make visible. Additionally, the terms we use to define diversity tend to change every few years, making it more difficult to accurately describe lived experience. Hence, in this paper, I have struggled with the word "diversity," often choosing to focus on the embodied experience of the term rather than its ever-shifting semantics.

In order to understand both sides of the publishing cycle, my research began to lean into writing-based texts. These sources focused on the craft or construction of writing, some of which had been used in my course work as a creative writing student, while others were discovered during the research process. Including texts like *Craft in the Real World* helped point out that a primary offender to the way LGBTQIA+ literature is presented begins at the writing stages of the book. In response, the goals shifted to address the writing process as well as the impact of social media trends such as Own Voices on the author. Additionally, to best respond to these issues,

both “Audience” and “universal Story” were defined based upon the scholarly sources and articles found.

Breaking down key terms and ideas help fill in gaps created from the limited or vague information available. These discoveries impacted some of the questions asked to participants in the interviews by changing the wording of some of the questions or adding one additional question. For example, as the research expanded upon the writer’s perspective within Queer publishing, what became clear was that the way writing is taught may have an impact on the kinds of stories presented to publishing houses or the ways these stories are constructed. Therefore, writing rules or guidelines, such as “universal stories,” taught in workshop courses assisted in confirming if current writers see the rule as necessary or prevalent in limiting their writing.

### *Primary and Secondary Sources*

The secondary sources that I relied upon, often seemed to treat the publishing industry as a single, often malicious, entity; in contrast, interviewees complicated this narrative, revealing a complex network of individuals with motivations often in conflict. Participants provided nuanced insights about their experiences getting published and/or working in the field of publishing. By focusing on writers' experiences working with individuals within the industry, I learned that while the industry may continue dated, well-documented gatekeeping, there is potential for and ongoing change. This comes not only from top-down executive decisions but also from employees working one-on-one with authors.

Even as participants revealed rich and varied insights, challenges related to access and availability were unavoidable. Initially, interviewee questions were centered around “Big Five” publishing houses; however, one of the interviewees came from an independent press

background. Despite these differences, in their publishing experiences, the initial questions provided unique perspectives on both independent and local publishers.

The interviews consisted of a total of seven questions, each with the intention of gathering the individual experience of the participants throughout all stages of the book publishing process. At the start of the selection process, fifteen individuals were identified based upon their relationship with Queer literature and their probability of being able to complete the interview. Upon the completion of the interview process three individuals were able to meet and discuss their experiences. Each interview lasted approximately thirty minutes and were held through Zoom or through a phone call with responses being recorded for later transcription. Due to the limited interview pool, much of the information remains limited and is subject to potential bias; although, each of the participants provided detailed responses, often answering far more than the questions asked.

### *Interviews and Questions*

Each of the participants were provided the option to remain anonymous for the interviews; none of them felt it was necessary and were glad to have their names included. Each question was intentionally broad, with the goal of allowing the participant to fill in any information they might find relevant regarding their experiences. Further, keeping the basic questions broad allowed for additional discussion throughout the interview in line with the IRB protocol requirements. The first two questions focused on how Queer literature is promoted or limited in the publishing industry:

- What have you observed in recent years regarding the welcoming and promotion of books by Queer and/or diverse authors?



- In your work with the publishing industry, how would you describe the publishing house professionals that you worked with, for example, primarily White or cis, and this support or limit the production of works either about or by Queer authors?

These questions provided a baseline for the remainder of the interview and helped focus the conversation to a single aspect of the publishing industry. Additionally, these questions showcased the individual experience or expertise of the participants regarding these subjects.

The second set of questions asked the participants to consider potential changes in the publishing industry based upon their experience:

- As you look to the future, what changes in the publishing industry do you feel would support the inclusion of more LGBTQIA+ and other diverse individuals (writers, characters, and/or stories)?
- What do you feel the 21st-century reading public wants—what kind of diversity or changes in the publishing industry and representation of others?

With the same mindset, the next question offered the opportunity to provide a specific example of potential change and provide context for the necessity of that change within the current publishing (and potentially, political) climate:

- I am interested in examples of published works or works that did not get published that include diverse characters and stories of individuals from the LGBTQIA+ community or experiences of authors trying to get their works published. Can you share any knowledge or stories that were meaningful to you that show the commitment of others to change the landscape of the 21st-century publishing industry?

As this project also focuses on the ways authors might be censored or struggle to be published, the final two questions asked for examples of potential censorship, if they were

willing and able to provide them. Additionally, I was concerned with how the publishing industry might be shaped in the future as a result:

- Are there examples where you observed or were aware of writers or publishing professionals censoring or altering books or the experiences or identity of a writer in order to engage a reading public perceived uncomfortable in diverse and non-traditional representations? If so, please share some details and explain how you see this relevant to publishing today.
- Where have you seen successful inroads in the inclusion of Queer writers and books (stories) in the publishing industry in recent years and how do you see this shaping future opportunities?

As the secondary research highlighted ways in which stories are taught in classrooms or by text, a final question was included with the hope of highlighting the impact of lessons and rules taught to incoming writers:

- How would you define the “universal” story?

Before asking this question, if needed, I would provide a bit of context for the “universal” story, such as a few quotes based upon the author of *Craft in the Real World*, Matthew Salesses. In the chapter “‘Pure Craft’ is a Lie,” he breaks down how the rules of writing, such as the universal story, are cultural. To avoid inputting any bias from myself into the author, I tried to remain vague and only provide enough information to contextualize the question without coloring their answer. From there, for authors, I would ask if this impacted their own writing and how.

### *Results and Potential Bias*

All interview recordings and transcriptions were secured per the IRB protocol established by my project. The qualitative results of each interview were analyzed for common themes and

how the responses compared to the secondary sources noted in the Literature Review. One major compilation discovered during this process was with me. I felt like my social anxiety and self-confidence may have affected the interview process, resulting in potentially unclear questions, lacking the attention to detail required of these conversations. Thankfully, in working with my advisors, I was able to fill in any necessary blanks and due to the connections that my advisors had with the authors, I could ask any clarifying questions as necessary following the formal interview.

All of the responses were quite valuable to my research questions. Each of the participants added to my understanding of the publishing industry, in addition to building my own confidence in the necessity of this conversation. All of their insight into getting their works published or working with other publishing industry professionals showed the changes occurring in the works being chosen for publication. Meaning, the more we have these conversations, the more we are able to participate in the direction of an ever-shifting industry.

## Literature Review:

### Introduction

In an effort to understand where Queer storytelling sits within the publishing industry, this literature review will evaluate three perspectives: the current state of the publishing industry, the rules of writing craft, and how audience affects the works being published. In order to address the current state of the publishing industry, I have largely focused on chapters from *Literary Publishing in the Twenty-First Century*. This book is a collection of essays offering a multitude of perspectives with regard to the publishing industry, its impact, and its constantly shifting environment. Addressing the past and present state of the publishing industry will function as a way to understand the importance of storytelling as a whole. Stories are intended to be a reflection upon our society, but there is a problem with representation within stories and art. In “Affect Theory with Literature and Art,” Sandra Ariza states that there is an “inherent conundrum with literary and art...[because]...while they are used to decipher impenetrable aspects of human experience, they are relegated to a form of life that is heuristically flawed in relation to the subject” (3). The representation we strive to see in our stories is incomplete. Our lacking attempts at representation could be due to the political climate, the publishing industry standards, audience expectations, or other reasons. These fluctuating concepts will function as a backdrop to understanding the larger conversations around how those stories are created and the current state of diverse storytelling.

As such, the second focus will be upon the rules that govern writing practices and how they interact with the third focus of how audiences participate within that understanding. Throughout this section, a lot of my research began with Matthew Salesses’ book *Craft in the Real World*. As both an author and a professor of writing, he reflected on the way craft is taught

and considered the ways classrooms and textbooks might benefit from a change. Because storytelling spans across many facets of presentation, when discussing the craft of writing I will be reviewing both literary based tropes as well as common film or other media formats. The focus in these conversations is about the creation and impact of those stories regarding Queer narrative. While there are many sources that discuss these matters, there is a need for more publications and research on the topic of the evolution of the publishing industry with regard to current market practices and sociological perceptions upon diversity in storytelling. This project will add to the larger conversation about Queer publishing, in hopes of inviting others to join the conversation about creating a more welcoming publishing and writing landscape for marginalized voices.

### **Preserving the Problem: The Publishing Industry Past and Present**

Penguin Random House is one of the world's largest English-language general trade book publishers, with over 300 independent publishing imprints. Large publishing houses, like this one, are one of the few ways authors are able to realistically share their ideas to a larger audience due to the vast resources and distribution they offer to the industry and authors. Yet, to be considered as a potential author on their massive roster, the gatekeepers of the industry weigh if you are worth the financial risk of being published by asking questions like, “Have you already been published?”

Questions like these highlight a shift in the publishing industry purpose. Upon its inception, the mass distribution of texts started as a way to spread “cultural, political, religious, and social change” (Smith 19). But now the publishing industry has shifted its values, in response to Amazon, to maintain a consistent profit. Literature has, to a larger extent than ever before, become homogenized because of Amazon's vast distribution reach and ranking system.

Yet, every "Big Five" Publisher (Penguin Random House, Hachette Livre, HarperCollins, Simon & Shuster, and Macmillan Publishers) has found essential for business. Gatekeepers across the industry must now focus only on whether books will be marketable, which then limits the amount of diverse, radical, or more dialogic texts which could better represent our country. In other words, because of the impact of Amazon's business practices, the kinds of texts produced are no longer published with the intention of sharing ideas, but with the goal of securing profit. But did the purpose of publishing books change throughout the years as corporations overtook the process? Or was the intended purpose never intended to uphold those values of sharing and distributing knowledge freely?

### *The Past*

The Gutenberg Press is noted as the first true start of "modern publishing," according to Kelvin Smith in *The Publishing Business*, making a more unified language, and the spreading of scientific research (19). The press allowed for an easier format for printing "texts [that] had been written and copied by hand for religious and secular purposes" (19). In fact, the first text Johannes Gutenberg printed was the Gutenberg Bible, because secular texts, at that time, were copied by hand (19). If the purpose of the press was to place the written word in the hands of the people, did Johannes Gutenberg see a problem with the way religious ideals were being spread?

The Bible has been altered many times throughout history; for example, consider the King James version of the Bible. So, is it possible that the ideas being spread were also being altered because of the church's control over religious information? Dr. Alan Mugridge studied the earliest printings of the Catholic texts written in Greek and Latin and learned that he could not prove if the original works had been intentionally altered (152). He discovered that "Christian texts were seen as 'sacred,' there was an element of conservatism according to which

copyists thought that they were not to be tampered with” (91). Therefore, he determined that these texts were used to share the consistent ideology of the church and therefore would not be changed for any reason. In fact, Mugridge goes into great detail about the level of care and attention that went into the process of copying these works, “for reading, learning and copying religious texts apparently became a highly honoured aspect of ascetic practice” (1). Yet, there was something Mugridge failed to address.

Mugridge reviews the structure and the formatting of these hand-written works, noting key phrases or abbreviations such as “*nomina sacra*,” that might only have been seen in these particular texts (4). These key phrases, terms, or even formatting outlined how the text was written not to be *read*, but to be *spoken*: “most ‘books’ in antiquity were produced to be read, and this meant reading them aloud” (71). In fact, he goes further to state that “the literary level of the texts, and whether they were texts which would have been read out in public, would almost certainly have influenced the way in which they were copied” (71-72). This is where the idea of limitation begins to culminate. If so few scribes were available, due to the training that the text necessitated, this meant that there were few literate individuals who could even consider reading the texts aloud. As such, it can be assumed that the only ideologies built from the texts were made based upon the interpretations of those who stood at the pedestal reading a “holy,” and widely unread, text. Gutenberg, therefore, provided a necessary solution to the lack of individual thought, allowing the development and distribution of not only secular texts but also language and accessibility.

### *Book Banning*

Unfortunately, as time moved on, the world would begin to understand what the spreading of ideas meant for those in power. With more accessibility to ideas, sovereign states

and religious powers sought control over distribution of texts, as sharing led to more individualism. Events like the publishing of the Catholic Church's *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* or the Nazi book burning in 1933 portray that need for control as publishing became universal (Smith 20-21). Today, book banning continues. PEN America, an organization dedicated to freedom of expression within literature, discovered that "From July 2021 to June 2022 . . . [there were] 2,532 instances of individual books being banned" (Friedman). Of the 1,648 unique book titles affected by these book bans, "674 titles (41 percent) explicitly address LGBTQ+ themes" or characters (Friedman). Jonathan Evison is the author of *Lawn Boy*, a book banned on the premise of pedophilia "for 'promoting' sex between fourth graders" (58). While Evison clarifies that there was no pedophilia in his work, he discovered that "[Virginia] Republican gubernatorial candidate Glenn Youngkin decided to take this misinformation and run with it for his own political gain, not only perpetuating falsehoods about *Lawn Boy* and other challenged books, but also smearing librarians and educators" (58). Even still, he added that his title gained popularity, selling more copies after being banned, leading Evison to ask, "what are the book banners actually accomplishing?" (59).

While Evison might have seen an increase in sales of his book due to the response of the book banning, as with books such as Maia Kobabe's *Gender Queer*, other authors may not see the same support. According to Connor Goodwin in "The Banned Books You Haven't Heard About," the ALA (American Library Association) reports that "82 to 97 percent of book challenges go unreported." Kristen McLean, a books industry analyst for NPD books, discovered that "only half [of the reported banned books] exhibited a sales increase, suggesting it is the news cycle that is driving sales rather than a wider consumer protest" ("NPD BookScan Data"). For this reason, "how much attention a book gets—either because it's already well known. . . or



because the banning itself generates big news—is a crucial factor” in the books ability to generate more sales as a result of being banned (Goodwin).

If the profitability of a banned book is based on audience attention, then the new practices with major bookstore chains can further impact the purpose of book publishing. With regard to Barnes and Noble, banned book sales increasing or decreasing depending upon popularity could have further consequences as the store changes their stocking decisions. According to Jenn Northington with *Book Riot*, Barnes and Noble is planning on only “stocking hardcovers that had proven sales records” (“What is going on with Barnes & Noble?”). Despite widespread acceptance of Amazon’s impact regarding book sales, Barnes & Noble “fills an important role in the ability of readers to discover new authors” (Northington). Meaning, if books that are less popular or unknown are being banned without the ability to recuperate losses as a result, moves like this from larger chain bookstores could negatively impact the spreading of ideas initially intended from the circle of book publishing. It is the consistent need for control that builds the cycle of immersion and restriction.

### *Self-Publishing and Online Books*

Upon its inception, Amazon started by selling books, but over the years has transitioned to a more variety of products, including selling books in an electronic format. As publishing expanded from the printed codex to electronic formats, eBooks have not only allowed people access books at lower prices, which has improved increased accessibility, but also provided people with opportunities to self-publish their works without the influence of “Big Five” publishing houses. Self-publishing allowed authors to potentially reach larger audiences and offering a cheaper outset of costs (printing, binding, marketing, and more) for publishing their books. Though this presents a few draw backs, such as not having a publishing team to produce

the physical product or market the book, Amazon shows how self-publishing can be profitable to both the author and the consumer by lowering the cost of self-publishing and the cost of purchasing those books. Additionally, this can let smaller, less known authors make a higher percentage of their revenue. On the face, this self-sustaining publishing outlet seems to allow for more ideas and more voices to be heard, but in actuality this may have led to financial damages to smaller, independent publishing houses and paved the way for Amazon to take over the publishing industry.

### *Cost of Books*

Instead of directly starting at the publishing houses, the lack of diversity of authors and stories may have been the response to shifting costs of books. The pricing of books has fluctuated over time, often a reasonable response to the evolution of the economy. But, in this case, the perceived “worth” of a book has shifted in the mind of the consumer due to the perceived imbalance created with mass market paperbacks sold in supermarkets like Costco (Smith 25). The visible shift has forced publishing companies to change the cost of the books, both physical and e-books, to support the market. Companies like Amazon have profited off of this cost discrepancy, forcing other small publishers and booksellers to shut down. At the same time, the influx of authors has only grown, leaving the “Big Five” to only publish what they know will sell. As Daniel José Older states in “Diversity is not Enough: Race, Power, Publishing,” “having a mostly white industry dictate mostly white standards to a mostly white author base [means] stories...won’t get told” (155). In other words, the gatekeepers of the industry only see a feasible market for the Anglo-Saxon population, therefore, only taking a chance with works they believe will sell to that specified audience leading to the lack of inclusion in the market. In other words, due to the increased pricing of book production, the

decreased perceived “worth” of books, and the financial ease of self-publishing, large publishing houses have become even more stringent with the books they market, leading to a distinct lack of diverse authors and characters.

