

THE RACE OF PUBLISHING:
THE TROUBLING WHITENESS IN PUBLISHING AND THE FORCES PUSHING BACK

by

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Bachelor of Arts, 2022

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of

College

Texas Christian University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in English



Fall

2023

APPROVAL

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the efforts of my parents, Leslie and Herminio Garcia. Without their support, love, and understanding I would not have completed every academic achievement I have. I love you both. I would also like to acknowledge the endless support and love from my grandmother Olga Reney, who never let me settle for less than the greatness she knew I could achieve. I would like to give my greatest thanks to my committee who gave me endless support and advice through every stage of this process. They made sure that I stuck to what I wanted this topic to be and what I wanted to say. Lastly, I need to acknowledge the support of my friends, who made sure that I took breaks, had adventures, and listened every time I needed a shoulder to freak out on. Especially, Ashlee, you made this year the greatest ever. Your endless late-night chats and cheers of support were the greatest gifts during one of my most challenging times.

Thank you all I am eternally grateful.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	i
Abstract.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
Publishing in the Face of Diversity.....	5
Chapter I: Just To Get The Pages Turning.....	7
Concept of “Blindness”	7
Hashtag Diverse	8
Chapter II: Numbers Aren’t Everything, But They’re Something	11
Opening the Cover on Staff Diversity	12
The Numbers Tell a Story	13
Moving to the Chapter on Change	15
Acquiring Outside the “Norm”	17
Chapter III: The Profit and Loss of Diversity.....	20
The ONE and Only	21
Comparison is the Death of Individuality	23
Social Activism for Romance.....	25
Chapter IV: Readers Gonna Read.....	27
Actively Communicating Diversity	27
Committees for Change	29
Chapter V: Hashtag Community.....	32
Bookish Culture	32
#OwnVoices over #OwningVoices	37
Social Media Mobilization	40
Diversifying Romance	44
Works Cited	49
VITA.....	51

ABSTRACT

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As the book community grows larger every day, the publishing industry's lack of diversity is more evident now than in previous years. With 95 percent of American fiction being written by white authors, and the workforce a staggering 76 percent white, the industry is being called out for its systemic racism and whiteness. Although in the last few years publishing houses have made small attempts to change the disproportionate whiteness within their industry, the book community on social media is still calling for a larger change. At the height of a new era in racial reformation, I will investigate all aspects of the publishing industry's lack of diversity and look at what lengths the book community, formed on social media, is pushing for change.

INTRODUCTION

The publishing industry is reaching a new level of constant questioning about their perpetual lack of racial and ethnic diversity among employees and authors. With the growth of social media and the urgent push for racial reform, the industry will no longer slide under the radar as they claim to be the cultivators of culture for the country. With a disproportionately white industry producing book list after book list that lacks diversity, the online book community is pushing back against the industry in a fight to diversify not only books but authors and the workforce. According to an analysis by Wordsrated.com between 1950 and 2018, 95 percent of American fiction books published were written by white authors, despite having made some increases toward author diversity.

Admittedly this analysis is from four years ago and documents years before that, but it still shows the consistent and systemic nature of the industry being disproportionately white. Over the past years, publishers have made efforts to diversify the composition of their workforce and author lists that were spurred on by calls to action from the book community on social media. Increasing activism from authors, readers, and members of the industry shows they are no longer accepting the status quo that has persisted in publishing.

As I started the process of thinking about what I would do for my thesis, I knew without a doubt that I wanted to focus in some way on the publishing industry. Throughout my academic career, I have always known that I wanted to join the publishing industry but with some reservations about their lack of diversity. As a woman of color, I knew that I wanted to help change an industry, it was important to understand what needed to be changed. With that thought I landed on my first idea for my thesis, to research and see where the publishing industry was lacking diversity within its book list and workforce.