### *Academic Publishing and Gender Bias*

While it may not be executed by political or religious powers, research-based writing and publishing are facing similar threats of information control. In an interesting take upon the history of communication, Natasha N Jones assessed the environment created by technical and professional communications. Her work, “Disrupting the Past to Disrupt the Future: An Antinarrative of Technical Communication,” responded to the need for more inclusivity in the research field, pointing out some notable discrepancies with female research work:

Throughout the decade [1990], scholars (primarily female scholars) argued for a correction of history to eliminate the exclusion of women and women’s work. . . and an awareness of how gender colors our assumptions about rationality, knowledge making, and research. (Jones et al. 214)

Through her research, she also discovered that it is important to consider diverging gender perspectives because it allows researchers to “see how a number of communication practices can be oppressive” (qtd in 214). Further, she points out that, while the communications community might address this issue, it is still “covered over again without having its due impact on the overall pattern of the tapestry” (214).

To account for the lack of gender disparity in publishing, even beyond research-based writing, the VIDA count visually showcases who exactly is being published in larger houses through dynamic graphs based upon gender identity. In “VIDA: An Interview with Erin Belieu,” Kevin Prufer asks Belieu her thoughts on the blatant lack of diversity in publishing. They also

discuss publishing's relationship to other gender-based issues, including the gender pay gap. Unfortunately, there is also a similarity in response from those who caused both the wage gap and the lack of diversity in publishing. The VIDA count breaks "the illusion that the writing world is somehow a fair playing field, and everyone has a chance to have their work published" (Belieu and Prufer 107). Despite this important conclusion, there continues to be those who believe that this concrete count "oversimplifies data" and does not account for who is submitting the work (105).

As VIDA highlights the blatant inequalities that come from these inherent gatekeepers, we are now seeing the resulting self-blaming that is encouraged in female publishers. In response to the question about the idea behind VIDA, Belieu states that the "gender bias works . . . to make women . . . feel deeply isolated with their concerns . . . [w]omen are told over and over that they must be misreading the bias they encounter" (102). This comes from the consistent gaslighting that Belieu underlines in her interview. Throughout their lives, women are told that they must persevere in light of turmoil and to make themselves the only source of frustration when it comes to failure. That if they just become that much better, to push that much harder, women might actually be heard. In short, the publishing industry has been crafted to blame women—and encourage them to blame themselves—when something goes wrong.

Unfortunately, the devaluing and gaslighting of women's drive to success happens in more than just the commercial publishing world. University publishing is another way in which the work of anyone who is not the cis-gendered white man is forced to fight to be heard. Even still, university publishing maintains to be the only publishing industry that might not be on its way out the door by the New Year. While university publishing may not be financially feasible, according to when Donna Shear wrote her chapter in *Literary Publishing in the Twenty-First*

*Century*—and it is highly likely that this has not changed *significantly* in the last few years (74–75). That being said, in academia, the need to be published is so much more than just letting your voice be heard. In order to stay relevant, there is what Abigail H. Patterson, in her capstone, refers to the concept “publish or perish” (3). Essentially, if you are to remain in your seat of power in academia, you must continue to publish relevant works and remain at the top of your field. In theory, this appears reasonable because ongoing education allows you to craft more applicable ways to teach information; however, a closer look leads me to view this as *terminal education*.

As the push to continuously publish builds, the need to produce quantity over quality crushes any purposeful additions to relevant fields; Patterson writes, “The pressure to ‘publish or perish’ does not guarantee quality, useful scholarship—it simply guarantees the existence of more publications” (12). Now, while Patterson’s capstone focuses on the advantages of working in new, multimodal formats, the connection with female academics cannot be mistaken. As Belieu notes, “women faculty make significantly less money than their male colleagues nationally . . . [because] women will do the organizing and bean counting. . . . Men are bosses; women are support staff” (110-111). In short, women are consistently proposed as the only ones who, not only can, but also *enjoy* the menial tasks within a department. This takes away their opportunity to do quality research that is then pushed down by publishers, who then tell the professor that it is *her* fault for not having good enough work. In short, this all culminates in her never being given a chance to even qualify because her name was far too feminine to be trusted with anything other than party planning. Even still, that is only one part of the problem.

*Major and Independent presses*

Jane Friedman, in “The Future Value of a Literary Publisher,” comments that books are intended to bring people together as “literary publishers can add value and credibility to niche communities” and might contribute to the building of that community (286). Yet, the publishing industry is ripe with exclusive tactics that seem to quietly silence voices in response to an audience that demands the same story from the same authors, with a slight nuance to a new character. This is not to say that the lack of diverse authors or characters in the publishing industry is a purposeful method of control by the “Big Five;” rather, it is an indirect control that those same publishing companies are now only able to respond to. Richard Nash, in “What is the Business of Literature?”, points out that “Institutions will try to preserve the problems to which they are the solution” (269). In other words, the publishing industry, consciously or not, has made themselves the only solution to a proper distribution of ideas, making them the decision makers as to what ideas are allowed to be distributed.

It may be hard to recognize the power smaller publishing houses may still hold for authors yet to be published, as with larger companies like Amazon seizing opportunities to take the place of failing publishing houses or bookstores—or overtake those who may have been still standing. John O’Brien briefly addresses, in “19 Things: More Thoughts on the Future of Fiction,” that independent publishers, while earning lower revenues, “have a chance to survive because they have one or two or no paid employees. They do short print runs, and don’t have the money to properly support their books. And yet this lack of money is also what makes the model work financially” (126). Because the “Big Five” publishers are shown to consistently lose money with each book release, I’ve gathered that they only see fit to publish books from well-known and well-established authors that have a better likelihood for profitability in the future. Yet, smaller, independent publishing houses seem to have the capacity to still review those authors

that may not have the same background but bring in a better composition. Take, for instance, Emily Louise Smith's comments in her chapter, "The Overnight Success of Lookout Books": "While large houses are as equipped as ever to acquire best-selling authors, we are at least as well, and perhaps even uniquely, suited to discover and nurture them" (232). In short, independent publishing houses can breach that initial unspoken requirement that we must have been published to be published. By reaching out to the smaller publishing houses, and proving the need for these kinds of stories, those same authors might be able to reach not only their intended audience but also the wider spectrum of readers, creating a lasting impact on audiences to understand what it means to be marginalized within their world.

A panel with Dr. Joe Taylor, author and publisher with Livingston Press, and Professor Keaton Lamle, writer and lecturer, addressed how independent publishing could provide the opportunity to share ideas and provide a chance for more voices to enter the conversation. When asked about submitting work to his independent publishing company, Livingston Press, Dr. Joe Taylor simply stated that anyone could just send him an email, addressing one of the primary issues within the publishing industry: gatekeeping. As Megan M. Garr states in "Hold the Damn Door: Idealism is no Currency," by and large, the publishing industry is full of gatekeepers that will keep the literary community "with the straight white male population" (134). Dr. Taylor opening his door to those possible authors is paving the way for the future success of the publishing industry and providing reasonable access to often overlooked authors. A trend that has gained traction in many online circles.

Although, John O'Brien, in "19 Things: More Thoughts on the Future of Fiction," adds that, even still, independent presses will likely not "survive their founders" (126). In other words, while it might be a good way to get your voice in print, it does not mean that voice will make any

realistic impact. Therefore, as Belieu points out, if women actually want to be heard outside of their own circle, they need to be published within the same publishers that showcase the larger male names.

As an example, consider the impact of the book *Boy Erased*, by Garrard Conley, and its film adaptation. The story details Garrard Conley's experience in conversion therapy, but the message gained a larger audience because of the actors who portrayed his family. In an interview for *Boy Erased*, Martha Conley, Garrard Conley's mother, makes the important assertion that having bigger name actors like Nicole Kidman will bring in larger audiences who may not know about conversion therapy and open their eyes: "the more people that find out, then the more people will help us stop [conversion therapy], and that's our goal" (4:13-4:18). Consider her comments in tandem with the kind of markets that could be reached with smaller publishing houses versus the larger ones, regardless of their gatekeepers. If commonly marginalized people are able to market their books alongside the well-known authors under the same publisher, they have a higher chance of reaching not only their intended market, but also the markets of those who do not have those same experiences and begin to understand true universality in writing.

#### *Diversity and the Universal Story in Publishing*

In "Reading the Tea Leaves: Notations on the Changing Look of the Literary," Sven Birkerts writes, "Technology has reshaped everything from how we communicate to how we find a mate or a job" (9). Though he goes on to express how this shift has a negative impact on reading as "books remain largely untransformed," this actually seems to be what is working here (9). Rather than removing our passion for reading due to a lack of interactive content within the pages, social media has crafted a way for us to talk to people outside of our immediate physical circles and reach a broader audience to share our thoughts on the content. In fact, this



collaboration of media and text has built a community that is even asking authors to craft stories that reach those marginalized voices and force other readers to break down and reevaluate their own ideas of universality. From this, we might be able to show how the push for more marginalized voices might be helped by the lack of gatekeepers in the independent publishing houses.

Now, historically, publishing was made to share and distribute ideas; though this hasn't changed, the ability to participate in what is being shared has allowed publishing houses to become that for which it was built to deconstruct: a power of control. In the first chapter of *The Publishing Business*, titled "The Fundamentals of Publishing," Kelvin Smith highlights a quote from Allen Lane: "We believed in the existence in this country of a vast reading public for intelligent books at a low price, and staked everything on it" (qtd in 23). Publishing was built to share ideas to avoid the interpretation of only one person, but when you control what is being shared, do you not control what is available to be interpreted?

Part of this could come from the idea of writing for a universal audience. Belieu writes that "it's clear that these editors and publishers often want stories, essays and poems that are written from the subject position with which they already identify" (107). In other words, those at the top of the publishing industry are only willing to publish works that the cis-gendered white men at the top of the industry consider relatable to themselves, presenting a bias. Likewise, from a writers perspective, the basics of writing state, in *Techniques of Fiction Writing*, that the writer is "by nature a sort of universal person" (Surmelian 3). Meaning, we are asking writers to consider a universal story that may not encompass their own point of view, but rather that of the publishing professionals who decide which books are distributed. So now we ask: if we are not given a reason to change, we will never see a reason to?

At this point, the idea of universality of stories is no longer relevant. In fact, Belieu writes that “the most important change will be turning more people into readers who don't think twice about reading . . . from the positions of main characters who don't come from their same experience” (113). As a result, many publishers might be more interested in a compelling story that may not relate to the white middle class American but is written *for* them. While we may not have the power to change the current path of the publishing landscape, there might be a way to work marginalized voices into it. And yet, this is not the fix to the problem. It is just a slab of duct tape on the leaking pipeline of lost profits and forgone wages. But, by taking one step, there might be a way to rip that door off and make way for a new generation of authors.

## Considering Important Definitions and Concepts

### Universal Story

Having taken many writing courses throughout my academic career, professors of creative writing courses have often led the semester with the primary guidelines that drive creative writing. Some of the most common might be the “show don’t tell” policy or the “universal story.” While there are many more rules to follow, there will always be a discussion about breaking those rules, thus bringing forward a key piece of advice: *you must know the rules before you can break them*. By adding in this final guideline, students are now compelled to only write within those very guidelines, which may seem reasonable, unless the “universal story” is not actually universal.

In a bubble, the guidelines serve a purpose, they build a structure for people to follow in order to understand the basics of story construction, characterization, and writing techniques. *Techniques of Fiction Writing*, written by Leon Surmelian, defines the “universal story” as the “insight into human nature and [the writer’s] ability to verbalize it” (2). On paper, the definition seems reasonable. The focus is on understanding your audience and crafting a story or character that they will be able to understand quickly and with ease. At the same time, the definition is too open ended, leaving the reader alone to interpret the meaning behind it. Further, this book is written solely using he/him pronouns with regard to the writer, leading the reader to assume that Surmelian’s intended audience to be primarily male. Equally important, this book was written in 1968, and many changes have occurred in the way writing courses are held, yet his writing is still being used today and his rules are the baseline for many writing workshops. The idea of placing the human experience into words seems simple enough, and yet this term has paved the way for

many white male authors to define for themselves what a “universal” story is and, in turn, leaving out an untold number of marginalized voices from the traditional narrative.

Matthew Salesses, an Asian American author from Korea who wrote *Craft in the Real World*, modernized his approach to writing workshops with regard to audience and the cultural values of an American classroom. In this book, Salesses identifies that many of the “rules [of writing] are cultural,” based upon the people who defined them (10). He adds that “we must be careful not to frame craft as prescription or even guidelines without first making it clear where those guidelines come from and whom they benefit” (5) because those very guidelines lead the marginalized students in the classroom without a voice to air their story and that “the spread of craft starts to feel and work like colonization” (10). He goes on to say that “there is also a kind of writer who believes that human experience is universal, so his experience is enough to know everyone else’s” (6). Notable here, is Salesses use of “his;” the majority of his work purposefully uses female pronouns, she/her, as though a response to the typical usage of male pronouns in many conversations with regard to writing. As stated before, using male identifying pronouns is intended to identify a particular audience, because the person being spoken about is the assumed Cisgendered male writer. Typically, the idea of a universal story is inherently centered on the American white male experience because that is who wrote the rules that we are not to break until we know them.

In assuming that stories are universal, marginalized authors are pressured to write in a format that does not accommodate their own experiences. As Ari Laurel writes in a *BitchMedia* Op-ed, “I grew up reading and writing about white people. There is no inherent problem in writing white. But when I did it, it was because I knew I didn’t belong” (“What is a “Universal” Story, Anyway?”). We are often told that to be a better writer we need to read other works, but

due to the types of work that are being presented to many writers in workshop based course, “Hills like White Elephants” or “Young Goodman Brown,” both written by white male authors, the culture in which we immerse ourselves is inherently biased, forcing many marginalized writers to focus on a universal story that does not represent their own lived experience.

Kristi Constabile notes the importance of the universal narrative: “We propose that the universality of narrative occurs not only because narrative is a fundamental element of human social and cultural life (Read & Miller, 1995), but also, importantly, because narrative is a fundamental element of one’s self and identity” (418). Yet, due to the stories that guide the writing principles, “the writer with different cultural values has to learn more than the terms and saying of literary craft” (Salesses 10) because, as Laurel states, “the definition of ‘universal’ is owned by those whose stories have already been told—and told with complexity” (“What is a ‘Universal’ Story, Anyway?”) forcing even the smallest details in a narrative to take on unintended meanings or shift the story away from the author's intentions. As an example, Salesses breaks down a potential workshop that is composed of primarily white students assessing the work of an Asian student’s story based in Korea. The focus of this story is not the location, but the character’s journey, yet students may feel this story needs more details to explore the setting itself: “There might even be a white American in the workshop who speaks up to say he’s been to Korea and goes on to give some examples of what he found unusual” (12). Including details like “passengers eating kimchi in their box lunches” (12) alters the narrative and pulls attention from the author's purpose, with the added benefit of tokenizing experiences by defining individuals through such baseline details that could be borderline racist. Salesses later notes that “to tell a story about a person based on her clothes, or the color of her skin, or the way she talks, or her body—is to subject her to a set of cultural expectations” (29). By doing this,

the author is forcibly leaning into the perceived “universal” story for the “universal” audience and is left unable to share a narrative that effectively represents their own lived experience, all for an audience that has only read one type of literature. The white, straight, cisgendered audience is the privileged audience, leaving all others at a major disadvantage.

One potential response to this quandary may be to write characters without identifying their physical appearance in order to let the readers place themselves within the narrative. Salesses responds to this assertion by stating that “to name race for no characters, for example, might seem a tempting solution, but it is a solution for no one except those who know that not naming race is an active choice against naming color” (46), because “a common assumption lies behind this phenomenon: that no mention of race is supposed to mean a character is white” (XV). Based on the types of literature students are prescribed in these writing courses, he would be right, however, there are solutions to such a problem. A member of a writing community called *Write the World*, notes that “you can and should describe your white characters just as you would a character of color. Leaving a white character as just ‘white’ might risk you implying that white is the default color of a human being and people of color are the ‘other’” (sybilluv). Independent publisher, SparkPress, would agree: “If you’re describing the color of a black person’s skin, describe a white character’s skin color, too. This helps subvert the idea of white as default” (“Writing Outside Your Race”). In short, instead of avoiding the topic of conversation, the goal should be to include what is important to the character and treat each character equally in regard to how they are presented throughout the story. Because it’s not about what makes these characters different, it's about how these differences have shaped the individuals within and beyond the narrative: “How would I represent myself and these people honestly if I was expected to erase what was most important to them?” (Laurel). With this in mind, if we look back at the

example from Salesses once again, While the student is regarding including particular details, those very details are erasing the very narrative that the author is attempting to create in order to accommodate the “audiences” idea of a “universal” story, or as Gary Schmidt might say, turning the author into a “tour guide” (155).

In “Who Can Tell the Story? Gershon’s Monster and the Quandaries of Retelling,” Gary D. Schmidt notes that oversharing the details of a story in an attempt to include a wider audience, the author is now forced to become a “tour guide instantly distance[ing] the reader from the story by leagues” (155). While Schmidt’s work is focused on the retelling of older stories, his points remain relevant, because, as Salesses states, and many authors and readers might agree, “to tell a story is to always retell it” (21). In Schmidt’s work, he brings up a great point about oversharing information with the audience in an attempt to appeal to a wider audience; those excessive details affect the story and “the focus is shifted away from the characters and places the reader at an enormous distance. The tale is now an object, something to be looked at” (Schmidt 156). In short, again “tokenizing” the story in such a way as the purpose, or moral of the story is lost to the audience.

The idea of “tokenizing” stories and the “universal” story are quite intertwined, as often the typical narratives that define a character are based upon stereotypes built upon decades of literature. As Salesses notes, “to engage in craft is always to engage in a hierarchy of symbolization” (24), and the way in which we “symbolize” or “characterize” our characters are based upon the literature we consume: “What we call craft is nothing more or less than a set of expectations. Those expectations are shaped by workshops, by reading, by awards and gatekeepers, by biases about whose stories matter and how they should be told.” (Salesses XV)

If storytelling is focused on these biases, what's to stop us from turning "bury your gays" into our own archetypal rule for Queer protagonists?

"Bury your gays" is a literary and film trope in which a Queer character is killed off before the end of a story. Erin Waggoner, author of "Bury Your Gays and Social Media Fan Response: Television, LGBTQ Representation, and Communitarian Ethics," offers some insight into how tropes such as these have dangerous repercussions for future storytelling. She contends that it is a trope that centers around the idea of introducing Queer characters that are killed or written out of the story before they are able to find themselves in a happy and committed relationship or happy as themselves. In doing so, the authors build a disjointed perspective of LGBTQ+ individuals and relationships that are manifested for the audience. Waggoner writes, "the message this [Bury your Gays trope] sends to those individuals struggling with their identities is that WLW (women loving women) may find happiness, but it is short lived" (1879). It's an unfortunate theme that seems to be falling in line with the formulaic writing that has become present in current media. This theme is important to note in the context of writing because formulaic writing is the basis for most of the damaging stereotypical portrayals of Queer characters. While Waggoner writes, "one of the dangers of this trope is that WLW viewers become used to it" (1885), which is further complicated because financially successful films will become a model for future iterations regardless of the accuracy of representation. These harmful themes will appear as an appropriate move to make for future writers who may not be aware of their damaging nature.

With regard to cinematic storytelling, *Brokeback Mountain* often becomes a topic of discussion. As a story portraying two men in a relationship, the themes of the film fall in line with many negative stereotypes of Queer media. With regard to "Bury-Your-Gays," Kylo-



Patrick Hart comments, in “Retrograde Storytelling or Queer Cinematic Triumph? The (Not so) Groundbreaking Qualities of the Film *Brokeback Mountain*,” about the impact of the conclusion of the film in which one of the characters discovers their lover to have died: “it should no longer have been necessary to separate the lovers and have one of them beaten to death. Yet this is a common device required by Hollywood in order to get a ‘gay-themed’ movie made and distributed” (147). In reality, this is not the only occurrence of harmful stereotypes in the movie, the film relies on the idea of “converting” straight individuals:

Ennis implies that Jack has turned him into a homosexual, invoking the same sorts of ‘conversion fantasies’ or ‘conversion fears’ that have been so common in films about nonheterosexual men throughout cinematic history and that have contributed, at least in part, to homophobia, harmful stereotypes, and influential social constructions of gay and bisexual men as individuals who must be feared, especially by influential young males who might otherwise go on to enjoy happy, fulfilling heterosexual lives. (146)

Due to the nature of the film and the impact it had on narrative screenwriting, it would be reasonable to assume that prospective screenwriting students might fall in line with the ideas presented here. As such, he has a reasonable fear for the push of a film of this nature.

But the film itself, has a different focus than the initial short story did. The original story was written by Annie Proulx and published to the *New York Times* in 1997. In *Annie Proulx's Brokeback Mountain and Postcards Proulx*, Mark Asquith compares the film and the story and considers the public reception to both. He discovered that Proulx wanted the story to be about “destructive rural homophobia” not “gay cowboys” (78). This distinction is so important when considering story tropes in comparison to *Brokeback Mountain*. The film was never meant to be about two men falling in love, it was supposed to highlight the hatred that homophobia can

cause. Therefore, if stories are based on what comes before it, then altering the intended purpose of a story as it becomes mainstream affects the stories that will follow.

One of the main reasons current films seem to be following a similar format is due to the way that screenwriting is taught to young writers. Michael Green looks at how creative writing is currently being taught to students in “Screenwriting Representation: Teaching Approaches to Writing Queer Characters.” He notes that, “Screenwriting books and courses may preach originality and finding one’s singular voice, but that message is lost when these same books and courses uncritically model successful films and when the student is continually bombarded by powerful and ubiquitous media that discourage critical thinking” (31). Therefore, when learning about how to craft a compelling story, oftentimes the films that future writers are looking towards are these formulaic monsters. As such this makes students believe that the only work that is able to be produced is something that has been done, but this only lets them add a new name to the same basic story moves. In terms of representation, this can add to the damaging effects by referring to films that have poorly stereotyped Queer characters. Green continues by stating, “Student writers need to understand how to recognize and potentially avoid the harmful representation continually on display in contemporary movies” (31). But recognizing these tropes in the media becomes harder when the media that is being pushed at new students contains these harmful tropes.

Further, Green also looks at the larger story structures that are being taught to students. He writes that “A student may understand act structure, plotting, and the basics of conflict and dialogue, but meaningful, responsible writing extends beyond mechanics to include a lucid perception of the social, cultural, historical, and political implications of the material” (31). In other words, while it is important to note how to craft a story, it is equally important to know the

larger impact that story may have. One of the examples Green uses is the *Harry Potter* series, a story that is known in every household for better or worse. The series has an excellent basis for a creative plot and adventurous hero; although, there was no solid representation of characters that go beyond cisgender or heterosexual. On one hand, this book was published back when this kind of representation was not as prominent in societal norms. Be that as it may, Rowling, after having published the entire series, took to social media and stated that one of the characters identities as gay. While this may be true for the author, though, this character was never written with his sexual identity in mind. As Green states, “If Dumbledore is supposed to be gay, and not only is his gayness not overtly represented, but he also overwhelmingly embodies traditional tropes of straight masculinity and patriarchy” (39-40). This is important to note, because going back to a character who has already been deemed as “straight” in the media, only serves to confuse the audiences for whom that matters and make it invisible to those audiences who couldn't care less. It devalues the importance of representation in media while also removing the imperative nature and history of characters and people who are LGBTQ+. This method of false inclusion also has the potential to undermine the ongoing stories of future characters. Green continues this thought, “his character’s sexuality is just a political gimmick, one that the conservative powers-that-be behind the Harry Potter movies (2001-11) never let affect the films’ bottom line” (40). Going further, as will be addressed more clearly later, films are formulaic, and these formulas do not stop at the plot of a story, they continue on to characters: the male hero and his female counterpart, the brooding rich superhero, or more.

To state a character is gay but use a heteronormative stereotype as that version of ‘representation’ is wrong. Audiences get used to the idea of who a character’s trope is, it makes it easier for audiences to pick up the story, particularly in a film, and follow along. This trope is

common for audiences and because of that, there is no way an audience would assume that this is representation by any stretch. It is simply a way to call something representation without having to alienate a larger audience. Because this book was already popular amongst the masses, and by stating this, she inadvertently alienated a community. There was no mention or active representation in the film or the books and therefore should not be considered. Representation is not simply stating an individual fills a box, it is writing these individuals with their specific histories in mind.

This is not to say that this story is not a well told tale, rather, that stories can be told with proper representation. In order to combat this writing trope, screenwriters need to garner an understanding of Queer individuals or Queer representation, because that will show in the writing when it comes to the characters voice or actions. As Green comes to understand, “[a] good story is universal and sexuality doesn’t matter if one creates real people instead of stereotypes” (38). In this context, representation is not something that needs to be slapped on a well-crafted and well completed story. Proper representation comes from understanding characters and knowing how to make their stories something audiences are able to relate to on some level. Because of the nature of educating future writers and creative writing for screen plays and other media formats, the need for more accurate representation with compelling characters becomes more imperative. This need is due to the fact that, as Green notes, students are referring to those films as guidelines for proper and prosperous films and as such, more films will be produced following a similar format.

In order to address the problems with the “universal” story, we must take two steps that address both the craft of writing and the consumption of literature. Starting with the former, we need to expand the types of literature presented to prospective authors, in particular, with

classrooms. Christina Dorr and Liz Deskins, in *LGBTQAI Books for Children and Teens : Providing a Window for All*, might agree: “Quality books representing culturally diverse children and their families can serve as mirrors, reflecting one’s culture; windows, providing glimpses into the lives of other cultures; or doors, allowing one to walk in someone else’s shoes” (ix). No longer are we at a period in which the best literature is the oldest. In fact, if the class is not an English Literature based class, the works being assigned should be modern authors that have been recently published in order to show the class what is successful in the market with regard to the genre and/or community that the future writers are interested in. The types of literature presented should be representative of not only the groups who are writing in the class, but a diversity within the genres the group shows interest in. This specification is important, because if we only focus on the individual communities, we fall into problems like the Own Voices Movement, which will be discussed later, and leaning into stories that are far too individualized, rather than representative. If we look back at Laurel, when she asked for some direction, her “Teachers pointed me to *The Joy Luck Club* and novels like it, but I could never see myself reflected in these works” (“What is a Universal Story, Anyway?”). Just because a story includes a particular community of interest, does not mean it is the bylaws for the way in which that community should be written. Just as we looked at *Brokeback Mountain*; while the film was a huge step for Queer literature, it should not stand as the bylaws for the way those stories are told, if only for the fact that this would turn those narratives into a genre, rather than the “universal” story.

The next part to assigning a wider variety of works is to then include a discussion of what makes those stories interesting, and what defines them. Again, to clarify, this is not to place a genre on a community, but, as Laurel stated earlier, “How would I represent myself and these

people honestly if I was expected to erase what was most important to them?" (Laurel). In other words, the characters are shaped by their backgrounds, but so too are the authors who have written those stories. Therefore, the culture of the author affects the way the story is written in order to identify with their intended audience and reading more modern literature may open the doors to conversations in which "Asian fiction gets labeled 'undramatic' or 'pointless' by Western critics" (Salesses 28). While this may not be the best way in which students could discuss the narrative, it opens the doors to ask what effect the author was intending to have by including "undramatic" moments. For example, Studio Ghibli films have grown in popularity in recent years and are known for their animation styles and strong storytelling. One key detail that the director, Hayao Miyazaki, always includes in his films are, what he called, "Emptiness" ("Hayao Miyazaki Interview"). It's small moments in his films in which "people will just sit for a moment, or they will sigh, or look in a running stream, or do something extra, not to advance the story but only to give the sense of time and place and who they are" ("Hayao Miyazaki Interview"). Of course, these moments are not exclusive to Japanese animation, nor are they required in every Japanese story, but they define one aspect of a storyteller within a particular genre that might garner the interest of those with similar interests or backgrounds.

Comparable, is the "coming out" story within Queer literature. A majority of those stories focused on the coming out narrative like *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*. At the time of their release, they were necessary for the evolution of Queer literature and deserve to be discussed, not only for the many ways in which the stories evolve based upon a central narrative, but also for the stories that were missed during this period. In a one-on-one interview with Kristen Arnett, author of *Mostly Dead Things* and *With Teeth*, she noted that "I wanted to write a book that wasn't a coming out story. There have been a million of them. I don't want to write

one.” As soon as she made that comment, I agreed, however, she continued with a story in which she was at an event for her book and a member of the audience stated, "I'm not sick of coming out stories. I'm sick of white coming out stories." In this moment, she highlighted a trap that may white Queer authors fall into when discussing literature, our privilege defined our understanding of our own communities stories. In this new era of celebrating Queer literature, it is more important than ever to show a greater diversity of those Queer stories because, as Salesses might agree, these will be the stories that lead the new generation of authors and a wider diversity of storytelling:

Craft is about who has the power to write stories, what stories are historicized and who historicizes them, who gets to write literature and who writes folklore, whose writing is important to whom, in what context. That is the process of standardization. If craft is teachable, it is because standardization is teachable. These standards must be challenged and disempowered. Too often craft is taught only as what has already been taught before.  
(20-21)

Therefore, to change the way craft is taught is to change the stories we are destined to read so that we can understand and hopefully change the expectations required by craft (XV).

Which leads me to my final point that Salesses makes in the opening of his book: “Like in revision, the fiction writer must break down what she thinks she knows about her craft in order to liberate it” (Salesses XVI). In other words, we need to redefine what the “universal” story means. At its core, the idea of a “universal” story is one in which anyone can care for the characters and the narrative shown. Then again, as discussed, the concept is so ingrained in western literature, we are creating a boundary that either forces writers outside of that boundary

to accommodate to our own ideals or turn our backs to their own ideas. It affects both the storyteller and their audience, as Laurel states:

Writers who lie outside of this boundary are pressured to adopt the same stories, the same language, used and approved by others. Readers who have never seen themselves reflected back are expected to continue not existing. Using “universal” to enforce only makes our stories narrower, but using it as an opportunity to explore the lives of others, so unlike our own, takes back the term and gives it the meaning it’s meant to have.

(“What is a ‘Universal’ Story, Anyway?”)

By forcing the universal archetype, we are limiting the voices of authors who could share a more varied and representative experience/story. Therefore, maybe the best way to define a “universal” story is to not define it at all.

### **Audience**

The primary reason we prescribe rules, like the universal story, within writing is to allow for a better understanding of who our audience is, what they will understand in our writing, and how the writer can appeal to what interests them. Understanding these aspects of an audience helps by creating a relationship between author and readers, allowing the readers to build a connection with the story or the characters. These “rules” are supposed to determine what makes a “good” story for your audience but defining the “universal” story and providing a loose definition of diversity leads to stereotypes or gatekeeping. This can then force a prescribed audience, ignoring the author's intended audience, and negatively affects the type of storytelling that should exist. In this section we will discuss who the current implied audience is based upon publishing industry standards, what the effects of that audience are, how authors should treat their audience, and what the audience themselves need to do.



Unfortunately, I was unable to clearly identify how the "Big Five" publishers determine their audience for their published works. Luckily, some independent publishing companies have commented on how best to determine an audience. While this may present a potential bias in the information, as the "Big Five" publishers held 77.4% of paperback sales and 91% of hardcover sales in 2021 (Statistica), the logic presented in the following articles aligns with information provided from interviews with authors who have been published by some of the larger publishing houses. According to an article from Greenleaf, one of the ways the companies define their audience is through the genre of a book ("How to Identify Your Book's Audience"). They use the BISAC (Book Industry Standards and Communications) subject codes to determine genres which dictate where a book might be placed in a bookstore. BISAC subject codes, created by BISG (Book Industry Study Group), "Determine the major heading which best describes the content of your book" ("Complete BISAC Subject Headings List, 2021 Edition"). Based on the genre, it would be reasonably assumed that audiences who enjoy similar books within that landscape may enjoy more books falling within that genre. In theory, following the same genre to determine the audience may make sense; yet this presents multiple problems: generalizing a massive audience basis, audience cannot be guaranteed based upon genre, and turning marginalized stories into genres leads to "tokenism."

In stating that the audience is something as vague as the genre of your book, it opens the door to prospective literary agents or publishers to deny a manuscript off of something that could be redefined to the publisher's advantage and the writer's disadvantage. Mira Jacob comments on this in her article titled "I Gave a Speech About Race to the Publishing Industry and No One Heard Me," where she writes, "In the publishing world, they don't say, 'We just don't want your story.' They say, 'We're not sure you're relatable' and 'You don't want to exclude anyone with

your work.’ They say, ‘We’re not sure who your audience is’” (*BuzzFeed*). Further, in “The Abundance, Joy, Beauty, Persistence, Power, and Potential of Independent Publishing: A Conversation with Six Black Editors,” Camille Dungy states, “For many of the emerging poets I’ve had the pleasure to work with, they were told elsewhere that they didn’t ‘fit,’ that there was no place for their work” (65). In a research report centered on the idea of rethinking the way diversity impacts the publishing industry, Dr. Anamik Saha and Dr. Sandra van Lente continue this conversation by addressing another method for publishers to deny a work based upon vague comments. They state that publishers might focus on the idea of “quality,” yet, “sometimes a writer of colour’s supposed lack of ‘quality’ speaks more to a publisher’s lack of confidence in how to reach nonwhite, non-middle-class audiences” (Saha and van Lente 4). Salesses agrees, stating, “To say a work of fiction is unrelatable is to say, ‘I am not the implied audience, so I refuse to engage with the choices the author made’” (75). In short, by avoiding a solid definition of the audience for a book, shows the cowardice of the publishing companies in denying works that they may not fully understand how to market.

While this conversation is intended to focus on LGBTQIA+ stories, it is not the intention of this research to state that writers color and stories featuring characters of color are a direct comparison to Queer narratives. Rather, these themes are important when considering Queer writers of color and Queer characters of color as they maintain an even harder journey when reaching out to publishing industries with their stories.

Looking back to the way in which BISG has defined the usage for BISAC codes, it focused on the “major heading” of a title. Using this as a basis for defining the audience of a book leads to assuming much of the intended audience. For example, while working in a bookstore, customers would be confused when looking for *A Court of Thorns and Roses* and

even more confused when I would direct them to the sci-fi/fantasy section. As a whole, the book is listed as a high fantasy romance, yet a majority of the readership would look for the book in the YA Fantasy section of the store because much of the sci-fi/fantasy section was filled with titles like *Altered Carbon* or *Necromancer*. In other words, the book was shelved within the correct genre, but the books nestled around it did not match the expectations of the readers. In “From Publishers to Self-Publishing: Disruptive Effects in the Book Industry,” Hviid et al., comment on the way we promote books and the problems that arise from how current marketing tactics can affect readership. They note that, with regard to reviews, “consumers’ tastes differ, one consumer will not necessarily agree with an earlier reader’s rating of a book” (Hviid et al. 364). While focused on marketing, the central problem still remains: basing a book off of one theme or opinion affects the readers who might consume those stories.

It would be poor work on my part to assume that this is the only method for which the audience is understood in publishing. Dr. Anamik Saha and Dr. Sandra van Lente discovered that “publishers have a very narrow sense of their audience. The idea of the core reader as a white, middle-class older woman (sardonically referred to as ‘Susan’ by several of our respondents)” (10). Though, according to a survey from 2022, women remain the major reading demographic (Jones), the results should not mean that publishing houses should only market to that demographic. In fact, it could be said that this is the demographic *because* this is who they market to because this is who the general publishing industry is used to seeing and who they can best relate to with regard to storytelling. This coincides with Robert Bittners “Beyond Mere Representation in the Classroom: Finding and Teaching Literature by and About LGBTQ+ Authors:” “When the “majority” sees themselves reflected in literature, they often fail to see a need for change.” (Bittner 38). Notably, both sources were published in 2020 and much has

changed in the publishing industry in line with many of the cultural events such as the Black Lives Matter protests, leading to a potential change in this mindset. Still, this information remains relevant as the audience is understood through based upon the experience of the individuals publishing the works which is important when considering the type of authors who are published because “until the publishing industry diversifies its audience, writers of colour will always be ‘othered’” (Saha and van Lente 12). Yet, Kristen Arnett noticed the impact of having a strong support group for her works as well which could prove that changing the team will help with avoiding a generalized audience. When asked about the team who worked with her at Riverhead, an imprint of Penguin Random house, she stated:

The specific team I worked with, including my publicist, were young and Queer and marketing was young a Queer and Cal has worked with a ton of Queer authors and continues to work with a ton of Queer authors. My entire group that I was working with had a complete understanding before I even came in. They all read the book and they all had an understanding of it. We all had conversations. There was never a moment where I felt like they didn't understand what I was trying to do.

Her team may not have directly shared every experience, but they understood what the story was meant to be and were able to see the author's vision, avoiding a generalized audience, and possibly creating a book that could be enjoyed by the masses while still speaking directly to a specific group. Ultimately, the background of an author's team is important to understand who the intended audience of a book is and to best speak to that audience. As confirmed by Saha and van Lente, “Hiring more people who belong to marginalized communities will help publishers to tap into new audiences – but only if staff are given the resources and freedom to do this work without being burdened to speak for these communities” (5). Therefore, in order to speak to a

diverse audience, the team behind the author should be able to meet on a common ground of understanding in order to promote their audience in the best possible way.

When it comes to marketing these stories, sometimes it may feel right to place narratives by authors like Kristen Arnett into a “Queer/LGBTQIA+” Section of a bookstore essentially turning one aspect of a book into a genre. As discussed before, looking at a book’s audience based on genre does not always help the author reach their intended audience. However, this has the added effect of turning that aspect of the narrative into a trope, tokenizing the experience. Going back to the universal story, tokenizing presents a clear problem with regard to storytelling. Take, for instance, Kurt Vonnegut’s humorous take on storytelling; he believed that modern storytelling can be grouped into archetypes. These archetypes help audiences anticipate and follow common themes and tropes: the good guys will always win, guy meets girl, guy gets the girl, etc. Though, as discussed earlier, many of these ideas tend toward euro-centric storytelling, but with the inclusion of more stories, these archetypes can be evolved. In the end, certain stories must avoid falling into these archetypes so that audiences avoid stereotyping these stories.

As discussed with the universal story, the idea of stereotyping leads to many issues with regard to Queer narratives. Yet, there is more that can result in defining a book on this one aspect of its narrative. Because so many LGBTQIA+ books have been published, each with their own genre, topic, and more, it would be hard to confidently call each of these only “Queer.” On one hand, as author of *Amateur*, Thomas Page McBee noted in an interview with Garrard Conley, that trans media narratives didn’t allow him to “see much of [him]self in them,” because they were discussed solely through the viewpoint of being “born in the wrong body” (Conley). Therefore, people considering their gender identity who do not experience this may struggle with their own experience. This is not to imply that these stories do not hold importance, rather that

they should not be the only stories marketed towards an audience. If they were, it would lean on stereotyping of attitude and storytelling, meaning regardless of audience, the reader might have an altered perception of the story itself. For example, if someone were to see *Boy Erased* and *Song of Achilles*, they might assume that all Queer narrative is full of trauma with no happy endings. If this is what the publishing world sees, then they may feel the need to push for authors to write to audiences with the intention of bringing out the author's own trauma in a way of addressing lived experiences.

Often, this is seen to be the case, as Salesses notes, “The book world often demands vulnerability disproportionately from writers of color, especially from women of color and LGBTQ+ people of color—as if these writers are expected to put their lived experience on display in order to publish” (84). From a generalized stand, incorporating the struggles individuals who do not fall under the white cis straight umbrella is important as a method of sharing and embracing their experiences. As Kristi Constable notes, “constructing a story of adverse life events not only reduced the negative emotions elicited by the event (Pasupathi, 2003), but also provided narrators with a sense of meaning to help them cope constructively with these experiences (McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007)” (421). At the same time, readers within that umbrella are now viewing these experiences through a lens that leads to pity, which Thomas Page McBee, discussed:

When you're talking to someone who's never considered their own place in things without a basic, 'Where do I stand and how am I being shaped by culture?' and who hasn't thought about that in a deep way, I don't think that person can truly be an ally to someone else in a way that's not coming from pity (“Transgressing Familiarity: Talking With Thomas Page Mcbee”).

Therefore, by collecting all the Queer narratives and placing them under one umbrella, removing what individualizes each story, means only the ones with the most popularity within that category stand out. Those stories are, unfortunately, the ones with the most trauma and violence towards Queer characters. Thereby creating the idea that these narratives are built for catharsis for the Cis straight white audience or might lead to the “exposure to violence in narratives promote[ing] mistrust of others, particularly among non-dominant groups” (Costabile 425). Coupled with that, now the Queer readers who are looking for those stories are subject to an overwhelming idea that their own experiences might be, or even should be, the same.

During an event for the LGBTQ+ initiatives at KSU, one student commented that if you are under the LGBTAIQ+ umbrella, you have trauma. Sometimes, these stories can help build a community based upon similar situations. In “Recent Trends in Using Life Stories for Social and Political Activism,” Helga Lenart-Cheng and Darija Walker comment on the need for “more inclusive and complete representations of...communities” (145). They state that “The sharing of life stories is thus seen by many activists as a way to strengthen the cohesion of our communities—whether by creating new ties or by ‘fostering deep community’ in those already in existence” (Lenart-Cheng and Walker 149). Being able to see that those traumatic experiences are not solely limited to one person can be a good message to many. Nonetheless, it should not be the only message shared.

While it is true that many within the Queer spectrum do have traumatic experiences in relation to their sexuality or gender identity, it does not mean that their experience within their sexuality or gender identity needs to be surrounded by the same trauma. Within that mindset, books that are focused on sexuality or gender identity-based trauma should not be consistently advertised to the same audiences who might want to enjoy a story about a found family and their

two fathers, as in *The House on the Cerulean Sea*. Thomas Page McBee even showed anger at being placed within the same box, stating, “One of the most insulting things to happen to me as a writer is to be placed only in LGBT sections. I can fit in two sections!” (Conley). Even when discussing how to shelve children’s books that revolve around Queer stories, Kate Messner, in “The Truth Is in There: Creative Approaches Blend Fact and Fiction for Young Readers,” states that “I know how few children’s books there are about LGBTQIA+ history. I would like to see books about my community sitting alongside books that show other communities who have struggled for equality” (29). By placing the focus of the book, not on the Queer representation, and, instead, on the push for equality, the audience is able to realign what they would be interested in and respond appropriately to the books and the narratives being told.

Placing the book in the wrong genre has the added effect of keeping the stories out of the hands of people who could learn something from those narratives. In short, identifying genre based on sexuality or gender identity leads to “othering” the stories by keeping them separate from the rest of the books. Lenart-Cheng and Walker note their concern with “othering:” “there looms the danger of reducing individual life stories to basic representative functions; such life stories or collections may in fact contribute to perpetuating our preconceived notions of the Other’s identity.” (Lenart-Cheng and Walker 145). In doing so, avoiding engaging with audiences who might not have understood the impact of those stories. As Page McBee adds, “I want my story to reach people who have not had my experiences. Put us on the front shelf.” (Conley). It’s important that a wider audience is able to engage with these texts as well, because:

These learning experiences—enhanced critical thinking, learning to see oneself as an actor with a communal role, experiencing the value of reciprocity, becoming an informed member of society—are all supposed to contribute to democracy indirectly, by educating



us as individuals. The hope, however, is that these learning experiences will lead not only to greater levels of individual involvement, but also to greater levels of acceptance among various groups. (Lenart-Cheng and Walker 147)

In other words, by avoiding “othering” the narrative, audiences are able to build empathy for the stories and create stronger bonds with the individuals being discussed.

Another important detail to keep in mind, though, is that authors should not be beholden to write to the audience that they did not intend. For one, as Chris Jackson rephrases from Marlon James, “writers, sometimes without realizing it, pander to the person they imagine to be the gatekeeper and how we are all poorer for it.” (Jackson), in turn creating a gatekeeper before even trying to publish their own works. Laurel confirms this, “When I wrote, I wondered who would care. As far as I was concerned, there was no place for me or my kind in the world of creative people.” (“What is a Universal Story, Anyway?”). Assuming who the audience is, from a writer’s perspective, goes back to the universal story, because “Much of what we learn about craft (about the expectations we are supposed to consider) implies a straight, white, cis, able (etc.) audience” (Salesses 46). Though, Salesses later continues, “The writer can’t determine other people’s limitations, only her own” (48). Therefore, instead of teaching the writer to focus on an audience they are not writing for, or asking an author to rework their story for a larger “universal” audience, authors should instead, “think of the implied reader as the perfect reader for our work, who would understand everything and would read the book exactly as we intended” (Salesses 42). While this would seem counter to many of the common assumptions with regard to responding to consumer demands, publishers might find that audiences are able to adapt to stories that do not focus the industry’s vision of an “intended audience.”

Referring back to Mira Jacobs, she sees that the publishing industry itself doubts the capabilities of their audience. She knows that “American audiences are capable of so much more than some in your industry imagine” and that “White Americans can care about more than just themselves” because “the rest of us...are DYING to see ourselves anywhere.” (Jacob). In “Diversity in Publishing: The Good, The Bad, and How you can Help Make a Change,” Crystal Swain-Bates agrees that ““Diverse books aren’t just for the diverse. They are for all of us” (*IngramSpark*). Her reasoning is that diverse stories “can help build bridges of cultural understanding, promote tolerance, normalize identities unlike our own, and allow people to develop an appreciation for the cultures of others.” (Swain-Bates). Not to say that racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and more can be cured from literature, but that it can have an impact on the way we interact with people. As Page McBee states, “I genuinely believe the first step toward coalition-building comes from genuinely having compassion and empathy for other people’s experiences, and I think you have to do that work on yourself before you can extend that to others“ (Conley). The publishing industry was built to share ideas and contribute to knowledge across the world. We give words power; we know that because “Diversity is a part of everyday life and our books should reflect that” (Swain-Bates). If people are able to sit and absorb the world around them without being pandered to by the industry, then they might be able to understand why it is so important to find empathy and relearn what it means to read a “universal story.” Lenart-Cheng and Walker noticed that contributing to these stories helps people participate in the world they live in, but that the focus in these cases is “focus not on the right to share, but on the duty to listen.” (145-146).

While encouraging publishers to allow more diversity because the publishing industry's intended audience will read it, that is not the only reason those books should be published. It's

important to remember that because then authors fall back into the mentality that they have to write to that audience again. As Jacob states, “Because all of us are so ready to talk about the world we live in. We are ready to have a publishing industry that is of that world” (Jacob). Based on the history of the publishing industry, they have a duty to share these stories and audiences have a right to read them, but “It shouldn’t be the writer’s concern to satisfy an audience who is not hers” (Salesses 33). It is not that unintended audiences cannot read those works, but that, as Salesses quotes from Chinweizu et al., “it might take ‘time and effort and sloughing off of their racist superiority complexes and imperialist arrogance’ to appreciate it” (qtd in 33). In conclusion, writers need to be allowed to go back to the basic and only rule of writing: write what interests you. Audiences will follow, they always have.

### **Diversity**

Building upon the intentions of the “universal” story and our understanding of audience, let’s consider what exactly is a true reflection of our society and how do authors craft a sense of empathy in fiction storytelling that makes someone willing to engage with a work? As we notice the lack of representative identities in book publishing and ask for more diverse voices to share their story, trends like the Own Voices Movement on social media or non-profit organizations, like We Need Diverse Books, have risen to address and respond to the lack of diversity. But an unfortunate side effect has forced marginalized authors to only write about their own experiences. Further, “Diversity” has become such a generalized term that it is now its own section in the bookstore, making it harder for those authors to reach a larger audience. Therefore, it is important to determine, not only for this project, but for the publishing industry as a whole, what exactly they mean by “diversity” in publishing?

With the spread of awareness and the ever-growing list of identities being named, it is more important than ever to be specific when the call for diversity is made. In Jessa Crispin's essay from *Literary Publishing in the Twenty First Century*, "The Self-Hating Book Critic", she determined that these broad, open-ended terms "give a person absolute freedom [and lead them to] probably. . . just copy the person closest to them" (63). As publishing has clearly become a white male playground for reiterations of the same dull work, the lack of definition has even made its way to scholarly and academic publishing. In "Disrupting the Past to Disrupt the Future: An Antinarrative of Technical Communication," Jones et al. discussed the lack of "diverse" authors and its impact in technical and professional communication: "Relatively few TPC scholars explicitly mention race and ethnicity, instead using the more general term diversity" (Jones et al. 215). The "performative activism" is allowing people to simply point out the inequalities of the situation without having to take any personal risks in making changes. Jones et al. goes on: "[t]his diversity focus has, at times, served as an insufficient stand-in for addressing race and ethnicity" (Jones et al. 215) as others have determined that "we live in a nonracist society, and thus the need to acknowledge color no longer exists" (qtd in Jones et al. 215). In short, leaving "diversity" to an interpretation leaves those under its umbrella to relative silence or continues their position as the "other" with regard to their experiences in the larger narrative landscape.

Another problem we see with the idea of diversity, is making the term political without knowing the impact of that action. In fact, diversity in publishing should not be inherently political; though, many authors are often equating the idea of Own Voices or inclusive writing with a political agenda, either in a positive or negative light. More often than not, this conversation is headed by the very people who benefit from the current publishing gatekeepers

and are able to engage in the conversation through performative activism or critique of those who are now seeing success that would not have been possible just a decade ago. Relating diverse voices in the publishing industry is a disservice to those who have yet to let their voices be heard. Doing this turns marginalized people into a genre; it makes the “standard” of book publishing increasingly white and turns even children's literature into a political statement where there need not be one.

Instead of politicizing diversity, the term and concept could be used as a way to open doors for audiences. Addressing the impact of representation in younger literature, Chiara Lepri's “Education on Diversity: The Contribution of Early Childhood's Literature” reviewed how children and Young Adult (YA) literature can open doors for conversations between children and their parents about their world. She discusses what diversity might look like in children's publishing and why it's so important, suggesting that children's books should be made to expand on “a different interpretation of reality, which is socially inclusive and aimed at valuing differences” (Lepri 327). In fact, Eugenia Yizhen Lo seems to agree as she discusses the interactions of YA literature and media adaptations. Lo writes that the readers of YA literature consist of “a generation that is demanding representation that reflects the world around them” (612). That is the key word to focus on: “reflect.” In order to craft literature that is truly representative, it needs to consist of a reflection upon our society, and not, as Lepri points out, “activist authors and publishers use[ing] the book as an inopportune tool to fight for civil rights” (334) as this devalues the marginalized experience by representing identities through the struggles endured rather than a celebration of who they are. And yet, books themselves are not free from politics.

Books and their distribution, as stated earlier, were intended for cultural and societal change (Smith 19) and the very concept of spreading ideas is political as it has the capacity to change the minds of an entire nation. Literature does not exist in a vacuum in which our society is free from persuasion; though some literary agents, like Steven Hutson, might disagree. Hutson, a white male literary agent, saw the impact diversity could have while experiencing the *Los Angeles Times* Festival of Books. He expressed his resignation to the liberal speeches that were given: "I thought we were there to recognize excellent writing and noteworthy stories. Silly me. Could it really be that good writing is entirely absent from the other side of the aisle?" (Huston). This shows a distinct lack of understanding of the primary purpose of sharing diverse stories. While the stories themselves should not be interlaced with a political agenda for every iteration, the current storytelling landscape necessitates their inclusion as a means of normalizing those who are not under the white male umbrella. Therefore, it is incorrect to assume that books themselves are not written with the intention of change. May it be the change of how children understand their peers, or the way adults understand empathy, books are society's way of, as noted earlier, reflecting on current issues, and sharing common struggles. Books are political and diverse books can be political, but considering all diverse, marginalized authors as political only adds to the current perception that anyone who is not the white male, is the "other."

With the fragile and wavering nature of the term in broad areas, it's clear that diversity, in publishing, should not be given a broad definition. As a whole, many organizations, publishers, and articles seem to come to the consensus that diversity in publishing has the *intentions* of inclusivity with regards to marginalized voices. Regardless, this just leads to an ever-expanding list of every identity the authors find on Google, making the identities listed as easy to skip as the annual sales number for Amazon. While reading these sources, my intentions were to agree and

spend my time pushing for this kind of representation and unpack the understanding audiences have of the term “identity;” in reality, that would lead to a purposeless endeavor, lacking any substantial addition to the ongoing conversation.

Emily Rosenman et al. and their discussion on “engaged pluralism” in academic publishing (510) highlighted what the true purpose should be with regard to defining “diversity:” “the idea of diversity [is] something that is taken as broadly positive, but also highly abstract” (Rosenman et al. 514). From here, the relationship between “othering” and “diversity” with regards to publishing was clear. By making diversity a simplistic list of identities based on skin color, culture, sexuality and more, you turn the very concept into a genre, or “other.” A literary blog for editors adds to the conversation, agreeing that “grouping different types of people together and calling them diverse reaffirms their marginalized status — that their identities somehow deviate from the norm — and might erase differences within that group” (“Diversity in Publishing”). In other words, by throwing anyone who is not under the straight white cisgender neurotypical male umbrella, we are stripping away what makes these stories so important and what gives them purpose.

This debate does not mean that diversity in publishing should not contain a definition. The Reedsy blog post goes on to state that “not acknowledging the differences in each group’s lived experiences — for instance, using colorblind language — can mean that manifestations of inequality are swept under the rug and never dealt with” (“What Can You Do?”). It feels nearly redundant to say this, but with the ongoing conversations around representation and equality centered on movements like Black Lives Matter sitting just under the surface, society remains at a point of change. In being at that point of change, many companies are discovering the need to promote their own inclusivity. Publishing is no exception. That being said, being inclusive does

not simply mean identifying who, within a company, does not fall under the majority of the population in a broad overarching statement. Rather, diversity, as E. E. Lawrence in “The Trouble with Diverse Books” states, should “not commit to a universal definition, or stable set of criteria that govern the application of the term” (1485). As such, it is important to not provide a generalized list or vague definitions of “diversity,” but to specifically identify who is being spoken about and what relationship the group has to the conversation at hand.

Lawrence fights for people to define diversity based on the situation in which it is necessary to be discussed. He determines that diversity in publishing is “polysemous,” and that publishers should instead offer “an operational rather than a real definition, such that readers understand what aspect(s) of diversity a particular speaker means to prioritize” (Lawrence 1485). In following this path, diverse, marginalized authors will not be promoted based upon what they are not, but rather what makes them unique. That is what will guide my capstone and resulting research, as I will work with the definition of publishing that focuses on, as Lepri states, “new ideas [that] promote dialogue, curiosity and encourage readers to discover the world and search for one’s inner self” (335). My diversity in publishing will focus on how writers and publishers see empathy as a driving factor and how audiences are perceived in such a way as to encourage the censorship of ideas. And, to avoid falling into a definition that is overly broad and open to alternative interpretations, I will be focusing on the diversity of Queer marginalized authors representing realistic stories and characters that do not center around the damaging impacts of their identity but celebrates who they are with a secondary look at the white Queer stories that overtake writers of color in the publishing industry.

If publishing was made to share ideas and build communities, then the very nature of books themselves is to build empathy. Authors want their audience to care about their characters,



in some way. They want us to hate them, love them, or be them. Empathy is the foundation for the human experience; it is what determines who we become and how we build interactions within our communities. As the world has grown with technology, stronger connections are built through communication, of which books still participate in. In fact, so much of my research shared this term that I found myself constantly highlighting it as it appeared. It is the guiding principle behind diversity in publishing and that principle is what should guide literary agents, like Hutson, to publish stories that share lives not often addressed in our current media landscape.

## Primary Research:

Throughout this section, I have combined some of the secondary research around the Own Voices Movement with the primary sources. These sources have been combined as they respond to each other regarding the kinds of works being published as well as the thought process that goes into the craft of writing. By understanding the background of the Own Voices Movement, and its impact on having more representative stories written by the same people who identify the same as their characters, shows the thought process behind these authors. This background can help in providing a more nuanced perspective of the conversations in the following chapter.

### The Own Voices Movement

As publishing has pushed for more Queer romances, many of the popular titles, such as *Carry On* by Rainbow Powell, *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* by Becky Albertalli, *Heartstopper* by Alice Oseman, *A Marvelous Light* by Freya Marske, and many more, are often written by straight cis women. A queer, trans writer for Electric Lit noted that this trend left her confused because while she was excited to see herself reflected on the page, instead she found “that some LGBTQ-focused stories were reflecting not me, but a straight person’s imagination of me” (“Why Are So Many Gay Romance Novels Written By Straight Women?”).

Women writing about gay male romance for a female audience has been occurring since fanfiction joined the writing stage. Fanfiction could be best described as a written work based in the world of a particular media narrative often published on websites like *Archive of Our Own* or *Fanfiction.net*. Fans may create their own characters to add to the stories, add new adventures for characters in the show, or, most often, write stories portraying a romance between two characters. Much of the MLM (men loving men) romance tropes started with *Star Trek* fans

submitting works to fan magazines (“Do Women in Fandoms Fetishize Men-Loving-Men Relationships?”). In an article about the same topic, writer and editor, Paul Gallant spoke with Lucy Lennox, who has written over forty MLM romance novels, about why women seem to be drawn to these types of stories:

Firstly, straight romances are full of ‘sexist junk’: the powerful assertive man, the damsel in distress. The power dynamics can be appalling...By having two men as leads, there’s not as much baggage in having one rescue the other, or having one more powerful than the other, or having that flip, or having them be pretty much ‘equal’ all along. When female readers get wrapped up in a scene about a male firefighter pulling a woman out of a burning building, they might, by default, insert themselves into the role of the female victim. If it’s a male firefighter pulling a future male lover out of a burning building, some women can more easily insert themselves into either role. It’s less about homosexuality itself than starting the game of love on a level playing field. (“Reading MM: How Gay Romance Scratches an Itch for Straight Women”)

Since, as Lennox states, most literature directed towards females pushes for the idea of a weak woman and a strong man dynamic, it might make sense that women have a desire to change the narrative. These authors are retelling a narrative that has dominated their lives by using another person's story to reshape the narrative. Stories are always being retold, it is the nature of storytelling, however:

If a reteller from outside the community is going to tell that community’s story, it seems to me that it is incumbent upon that reteller to learn the background of the story, to understand the cultural forces that produced it, to study the assumptions behind the tale and the meanings that arise from those assumptions, and to study the characters’

motivations and—perhaps most particularly—the language, which incarnates character and action and meaning (Schmidt 162)

Ultimately these female authors are taking a community and revising their narrative to their own benefit. The problem comes from the fact that much of the literature that includes MLM relationships was so small beforehand, leaving much of these narratives to be based on stereotypes, which became one of the fundamental baselines for the Own Voices movement that started on Twitter.

Twitter found its hold in the book community as a way for content creators to recommend books of similar tastes or a way for authors to interact with their fans on a more consistent manner. The host of a podcast centered on speaking with booksellers and authors, Nicole Brinkley, noticed that, in particular, YA fans “found Twitter to be an easy space on which to meet each other and share that love. Authors used it to interact with librarians and booksellers and bloggers and readers” (“Did Twitter Break YA?”). Corinne Duyvis used this platform and started a trend through the tag #OwnVoices by asking for recommendations of books focused on diverse characters from authors of the same background. In a blog post about her hashtag:

Getting to write what you want goes both ways. However, it’s disingenuous to pretend these are similar conversations. Historically speaking, it’s extremely common for marginalized characters to be written by authors who aren’t part of that marginalized group and who are clueless despite having good intentions. As a result, many portrayals are lacking at best and damaging at worst. Society tends to favor privileged voices even regarding a situation they have zero experience with, and thus those are the authors that get published. (“#OwnVoices”)

#OwnVoices was intended to showcase works written by authors from the same background as their characters. Adding this level of authenticity to storytelling lets readers feel a closer connection to the stories being told and to respond to the primarily privileged voices that are published. The trend was not meant to say that some books are better than others simply due to the background of the author, because “a book being able to ‘claim’ the #ownvoices label does not place it or its author above criticism” (Duyvis). Instead, Duyvis states that its intention was to “use a broad definition of #ownvoices while still having important discussions about the effects of authors writing outside of their lane” (#OwnVoices). Yet, Robert Bittner noticed that “#OwnVoices... has become prescriptive over time, rather than being used descriptively, as it was originally envisioned” (36). The nature of social media opened up the doors to criticism for authors and unnecessary pressure for marginalized authors to write only within one aspect of their life or expose intimate details of their lives with the intention of creating more inclusive content.

Robert Bittner noticed that “With the advent of social media, authors are often expected to interact with their readers and also reveal various aspects of their lives for public consumption...to prove that they are “qualified” to write a given narrative” (36). This presents a new problem in which, Bittner notes that “Unlike some aspects of an author’s physical appearance that are more visible, other components such as sexuality or gender assigned at birth can be invisible unless explicitly made public” (36) creating a double edged sword in which people may feel forced to unwillingly out themselves in order to get their book published or noticed by audiences. As the trend continued, it became harder for Queer authors to avoid scrutiny, as “Queer authors must be out of the closet, in a neatly labeled box, for their Queer representation to even be considered acceptable” (Brinkley). Complicated further:

author Erin Hahn (*More Than Maybe*, 2020), who writes, ‘I hate that every year when the M/M [male/male romance] fiction discourse comes around, ALL of the ownvoices writers are forced to air their private lives and hurt in defense of their art’ (Hahn, 2020). . . which is complicated by the fact that queer, white male experiences are so prevalent in media and often overshadow all other kinds of queerness. Many marginalized individuals therefore cannot help but mirror these experiences in their own work, even subconsciously. (Bittner 36-37)

Taking a look from an audience perspective, the books you read must be from a credible proven member of the LGBTQIA+ community in which the author has clearly identified who they are, and those books must focus on the trauma or struggles the individual had to experience just to be allowed to exist making the focus of all these narrative solely on the trauma one must endure. Focusing on this trauma creates more harm than you might think if we take into account what Helga Lenart-Cheng and Darija Walker learned in “Recent Trends in Using Life Stories for Social and Political Activism:” “Karen Worcman, director of the Museu de Pessoa, and her colleagues argue that ‘promoting the construction of a social memory open to narrative by people from all segments of society and acting to spread that memory are essential to building a democratic society based on respect for the other’” (Lenart-Cheng and Walker 143). In other words, we learn about each other through these stories, but if those stories only focus on the trauma one community endures from another, the understanding gained from that community is incomplete. Lenart-Cheng and Walker note that “technology today brings people together who otherwise could not be sitting around the same fire, and this intensified experience of sharing life stories leads to new forms of activism.” (143) On the other hand, by only viewing these stories as

political activism, audiences are confusing the idea of Diversity with politics, assigning an unintended label to the conversation.

Kacen Callender also considers the kind of pressure being placed on authors and what they have to produce for an audience in a *Medium* article titled “The Humanization of Authors.” Readers often “feel entitled to the work of an author...because the reader has been willing to give money for books,” but seem to ignore the autonomy of the author themselves making the audience feel as though they have been jilted when a character does not do what the audience assumes they should (Callender). So, while authors should “ensure that no reader is harmed in their writing by creating racist, misogynistic, etc. depictions of people” (Callender), Kristen Arnett believes authors should still be free to write what they want to see, regardless of audience expectations. Therefore, Callender challenges the conversation: it is not the author’s job to write non-racist, non-homophobic, non-transphobic, etc, work, it is the job of the publishing industry to select works that create a positive impact for their audience, and to be able to market to that audience and more.

Eventually the trend had to be dissolved; publishers had been using #OwnVoices almost like a quality check of the book but had to remove the tag from its content (Brinkley). On the surface, one tweet opened the doors to a movement highlighting a need that has been missing from the book world, but the movement had an unintended effect of pushing authors of marginalized backgrounds to only write about their experiences or stories, limiting their voices to their trauma. While “Diversity is a part of everyday life and our books should reflect that” (Swain-Bates), it is equally important to encourage authors to write outside of their trauma for the sake of other audiences in order to normalize the stories being told and keep Queer literature out of a genre. More stories should exist that are written from authors of diverse backgrounds,

but authors should not be limited to only writing about the most traumatic part of their lives. But we are still left with the question of how to include and market Queer literature in a way that remains accurate but does not limit the voices of the authors themselves.

### **Interviews**

At this point in my research, there still seem to be questions unanswered regarding Queer diversity in the publishing industry. One on hand, the impact writing practices have on not only Queer writers, but marginalized writers of color in workshop or education shows a clear need for adjustment in how writing craft is taught and what kinds of writing should be used in classroom settings. Additionally, the way audience members might be able to readjust the expectations for novels and books could set a new standard for how readers engage with works both online and individually. However, how the publishing industry could tackle the ongoing systemic oppression of primarily Queer non-white and non-cisgendered writers remains elusive and complex. While the background issues relating to writers and their audience could be addressed, the major way to make a positive change should be through the companies that are responsible for choosing and distributing the very works we are discussing. The problem cannot be solved only through online trends or through the populace itself, yet my research was unable to pinpoint the exact method in which this could be addressed.

Through my secondary sources, I needed to pinpoint the root of the problem itself. Are authors truly feeling censored as a result of the way craft is taught? Are publishing companies actively and authentically attempting to provide more inclusive representations of Queer stories and authors? Or is the industry focused on only showing the traumatic stories that seem to define that community? And, how could the publishing industry be more inclusive and provide a better method for good representation of the Queer community?



Upon gathering my sources and questions, I reached out to notable figures within the publishing industry, asking about their firsthand perspectives upon the subject. The three individuals connected to the publishing industry offered their insights, opening the possibilities of potential change that could occur in the hopes of more inclusion. The two authors I spoke with were able to provide their own personal insights around the publishing of their works, while the final participant was able to provide a nuanced look from behind the doors of an independent publisher, Peachtree. Based upon their comments, I was able to further the conversation regarding Queer diversity in publishing and address some of the larger concerns from the gatekeepers of the industry.

### *Demographics and Background*

As the focus of my research was upon Queer representation in publishing, my goal was to locate authors and publishing professionals able to reasonably address my questions within that scope. I interviewed three people, two of which are authors: Kristen Arnett, a cisgendered lesbian woman, and Meredith Talusan, a transgender nonbinary individual. Both of the authors have experience working with one of the "Big Five:" Penguin Random House. The third participant is a freelance editor who has experience at a local independent publishing house in Atlanta, Peachtree Publishing, which recently published a young adult fiction novel focused on a trans main character. While each of them had different journeys into the publishing and writing realm, they each came to the same conclusion with regard to diversity and the lack of Queer representation within the industry. Then again, Kelsey Provow noted a key point about the industry that bears consideration throughout the remainder of the conversation. Even though she only worked for an independent publisher, her experiences throughout the industry showed "there was always a desire to support and promote those stories." Yet, this conversation needs to

be continued because of the nature in which the publishing industry exists. As Meredith Talusan states:

**Meredith Talusan:** The American Publishing industry reflects American society as a whole. And American society is innately unequal, from various vantage points. It's actually very hard to isolate an institution and make it actually diverse. While at the same time, everything leading up to writers and books being introduced to that institution is extremely unequal and oppressive.

As my literature review addresses, it seems as though the publishing world is aware of the way in which representation is handled, yet the ways in which they are addressing the resulting issues of poor representation for marginalized authors is clearly not having the intended impact on the kinds of writing being produced.

#### *Current State of the Publishing Industry*

When asked about the current state of the publishing houses each of the participants had experience in, they each expressed interesting perspectives upon the kinds of diversity present and what effect that had upon their experiences. As anticipated, all of them agreed that many of the people working within the industry are straight white cisgendered individuals:

**Meredith Talusan:** [Publishing hiring practices] has been changing and has changed significantly since the protests of the summer of 2020 which led to a bunch of appointments of people of color in the industry. There are a significant number of gay men and lesbian women I know who are editors in the industry. But you know, very very few trans people.

Notably, Meredith Talusan was published with Viking, an imprint for Penguin Random House, but, looking to Kelsey Provow, who worked with an independent publisher, there was a similar problem:

**Kelsey Provow:** When I started out at Peachtree it was predominantly white and cis and practically all female except for our warehouse team. Over the past, maybe two or three years, that has changed...we had one male editor, who identified as male, and, in our marketing and accounting teams, we have had Queer representation. But, in editorial, it was only a couple years ago that we hired our first black editor. When I started, there were only two black coworkers in our company.

As discussed earlier within the literature review, it can be assumed that getting published within a major publishing house allows for more accessibility to marketing, printing, and other necessary aspects to producing a work in a financially feasible manner. Although, getting published by major houses is nearly impossible without having proven your own worth as a writer by getting published within independent houses.

Provow further concluded her assessment with, “I don't think I ever got a sense that it was from a lack of desire to have that representation in this space, but at the same time too, no sense of urgency to change it.” I began to question the effects of who is being employed. While they “desire to support and promote those stories...there was less of a drive to obtain them as they were accepting if they fell into their lap.” Combine this with the systemic oppression that many marginalized authors already feel, something that Meredith Talusan addresses later, when entering the publishing industry, that leaves many people unable to see their works published because those authors may not even realize what is available to them. But having Queer and

other marginalized groups working within the publishing industry means that those acquisition editors will fight to acquire books showcasing better representation of their communities.

The reason diversity is such an important aspect of hiring practices within the publishing industry is highlighted by Kristen Arnett's experience going from an independent publisher, Tin House, to Penguin Random House's imprint, Riverhead. She notes that, "Tin House was a genuine delight" because she "was able to be in constant communication with everybody who was touching my book...it was like friends who cared about me putting my art out and doing a great job." This sense of community or comradery helped her feel more confident in the work she wanted to create. The level of accessibility to the people working on her book gave her a level of confidence in the publishing house's ability to maintain consistency within her vision. So, when she moved to Riverhead, she only did so upon the basis of their history with publishing other Queer works. Even still, her experience in getting her work published with a larger house meant less communication with the people she worked with, but that didn't pose as much of a problem: "The specific team I worked with, including my publicist, were young and Queer and marketing was young and Queer and Cal has worked with a ton of Queer authors and continues to work with a ton of Queer authors." While I cannot confirm if Tin House had Queer employees at the time of Kristin Arnett's first published work, it was clear that her ability to communicate with those individuals allowed for the same confidence in her work that Penguin Random House offered her when she was not allotted that same level of communication but had people of similar backgrounds on her team:

**Kristen Arnett:** There was never a moment where I felt like they didn't understand what I was trying to do. But that was a big thing for me going with Riverhead was that I had an understanding that, even though I can't speak for all of PRH, I knew that Riverhead

would be good about those things. They publish a lot of Queer work that I read... I have a feeling of safety that I'm not going to feel like I have to explain a lot of things or argue or be my own advocate. In terms of "I want to write this sex scene in here" or "I want to keep this" "this is what I want to have happen" I never want to have to do all that stuff.

So, I'm not sure if that's like an overall PRH thing, but I know for sure it is Riverhead.

On one hand this shows the importance of either strong communication or people with a clear understanding of the author's intentions or experiences. If Peachtree Publishing can offer open dialogue, why then is it important for them to include more diverse employees on their roster?

To answer this question, first consider the reasons major publishing houses have imprints for their works. They function as a way to help consumers identify what genres or common themes best support their interests. Yet, independent publishing houses are not allotted the same freedom for their works because they have a singular brand to uphold. Kelsey Provow detailed that Peachtree "was known for having clean fiction. No curse words no sex. If a sixteen-year-old could read it then so should a twelve year old." But, as Peachtree started to grow, they began to build an imprint of their own in order to open doors for more works: "[Ashley Hearn] was also a part of the Queer community and she immediately said...that she wanted to have at least one Queer title for every season that we produced. So far she has done that and it has been really wonderful." Ashley Hearn was the acquisitions editor for Andrew Joseph White's book *Hell Followed with Us*. This book presented a few problems for the company, though not for the trans narrative. Instead, they were concerned about its body horror aspects. Once the book landed on the New York Times Best Sellers list, though, Provow stated that "it's proven to be such a great fit for that imprint as well as, obviously, a need in the consumer market." Thereby, hiring people with an understanding for the need of Queer literature allows for more experimentation that can

prove to be effective for consumer markets. But was this only possible due to the implementation of the Peachtree Publishing Teen Fiction imprint?

I find this question important as often Queer literature is made to feel experimental or taboo, but that is not always the case. Earlier in our conversation, Provow mentioned a children's book that was published by Peachtree, which, as discussed, is a known children's literature publisher, before implementing their teen imprint. She told me about the young editor who "being a part of the Queer community himself, made it a top priority for him to start acquiring children's book that had a Queer message, Queer characters, Queer identities." Once again, when the book proved successful, the President of Peachtree was willing to continue looking into books of that nature. Even though this feels like it should be a win, it's disheartening to know that would this book not have been published without the new Queer editor, because, in Provow's words, while "there was always a desire to support and promote those stories...there was less of a drive to obtain them as they were accepting if they fell into their lap." Further, this book had to prove that it could be successful, as though these are not works that are being published consistently to mass market audiences. But from an independent publisher's perspective, there is a smaller market they need to appease, which means they need to ensure they can reach the bottom line with experimental work. So, while major publishers like Penguin Random House are able to determine the "Queer work will sell and make money," based on what Kristen Arnett said, independent houses must have this work proven to them by the employees who care enough to make it a priority.

Keeping in line with employees, though, Meredith Talusan brings up an excellent point about what kind of writing is given to editors based on their backgrounds. She states that, on one hand, "There [is] this sort of really weird gap in the sense that there continues to be public

interest in Trans issues, but there are actually very few publishing professionals who are Trans.” Notably, Talusan adds that while she doesn’t “personally know any openly trans editors in any of the major publishing houses right now...doesn't mean that they don't exist. But I don't know any.” Later, she identifies why this might be the case when considering how to fix the changes that might benefit the publishing industry:

**Meredith Talusan:** The really big reason that publishing is so White and so Cis is because most of the people who go into publishing have to spend periods of their lives as editorial assistants, making probably now, more like \$60,000, but in the past like \$30,000 to \$40,000 living in the most expensive city in the world...something that was just not possible for anybody who didn't have parental support, which is much less likely if one is a person of color or Queer and certainly Trans.

She goes on to state that while there is “progress towards creating living wages even for entry level employees,” there remains a distinct advantage for white, straight, cisgendered individuals that leaves her “with this mantra in my head that I have to always be at least twice as good in order to get even close to what I would get if I were a Straight White Man.”

Those who end up making it into the publishing industry, however, continue to face problems with their work. Often marginalized individuals are subject to only focusing on works for which their backgrounds represent:

**Meredith Talusan:** I feel like, in a lot of places there can be the perception that a person who belongs to a particular marginalized group is only sort of capable of working on things that are related to that group. Regardless of the fact that White people work on books by People of Color and Cis people work on books by Trans people all the time.

In fact, when it came to Talusan's own writing, she stated that while they "did an MA in Comparative Literature at Cornell, and my specialization in Grad School was Post-Colonial Literature and Theory," and that they "have not had any training in Trans related Academic topics, at all," the only thing people expected from her writing was trans related topics. It's almost a new genre of censorship for both the editors and writers in which people are only looking for marginalized groups to focus on one aspect of their life and not move from that point. Thankfully Meredith Talusan was able to move past this point: "It wasn't until I became a well-known enough name that I could—that my name was the thing that people could potentially identify about my writing, rather than the fact that I'm Trans." Though this was after years of being identified in articles as a "Trans woman."

This leaves the conversation whereby there is a clear desire and need for more diverse hiring practices. Even still, just because someone is hired on who represents a particular background or community, does not mean that their position should only be focused within that area of "expertise." Kelsey Provow, when considering her perspective upon potential changes that should occur in the publishing industry, concludes that "There has to be a change in the workforce," but this is not just in reference to the incoming employees for the publishing houses. Provow states that those who currently work within those houses need to take some time to reflect as well:

**Kelsey Provow:** At the same time too, there also needs to be an admission and reflection of those who do not identify [as a marginalized group] that says "I need to step back and support rather than make my voice the loudest" I do think there are a lot of people in the industry who realize that and are willing to make those changes, but I don't think it's enough of them yet to say we've gotten to where we need to be. And I do think that the



workforce who do identify are working their ass off to do what they can, but at the same time too, they are such a minority at this point that there is only so big a dent that they can make at this point.

Through a combined effort of more intentional hiring practices, and internal recognition towards what they can do to step back and allow the conversation to continue without the majority voice overshadowing the minority, the publishing industry might be able to craft a more inclusive and safer workforce for the unavoidable future Queer trends.

Each of the participants in this study noticed the current consumer interest in more diverse storytelling. To meet this demand, publishers would produce a “Diversity Gay book,” as noted by Kristen Arnett. These books “could encompass all kinds of Queerness,” but Arnett noticed a shift “when [she] was shopping *Mostly Dead Things*, it was more like, ‘Okay, we had our *one* lesbian book,’ ‘We had our *one* Cis Gay male book.’” Publishers transition their perspectives might seem like a trend akin to vampire romance novels, but Kelsey Provow states that, “Some people also view this change to talk about identities and sexuality, [as] almost trendy. But it would eventually go away, and I don't think that's the case for that audience at all. I think it's only going to grow from here.” In fact, Kristen Arnett emphasized the fact that this is not a trend when she talked about an experience while she was on a panel during her book tour for *Mostly Dead Things*. Arnett stated that she was tired of “coming-out stories” and didn't want her book to be one. But someone in the audience responded, “‘I'm not sick of coming-out stories. I'm sick of white coming out stories.’” which led Arnett to reflect upon this:

**Kristen Arnett:** I wasn't taking into consideration, there has been white cis coming out narratives in fiction, but there's not necessarily space provided for POC coming out narratives. It's like my own whiteness was not even considering that.

If publishers are beginning to break down levels of Queerness based upon gender and sexuality, then it's reasonable to assume that we will begin to see more books focused on different experiences revolving queerness and race or more. The problem with past trends in YA like supernatural romance, is that there were only so many directions those stories could take and still appear original, but Queer literature does not suffer from the same problem. Queer narratives are not easily placed under one umbrella; a coming out story for one does not represent a coming out story for all. As a result, publishing houses seem to be responding to this demand through evolving hiring practices; it seems that some authors are finding it somewhat easier to get their work published while others are upset at the remaining discrepancies in publishing practices.

Both Meredith Talusan and Kristen Arnett agree about the discrepancy in terms of publishing their works, yet note the changes that are resulting as of recent conversations around race and sexuality:

**Meredith Talusan:** White friends of mine have come out of nowhere and gotten book deals based on very short—I have a friend who got a book deal—a straight white man got a book deal based on a five-page proposal, right? Whereas it is much harder to do for minorities. For Minorities, you have to actually prove that the outside world cares about you before somebody from the industry is willing to take you one. I feel like, as I said, that the situation, to some extent, is changing, post summer of 2020. But that's a problem that the industry has been dealing with.

**Kristen Arnett:** ...It's possible that I could have like sold this book more easily, or to a different publisher, based on if it had been a White Heterosexual narrative with those weird things, but adding Queerness on top of that, I think this is too weird. It's like I need the Gays to be like a little less weird cause you have to sell it to straight people. Whereas

now, it's almost a push where it's almost like "It's Gay, but can you make it like weirder?"

I do know that for myself, at the time, I don't know if I would have thought about as

being, like, "They don't want this because it's Gay."

Interestingly, though, when considering what kinds of hurdles she had to navigate when publishing her work for the first time, she may have inadvertently self-censored her work. She talked about how she thought that because this “was [her] first novel and... ‘Maybe they don't want this because it's not good enough, or because it's too weird’” instead of being concerned about the fact that her work was Queer. However, she also noted that, “in hindsight, and retrospect, there're plenty of books that do a lot of weird things, or have not, necessarily, likable characters. If it had been a white male straight protagonist, they could have done anything. [Publishing Houses] would have been like ‘This isn't weird enough.’” On one hand she was an unproven author; she had not breached the doors of the publishing industry. Though she considers that had it been a book by a straight cis white man, or featuring the same kind of man, she may not have had as many concerns around publishing her own work. Further, she addresses the nuance of the situation, in that, it was not just her selling a Queer character, it was, as she states, “a gay that was a fuck up.” Meaning, while the strangeness mixed with the Queerness, and the idea of an imperfect Queer character, meant that she did have to justify, even to herself, that this book deserved to exist in the same places as many straight focused stories with the strange elements attached: It “was a hard sell, and I think that's because it was a Queer Cis protagonist.”

Ultimately, these books are subject to mass market appeal, making many of the authors having to prove themselves or their work in the same way we see this occurring with independent publishers today. Both Meredith Talusan and Kristen Arnett state,

**Meredith Talusan:** The Publishing industry is still an industry. It's still subject to market forces and it still has to deal with the fact that the majority of the population is Cis and Straight. If we can make Queer and Trans books written by Queer and Trans people consistent Best Sellers then there wouldn't be a problem. But the fact is, in order for that to happen, those books have to be pitched and marketed towards Cis people. That's the situation that everybody is trying to navigate.

**Kristen Arnett:** Because Publishing. . . is corporate. They are a business; they are looking to see the bottom line and the dollar and what sells. So...when a Queer book does well, it's like "proof," and it shouldn't have to be in that kind of way, but it's like, "This will sell, this has an audience." Even though we know that these audiences are there because *we* are the audience. It's like one of those things that's like, for instance, using my own book as an indicator...when a book does well, they're more willing to take a chance on other stuff. So, it's like cracking the door open for other kinds of Queer writing across all kinds of different spectrums.

In other words, another layer of gatekeeping is added to the publishing market that does not have a political backing in which authors are having to prove the marketability of their works in a highly political climate. It's like a balancing act for the publishing houses to determine if the amount of people who will buy the book because of or regardless of its content will meet the bottom line of the production of the work, or lead to further financial avenues of work, such as film or television rights.

### *Writing and Audience*

Based on what I discovered or had theorized in my literature review about writing practices, I found it necessary to ask each of the participants about their own writing and what

might have affected the content they are producing. Interestingly, I was surprised to find that often, while the writers noticed the discrepancy within the publishing industry in terms of diversity, they did not see the way writing is taught or understood to be a major contributor to the potential censorship occurring in writing. Ideally, many writers start out their works in the same way Kristen Arnett does: “Whenever I’m writing anything, I’m the audience first. I’m writing something that I want to read, cause otherwise, I just won’t write it. I’ll be very bored. Cause I think, we are our audience first when we are writing our own work.” In doing so, she avoided thinking about her audience as she wrote: “I don’t know if I would say I went into writing a book thinking about the reader. I don’t know if I ever go into any book thinking about that. I think I would psych myself out if I was thinking about who would want to try and read it.” This method is very similar to something I had to read in a rhetoric class, and even something I have assigned to my students on occasion, “Closing My Eyes as I Speak: An Argument for Ignoring Audience.” This article is about how students who write without focusing on their audience are able to write more about their topic without worrying about who or what is missing from the conversation. It allows for more open speech that should be followed by revision and editing to clean up the work. Anne Lamott talks about the same thing in “Shitty First Drafts:” ignore the critics to produce the writing you care about. Turn off the voice inside your head. Yet, even still, Kristen Arnett added, “It has to be me first. Just being very self-absorbed.”

I found this interesting, and said as much during the interview, that this is probably the way cis straight men feel about their writing and we don’t fault them for that. Yet, she felt “self-absorbed” even talking about it, when she should have no reason to. After bringing this up, she agreed with my comment, stating:

**Kristen Arnett:** I mean they're not thinking about an audience. They're thinking about themselves. When I'm writing a book, I'm writing it for me. And I can hate the book I'm writing, and I can think that parts of it are pieces of shit and I need to work on it. But at the end of the day, I have to sit with it all the time, I have to be the one that has an interest in it. I'm the readership. And my reading tastes change. I don't like to read the same book over and over again and I'm trying not to write the same book over and over again. Or maybe we all are in some way, I don't know, I'm going to give myself a complex.

Which brings up a good point about how she, and her publisher, understand the audience of her books.

When asked about who her audience for her book is, Kristen Arnett stated that, with regard to her book *Mostly Dead Things*, “I can tell you post publication, how those books have resonated with different people...I can only tell you from people who came to events or spoke to me at events. It was people who were young and white and Queer and could identify with grief in these kinds of ways.” This was interesting to me, because from my perspective it meant that the publishers may not have communicated with her, or even had a specific idea of who the audience for her book would be before it was published.

Before her book was published, Kristen Arnett also had trouble with who her audience should be because of the kinds of characters she was writing. In general, it seems narrative storytelling has told us that Queer characters must always be likeable and morally good in terms of the story. Yet, Kristen Arnett was not interested in a story like that; she stated that she was not interested in “likable characters,” she wanted an “unlikable” character who was also Queer, but her story also included some “weird” narrative choices. For example, she says, “it's also very

messy and bodied and sexual, and it has to deal with death and it has to deal with this weirdness of taxidermy and Florida.” This meant that all the aspects of Queer narrative that audiences had grown to expect, this book ignored:

**Kristen Arnett:** I'm asking you to be here with...this specifically very Gay character, a very messy Gay character. I'm not writing a romance, technically. I'm not writing a "coming out" kind of narrative. I'm not interested in that kind of thing. And those are like proven in publishing. If you're writing this like Gay Book, is it like a romance. But, that's not what I'm writing.

This meant that audiences had to shift their understanding of the works or the characters they were anticipating reading about. If we want more diverse stories in the book world, we need to be willing to shift our understanding of what those stories look like and no longer place these characters on a pedestal just because they are gay because this will limit the kinds of stories we are able to tell. For one, Arnett states that there is a kind of pressure placed on her when she writes stories like this:

**Kristen Arnett:** When I was writing *With Teeth*... I was interested in the concept of everyone in the audience being an unreliable narrator and what that looks like through a Queer lens because there's this idea of everybody prejudging you because of Queer parenting, but then a double-edged sword that you can't fuck-up because people think you're going to fuck-up all the time and you really can't fuck-up because then you mess it up for other people.

While she is addressing something that she wanted to explore in her book, she is also addressing something that can impact the publishing of future Queer works. Since many Queer works are in a stage in which they have to “prove” themselves for many publishers depending on the

complexity of their storytelling, other works have an added pressure of having to be successful otherwise the books that follow are unsuccessful as well because the author could “mess it up for other people.” With these internalized fears, authors may not always feel the need to reevaluate the content of their book, but the people they trust could respond to their work in a way that challenges the intended narrative. Take, for instance, Meredith Talusan on the publishing of her book, *Fairest*:

**Meredith Talusan:** I had a good experience publishing my Queer Memoir *Fairest* and, in fact, one of the most wonderful parts of that experience was that I was allowed to integrate my entire being into that book, even though I feel like there was a lot of market pressure for me to make it, you know, like a much more focused Trans Memoir than it actually was.

Focusing on the idea that this was about “Market pressure,” her fears came from their understanding of the current market interested in their book. Talusan even stated that no one directly told her this information, instead it was because she had been working on the memoir since 2015. Rather, this came from the “well-meaning advice” about the complicated nature of their story. But she later continued that her story:

**Meredith Talusan:** It's not just about me being Trans. It's about me growing up in the Philippines and being Albino and all of that stuff. And I was very clear with myself that there was no way for me to foreground my trans experience without bringing all of those other experiences to bear. I think it was clear to me that I needed to attain a particular kind of stature in order for that to be sellable to people. Just because it's one of those things in the industry where either your work has to fit into existing parameters of how other books have been successful or you have to attain a certain degree of prominence in



order for you to be able to set your own agenda. I think that becomes even more magnified for minorities because very few people were reading your work, or none of the people reading your work would have an intuitive understanding of it.

In other words, she understood what her writing needed to accomplish, but the idea of an audience left everyone assuming that no one would be able to grasp the concepts needed to understand the narrative of the story. However, my interviews, as well as my research, all seem to come to the same conclusion: trust your audience.

Kristen Arnett agrees that we should be writing without an audience in mind. This means that, as writers, we are assuming our audience will understand a lot of information that could be easily understood by people who come from the same background. But, as Arnett learned from Tori Peters, author of *DeTransition, Baby*, writers and publishers need to be willing to let people be confused and do research:

**Kristen Arnett:** I was on a panel with [Tori Peters] and she's a genius. She didn't want to feel like she had to describe everything for the reader. I'm not going to annotate everything for you. If you're the reader and you have a question, Google. Google is your friend. You can look that stuff up. You don't need to write a complete explanation on how transness works. I was at AWP and I was at a food writing panel and a white person in the audience asked a question to one of the writers in the panel: "How do you write for the reader so they'll understand the language you're using. Do you use italics?" And she was like "No. I write it in. I don't need to explain it to you." You don't need to transcribe all that stuff...She wasn't spoon feeding that to her readers and readers did fine.

Tori Peters' work is in the process of becoming a tv show due to its success. Her book didn't need to explain every aspect of trans life to its audience, instead Peters trusted people to figure it out as they go along, and they did.

Based upon our discussion, the proposed changes offered by the participants make more sense. As is the nature of the publishing industry, when it comes to change, the trends leave the written word open to a constant fluctuation in our understanding of what is popular, what will sell, and what audiences need and should read. As such, I agree with Arnett's proposal that the type of literature we are reading needs more diversity, but not in the way we might assume:

**Kristen Arnett:** I would like to see more Queer stories that are not centered on whiteness. We could explore even more different Queer narratives...I think there is a wealth of different perspectives that are missing in the canon. Or there are ones that have come out that are hidden under the radar because they're not white. And ones that are Queer narratives that are not hinged on trauma to tell a story. There is room for those...I love to see different stories not based on trauma. Not centered on whiteness...I'd love to see stuff based on non-binary [identities] that we haven't seen yet. There are places to explore it. I know people are writing those books. I'm interested to see what happens next, cause I feel like different things happen and sometimes I am pleasantly surprised. Like it was a pleasant surprise to see Tori's book come out and see an interesting look at trans narratives and trans lives and how people embraced it.

In other words, she wants more diversity within the genre of Queer literature. This works on two facets; on one hand, like readers, Arnett stated that, "my reading tastes change. I don't like to read the same book over and over again and I'm trying not to write the same book over and over again." Audiences feel the same, they can only read the same book so many times before the

narrative needs to change. In the same way, as the world comes to understand the massive amounts of representation and diversity present within the Queer community alone, in order to follow this ongoing trend of representation in media and literature, we need to continue to diversify the stories being told. In order to do this, as Meredith Talusan and Kelsey Provow notes, we need to hire more diverse individuals in the publishing world so that this becomes a priority, because the people who run the industry are still white, cis, and straight, leaving them unable to see the areas potentially lacking diversity.

## Autoethnography

### Introduction

Within this section, I have revisited the question that began my research: why was I so uncomfortable with my sexuality? As stated earlier, I grew up in a loving household. While that home may not have had a perfect example of love, *I* was loved. Yet, I still found myself alone when I began to understand I was not straight. Based on my research, I reflected upon the books that were a part of my childhood, the books that were on display in my local library, and the kinds of stories I surrounded myself with. If books were to be the way I understood the world, then the books I had access to be the reason I felt lost for so long.

This section is broken up into two parts. The first of which is how I breakdown the guilt that surrounded my sexuality. I wanted to explore my own lived experience in conjunction with the popular stories. Part of this was to understand why the word “lesbian” was so terrifying to me for so many years, because the books I read were just as uncomfortable with the words as I was. Some of the stories would tell me about the trauma I would experience or would perpetuate the idea of being alone because of my sexuality. Therefore, I consider the connections I see between my own family, and their privilege, alongside the publishing industry. There are so many decisions made about whose voice gets heard, and after so many silent family dinners, I’ve began to understand how easy it is to be silent.

For the second section of this autoethnography, I reflect upon my own experience as an audience for books and how my purchasing decisions might be impacted with the current state of the publishing industry. I focus on the idea of queer storytelling and how I participate in the books that are being marketed to people like myself. Since this project addresses how genre and audience play into the decisions made by the publishing industry, it was important for me to

consider why I make the purchasing decisions I do. Now that I have stepped into my sexuality with pride, I wanted to consider how my favorite book is marketed and what impact that had on my own purchasing decisions. The book, called *Gideon the Ninth*, included the tagline, “Lesbian necromancers in space,” which was the inspiration for the title of that section. I chose this as the title, because I hope it has the same effect that the book did for me: interesting, and a little bit confusing.

### **Part 1: Unpacking my Guilt**

During a virtual class via Zoom, an older woman, probably the oldest in my class, asks me a question about my recent piece about my sexuality.

“Are you a lesbian because your father beat you? Or was it because a guy raped you?” To her, I am sure, this is a genuine question. But am I supposed to respond to her?

Another in our group speaks up before I even realize that I should be shocked. “I really don’t think that’s an appropriate thing to be asking right now.”

*Offended.* I should be offended by the question.

I’m not. I feel offended by the creative writing book that only uses “he” when referring to the writer, because that means I wasn’t considered as an audience for this book. As a writer who poured their attention into writing and crafting worlds, instead of doing their homework while I grew up, I am offended that I could not be seen as a writer from a man long since dead, but his ideas still seep into my education. That offends me.

As for this question, I don’t care. I try to make myself care about the implications, but this is different. While my peers can sit there and say it’s wrong, it’s a question I’ve gotten before in different ways, from different people. And, to many people’s surprise, no one has raped me or hit me. No one made me afraid of men. No one *made* me a lesbian. I just am. But

somehow, the world has decided how I should act or what kind of trauma I must have endured to not be interested in men when, nearly ten years ago, I was still averting my eyes from gay characters in books and movies.

Being gay was not strictly frowned upon in the eyes of my family. In fact, when I first told my mom about being bisexual, she responded, “Well, doesn’t every girl want to be with another girl?” To which I discovered she wasn’t as straight as she once believed or continues to believe. However, small comments throughout the years about how, once I marry a man, I will be straight again, meant I never told her about the realization that a man would never be in the picture for me. Instead, we would dance around the subject.

“Someday, when I find my *partner*.”

“If I get married, *they* need to be a better cook than me.”

I’d thought for sure my mom had caught on, but she continues to talk about my future boyfriend. And every time it comes up, my chest burns with a guilt I don’t quite understand. It’s not a religious guilt though. My Mom and I stopped going to church a long time ago. Always for the same reason. Golden haired men, the edges of their eyes bleeding tears of glory, for God stands on their shoulders, telling the people of their sins. Beg for forgiveness for the wrongs you have committed in the eyes of God, for you are a sinner. Beg for forgiveness for the people you have scorned. Beg for forgiveness for fornicating outside your marriage. Beg for forgiveness for stealing money from your parents. Beg for forgiveness for having your child out of wedlock.

My mother understood many of the sins of the world, but she could not understand how to beg for forgiveness for something she does not regret. I was the child born out of wedlock, and she didn’t want to be forgiven for having me. If that is what this church says is a sin, then maybe God could be found elsewhere.

She still considers herself religious, as do my grandparents, but no one goes to church anymore. It wasn't my mother, nor was it God that made me feel wrong about myself, just an unspoken rule that I slowly understood without realizing how much it dominated my life. But this rule had to come from somewhere.

The world has changed so much, even from when I was in high school and still trying to figure out why I hated every time a boy touched my hand. The kinds of books I can now get my hands on would have terrified me, but might have helped me accept certain parts of myself. Instead, I would read *Twilight*, thought to be the pinnacle of romance while I was a developing mind. Even friends who might have read books about Queer relationships, all focused on gay men. I couldn't find myself in those books, so I stuck to the ones that continued the narrative of strong handsome men sweeping innocent kind women off of their feet. Eventually, we learned to hate those stories for the same reason we loved them. Men shouldn't stalk us in our homes, nor should they want to kill us. But now I watch the movies and read the books with a nostalgic love for those characters and stories.

I could never have been those women. With their small frames, delicate features, and proclivities for dangerous activities. I was the fat kid in the back of the class who talked to no one and wore the same black hoodie with holes in the sleeves so I could pretend I didn't care what other people thought.

Queer women were not a reality when I was growing up, but what would those women have meant to me if they had been a part of my life? When I did find stories about people like me, they never had a happy ending. It was like the world wanted me to know that my life would be filled with trauma. Whomever I loved would die. Or I would die. Or no one would accept us and we would live away from our families.

Now, we tell ourselves that we must have trauma. Like a perversion, it defines us as a badge of honor. Just last semester, I went to an event where Garrard Conley spoke about his experiences and book, *Boy Erased*. During the Q&A portion of the night, the president or vice-president of the LGBTQIA+ club spoke up.

“If you are Gay or within the Queer spectrum, you have trauma. It’s just a facet of the world we live in. It doesn’t matter if your parents loved you or your friends accepted you. You have Trauma.”

Why are we now telling ourselves that our identity is dependent on this idea of having a traumatic life? Every social media post now talks about how our parents screwed up and now that’s why I have to sleep with five pillows and a weighted blanket. We want an explanation for who we became as an adult that we are obsessed with our trauma.

*But I don’t want it.*

Why does this one, very small aspect of my life have to be defined by the experiences of everyone else. I’m proud of who I am, but I don’t want to think of my life through the eyes of other people’s trauma. I don’t want to read about it anymore. I don’t want to hear about it anymore.

Even still, why does my throat close up every time my mom says something about my sexuality?

I don’t want to write this story. I don’t want to be defined by who I love. I just want to exist in a world where it doesn’t matter, because to me *it doesn’t matter*. And yet, that is why I must write about it. I want to tell my story from the perspective of someone who never wants to write about this again, because sexuality is not what defines my character or my story.



Maybe that is why when I say “lesbian” the guilt rises in my throat. If I say I am a lesbian, then I am aligning myself with Sappho’s tragic poetry. Her lines of pining and yearning for someone who may not feel the same as she, Aphrodite save her please. Lines that people have interpreted to be gay, but I couldn’t see when I read them. Why couldn’t I see it? Why did I have to read her poems over and over again, turning my head side-to-side, flipping pages back and forth, as though her words would come to life in my hands? Why couldn’t I see my own sexuality even after magnifying my repressed emotions from years of family dinners and teenage romance novels?

“Lesbian” lies in the categories of porn or between the lips of scared women approached by men. It is an insult to men and an ignored safety net for women. It sits next to “dyke” on a list of words no one knows if they are okay to say or not. It is a penis-envied word for women with short hair and too many cats.

This is the word that defines who I am? How do I let this word control my life, when I cannot even say it aloud?

Today, I see more of them in books and on screen, but what I have been told as a child cannot be fixed by another fantasy story about two women in love. Not when the people I trust most are still unable to look past their own prejudices. When even the silent parties at the dinner table become participants in the discordant conversation about others.

We had just finished clearing the table after an Easter dinner and my mother began preparing the cake for dessert while my grandfather's earlier lecture filled with any idea that could be summed up with “-ist” or “-phobic” settled over us like a cloud. Setting down a few plates, she broke the silence and asked about my recent work at the archives. Quickly the air faded, the women polishing their rose-colored glasses, and I pulled out my phone and began

showing the books and newspapers from the eighteenth century to my grandparents. I ran through all the information I had learned about book making and binding, even showing them a fully bound book from the rare books museum. This would end up being a mistake.

“It’s a small room in the library that changes displays each month. This time it was about the history of book publishing, which coincided with my current work,” I said, watching carefully as my grandmother scrolled through the pictures on my phone. “Most of the time it’s focused on southern documents, but this time they had a Gutenberg Bible.”

I was so excited about seeing that book. Having spent a semester reviewing the history of publishing and writing about this specific book, meant I could share something that my family loved with passions of my own.

But my grandfather was beginning to feel the boredom of no longer being the center of the conversation. He asked if the museum ever showed anything real? He wanted to know just how politically correct my university was.

It was bait. I took it.

“I mean, they do show real things there.” I said, unsure of what exactly I wanted to convey, “The last time I was there, the museum was showing a lot of historical documents about Black authors, but also about how they were seen.” My grandmother scrolled through the pictures a bit too far. A girl I had been talking to for a bit. She was kissing my cheek. “That’s just—”

I was distracted. He cut me off. I opened his door.

Another lecture poured out of him. Things that make me ashamed. Things that make it clear I could never bring a friend here. Things I don’t care to remember but are burned into my mind.

My mother's eyes saw a repetition of the last time my education was tied to my university and marginalized communities. The Christmas break where I sat and watched my grandfather tell me my work, my education, my purpose was worthless because some man on some sports team from Kennesaw State kneeled during the pledge of allegiance. It didn't matter that I have no connection to any sports team. That my education has nothing to do with the sports team. That I don't even know what sport he was talking about.

My degree means nothing if it comes from Kennesaw State because a Black man kneeled.

I didn't fight with him then and I don't fight with him now. Instead, I put my phone away and pick at the cake in front of me.

That night, my mother tells me it was for the best that I didn't say anything. But I need to control my face. I say too much with how I won't look at him, or when I roll my eyes. I need to hide my thoughts better because we can't change his mind.

I thought I was an adult. But in his presence, I am a child who still doesn't understand the world and lives online.

I wonder what he would think if he knew why I was in the archives in the first place. What would he say if I told him that my project was for a man who wrote a book on the negative effects of conversion therapy? If I told him that I was trying to research how to appropriately refer to Native Americans and provide proper representation of them in a work of fiction? If I told him that he is a child unable to understand the world because even though he would like to think his family can do no wrong, he has sat a lesbian at the dinner table every year.

But I don't tell him any of this, because I know this does not mean the same to him as it does to me. He has always been in the seat of power in this house. I can't change his mind. He is

too old to learn what he says or does is wrong, but even an old dog understands what it means when they hurt someone. They know what they are doing, because they are protecting themselves from a threat they have seen coming for years.

Am I a threat to him?

The way we talk about the sides of the political spectrum, like we are two different species on the same planet, must live in my family's brain when they see me for the holidays. I know it must, because it comes home with me every time. I see it when I come home in my textbooks and in my favorite stories. It's the man at the seat of power who has the most to fear from change in the world. It's the CEO of a nameless publishing house who reads a pamphlet on "diverse hiring practices" only to see his job being stolen from him instead of opening the doors for more people. So they respond with lower pay and higher experience requirements. Ignoring the potential turned away from their doors.

That is how the stories continue. That is why I was raised to hate myself without anyone telling me to. Because I know who distributes their stories. I have Christmas dinner with him every year.

## **Part 2: Lesbian Necromancers in Space**

My favorite book is *Gideon the Ninth*.

"Is it?" Olive says, sitting across from me in the library. After taking a drag from her vape, she blows the smoke into her shirt to avoid attention from the others studying in the building.

"Yeah, I mean," I shift in my chair, "I like that it's about lesbians and it has the whole space thing going on."

“Okay, but didn’t you give me a whole lecture the other day about how mad that book made you?”

“It wasn’t a lecture.”

She just stares at me, because she read somewhere that if you just look at a person and wait long enough, they will fill in the silence for you. I didn’t believe her.

“Okay,” I said, to fill in the silence, “I just hate that it’s advertised as a lesbian novel.”

She smiles, then turns back to her laptop.

The book popped up on my social media feed about two years ago, and I picked it up shortly after. It must have been around pride month because everything that I saw had to do with Queer stories, but this one had a tag line that stood out: “Lesbian necromancers in space.” While I’d read a few books about lesbians or Queer women, none of them were fantasy based until now, much less in the science fiction genre; yet this one was. It drew me in with the magical school and sarcastic protagonist, who flirted once or twice with other pretty women. I felt like I had a hero I could actually want to read about. Gideon, the main character, was strong and charismatic. She was the Han Solo I could actually deal with.

But when I finished the book, I was annoyed.

And I might have given Olive a lecture one night in my apartment about the book.

“It’s marketed as a lesbian book,” I pointed out the tagline to her on the back cover. “But that’s not what the book is about.”

“So, you don’t think I should read it?”

“No, I’m not saying that.”

“Is it because it’s not gay enough?”

“No.”

“It’s too gay?”

“No.” I took my book back from her, “Let me finish.”

“Okay.”

“The book was marketed as a lesbian novel. It was featured in the LGBTQIA+ section of the library. It literally calls itself ‘Lesbian necromancers in space.’ But the story isn’t about the main character being gay, so why is that the focus of the marketing?”

“Is the main character not gay?”

“She is. She is like super gay. She flirts with a lot of girls throughout the book.”

“I’m confused again.” She sat down on the couch, “The main character is gay, but you don’t want the book to be marketed as gay?”

“Yeah, because if it’s only marketed to people as being a gay book, then other people who might like it won’t pick up the book because the tells people it’s only about lesbians who happen to be necromancers instead of necromancers who happen to be lesbians.”

“Then what made you buy the book though?”

“Because it told me it was gay.”

The book was really good. I have the entire series at home, but do I like the book because it’s gay or because its a good story? Does liking the book because it’s gay make me a contributor to the tokenism of Queer characters and stories that I’ve written about? Or is this a form of representation that I’ve been missing in my bookshelf?

I want to approach this like a scientist. Compare the common denominators. What books did I like before I realized I was gay? What were the themes I liked about them and do I see those same themes in *Gideon the Ninth*?

There are only two other books that I've confidently said were my favorites in the same way I treat *Gideon the Ninth: The Series of Unfortunate Events* and *Twilight*. They were two books that essentially guided my formative years. Building my own confidence as a reader and teaching me about myself.

To be fair, though, I didn't read the Lemony Snicket saga the first time it was introduced to me. My fourth-grade teacher read the first book to us in class. I remember it was the first time a book had pulled me into the story, mostly because it told me not to read the book at all. Which, to be fair, I wasn't reading it myself when it was being read to me. The language is what pulled me into the world of three lonely orphans. Snicket played with his word choice, creating new words through a baby, as though a Shakespeare for children.

We sat there, on the old carpet, colors faded from years of children stomping across it, our legs crossed as instructed, watching her read aloud. It was the first time I could see the story unfold in front of my eyes as though I was watching a show. I couldn't tell you what the smell of the room was, or even the name of my teacher, but I can see Count Olaf in my mind as clear as the first day he was described to us. A lanky old man, pants too short for his long legs, so his eye-shaped tattoo flashed upon his ankle.

Clever wordplay and strong details—this is what pulled me into the story. This is what made me request the entire set of books for every Christmas until I got them. That is what made me reread the books as a teenager and once again before college.

Then what about *Twilight*?

When I tell people that *Twilight* used to be my favorite book, they think that I read the book once and probably saw all the movies, but that's not the case for me. At that age I was incapable of just liking something; I would make it my entire personality. *Twilight* was not just a

favorite book—it was an obsession for at least three years. I devoured books in hours. I would read them then reread them over and over until I had the lines memorized so well that I could rewrite them in the margins of my notebook. I went to nearly every movie premiere at midnight. I even went to the midnight release of the DVD at Hot Topic in Town Center Mall just around the corner. There are pictures. They will not be shown.

When I read *Twilight*, I wanted to know what it was like to have someone give up everything for one moment in time. I wanted love no matter who it came from. I didn't care that it was Edward who loved her. I longed for the same kind of love that my mother spent so many years of my childhood looking for as well. The love in these books placed the same rose-colored glasses on my face that my mothers' relationships did for her. Both of us ignored the problems of the men in our stories, instead we only saw the love we desperately needed.

Edward was the second most boring character in the books, Jacob taking the lead by miles, but Bella got to have people who fought for her and who would die for her. They pined for her as she did for them. Not to mention, she got the ultimate gift at the end of the story: becoming a vampire. God how I wanted to be a vampire. I thought it would cure all the ugliness outside of me. I would be beautiful.

Looking back, I think I shouldn't have read this book as a pre-teen. It probably caused more self-hatred than I already had.

Back to the point, though: what about this book made me love it? The monsters and urban fantasy elements for sure, but love absolutely had something to do with it.

So, we have word play, character details, monsters, and romance. All of which, this story has. Gideon, the main protagonist, maintains her quick-witted comebacks throughout the story while keeping up with her planet's customary skull painted look. I would count the necromantic



part of the characters as their own monstrous traits. And finally, there is a romance budding in the story, though it is not the focus of the story. But even with all those, I don't think I would have picked up this book if it had not been marketed as a Queer story, even though I was mad enough to prepare a lecture for my friend about it.

*Gideon the Ninth* is a good book that I absolutely recommend to anyone who asks, though I wouldn't recommend it the same way it was advertised to me. But do I make that distinction just to make myself seem like a smarter consumer to my friends? Am I not still complicit in the tokenism of Queer storytelling if the sole reason I picked this book is because of the lesbian main character? Or is it okay because I am a lesbian consumer myself, looking for representation in a platform I had not seen as a kid?

“Don't you think you're overthinking all of this?”

Of course I am, but in some ways, that is the point of this paper. When we have to break down every choice we make as an audience, it makes it so much harder to pick a book simply for its story. All over my social media feeds I am constantly bombarded with posts about books with good and bad representation of some social community. I am told of the ramifications of supporting these authors or these publishing houses so often that I cannot make a purchasing decision without researching each author to see if I am supporting something that is bad. Even still, I get so excited when I read a book with a female main character who loves without boundaries, because this is what I needed as a kid.

I didn't need vampires and werewolves fighting over each other for the pretty girl. That is not to say that I wouldn't have read it, but wouldn't it have been so much better to grow up with libraries that shelved just as much Queer literature as straight, to a point where there was no longer a difference in the story?



## Conclusion

Upon reflection, I realize that this was an ambitious project. The publishing landscape is constantly shifting in response to shifting cultures and more. As such, assessing the current state of this industry was a daunting task and may have left some of my research dated as the industry continues to develop. My focus, though was in assessing the current state of the publishing industry through a queer lens as a way to address how queer works have been written, published, and censored. As of today, I believe that my research shows the kinds of gatekeeping that is in place for queer authors and queer authors of color. However, I also believe that this project showcases that this is changing. Major publishing houses are seeing why these stories are necessary for the publishing industry's primary purpose; to spread "cultural, political, religious, and social change" (Smith 19). Since publishing is an industry that is constantly shifting, the books that are published should be more representative of the current state of the world. Based on my conversations with Kristen Arnett, Meredith Talusan, and Kelsey Provow, there is a clear need for change that is being addressed within the industry. But there is diversity within the publishing industry, as more people who represent marginalized communities are being brought into the publishing industry to ensure authors' stories represent their vision, the industry is showing how it is keeping that purpose in mind. But it is not an easy industry to join. As Meredith Talusan stated, the wages provided for entry level positions are not livable wages unless someone is lucky enough to have some money saved up before they take on the position. This form of gatekeeping can affect the kinds of stories that make it into the hands of the consumer; therefore, it is necessary to adjust the wages offered to ensure there is diversity, not only with the authors, but also with the team who supports the authors' work.

Now, when it comes to the works themselves, often queer focused stories are still new territory where many are being seen as experimental. This perception can lead to publishers closing the doors on authors or asking stories to be readapted to an unintended audience for that author. These changes are resulting in censorship of these stories. These publishing professionals are redefining what the world looks like, ignoring the purpose of the author's story. Therefore, this means that there needs to be more of these stories that exist, not as proof that these types of stories can be successful, but to normalize their existence. Further, these industries may need to reevaluate who their primary audience of their book is and how best to market to them. By reassessing the landscape, the publishing professionals may have a better way of understanding how to reach their intended audience and discover what books will be popular. This assessment can help open the doors for more authors who have been traditionally silenced, and even refresh an industry that many see as dying.

As for the authors themselves, it is time to also reevaluate how writing craft is taught and what rules are deemed the most important for storytelling. When classrooms or textbooks tell writers that they must follow a select set of rules, then support those guidelines with works that were published fifty years ago, or longer, those teachers or books lose their credibility. As Kelvin Smith discusses in "The Fundamentals of Publishing," the industry is constantly evolving as technology, marketing, publishers and more develop over time (26). If that is the case, then why are we still teaching and talking about writing the same way? Right now, in classrooms, the people sitting at their desks do not want to write like Nathaniel Hawthorne or Ernest Hemmingway. They are great authors, but they no longer represent the current writing market. Therefore, it is time to place modern works at the forefront when discussing writing craft, because there are more stories than *Hills like White Elephants*.

I started this project to contribute to an ongoing conversation regarding publishing but discovered that much of this topic doesn't have as much research as anticipated. It wasn't uncharted territory, but the research was limited. Therefore, a lot of these topics focused on how writers are navigating this publishing and writing landscape. By the end I felt like I had more questions than answers, but that is because of the tensions surrounding this topic. There are no answers because they are not easy questions. It is my hope that this project offers a nuanced perspective of the delicacies of this conversation and that more people see the need for a more open dialogue around the publishing industry practices. The best way to unpack gatekeeping is to understand its purpose, then reevaluate how commonly unheard stories can break open those doors and join their place on bookshelves around the nation.

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# ALY GILMORE

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## Director of Programs – Georgia Writers Association

August 2022 – Present

- Head of marketing and events team
- Monitors performance and determines ways to improve.
- Coordinates and hosts monthly writing workshops with published authors
- Designs marketing materials for Georgia Writers social media
- Oversees planning and communications for Red Clay Writers Conference

## Editorial & Research Intern for Author Garrard Conley

January 2022 – December 2022

- Organized comprehensive and archival research upon the setting, environment, and accuracy of the historical background for an upcoming novel
- Formed a database of academic and primary sources for future project developments
- Provided focused feedback on style and character development

## Graduate Teaching Assistant – Kennesaw State University

September 2021 – December 2022

- Crafted and taught original lesson plans on entry level composition to 52 students
- Designed essay guidelines and rubrics for each major essay
- Provided individual feedback and support on editing, composition, and writing style for each major essay

## Writing Center Tutor – Kennesaw State University

September 2020 – May 2021

- Evaluated student essays to facilitate focused one-on-one editing sessions
- Communicated detailed feedback based upon individual guidelines

## EDUCATION

Kennesaw State University  
Bachelor of Arts in English  
Minor in Professional Writing  
May 2018

Master of Arts  
in Professional Writing  
Area of Concentration:  
Creative Writing  
Minor: Rhetoric and Composition  
Thesis Project:  
“The Cycle of Book Publishing  
through a Queer Lens”  
December 2022