To say that this has been a short process would be undercutting the true length and work it has taken in its completion. I knew that the work would not be easy, choosing a specific topic that is deemed unconventional within a traditional English program. With the help of Dr. George—who from the beginning knew how important this topic is to me—I was able to keep the broad topic of diversity within publishing while understanding that my research needed to be focused and central within that large spectrum.

As the exam came up and I was able to look at the questions, I knew that answering the question of the most serious problems within publishing and the root causes of the systemic whiteness in the industry was where I wanted to put my focus. Although there is plenty of debate over where the industry should put its focus, whether it be on the workforce, acquiring authors of color, or making sure that their book list is diverse, my point was to focus in detail on all these aspects together. The industry is not truly diverse unless every section is completely diverse.

My thesis is primarily informed by statistics of publishing professionals giving at least a numerical evaluation of the diversity issue. Although I don't believe that the focus on diversity should be solely placed on numerical evidence to evaluate whether someone is achieving a goal, it is a good place to start research to get a baseline understanding of where the lack is oriented. Once I had the numbers, I wanted to investigate the different steps within the publishing process and how a lack of diversity is affecting their ability to produce more books by marginalized communities at the rate that books by white authors are being published.

Once I finished my first exam and moved on to my second topic, my interest again came from my personal experience and desire within the publishing industry. As I gathered more research and gained a larger understanding of the lack of diversity within the industry, my desire to be part of a change within the industry grew. So for my second topic, as a first generation

Mexican American, I wanted to focus on Latinx literature, specifically looking at the formation of identity within the romance genre. I chose the romance genre because it is a genre that I read most but also because it has become a genre that has always been one put under debate.

The romance genre has always been coined "chick lit" or "female reads" and very rarely is it investigated in a way that centers its ability to subvert gender norms, happily-ever-after ideology, and bodily autonomy. When looking at diversity, Latinx literature, and the romance genre, I found an interesting research point that allows for investigation into the advancement of the genre through activism on social media. When it came to my exam, although, I hadn't chosen this topic choice became the foundation and part of my argument; the significance of online reading communities and their ability to demonstrate the power of reader mobilization through activism.

The online reader community's ability to affect change within the publishing industry and romance genre through social activism draws attention to their desire for inclusivity within the genre of romance. The online reader community's ability to affect change within the publishing industry through social activism draws attention to their desire for inclusivity, specifically in this instance, the romance genre. Their ability to promote diverse literature, call attention to unequal pay, and push the necessity to diversify the workforce shows how their collective mobility is helping to change the industry.

At the start of my research, I knew that I would be taking two separate exams, but I wanted to make sure that the topic choices could be in conversation with each other. As I looked at the publishing industry's lack of diversity, I found that the problem and the solution could be these readers' communities. Their ability to compose a conversation on a public platform that calls out the industry and holds them accountable for action, in my case diversifying the romance genre, as well as investigating diversity within the industry as a whole. As the publishing industry contends

with their notion that diverse books do not sell or are not popular, the communities on social media call that notion to charge in blatant requests for diverse reads and changes to the industry.

I found throughout my research that diversity is not a singular problem within publishing but a systemic issue that is very slow to make progress. This issue does not just touch one section of the industry but is so systemically rooted that any progress means a massive change to the industry and the way that it performs. Also, with the current era and technological advances, the lack of transparency that has kept the publishing industry under some kind of secrecy is slowly being pulled back, and will no longer be able to keep vital information from the community that demands to see it.

With the political climate at an all-time high when it comes to diversity and books, I know that my outlook on the industry and the information that I've gained will put me in the perfect position to help be part of moving the industry forward. I said throughout my exam that my goal was not to solve the racial disparities that plague the industry and that isn't my goal currently; from an outside perspective, I would be crazy and naive to think I could do that. But, when the time comes and I put all of the information that I've learned with my desire to be part of the industry into a career, I know that I can start to make change.

This process has been long, but rewarding in understanding what it takes to educate yourself so profoundly on a subject and rely on your ideas and gained knowledge to express an argument you feel passionate about.

PUBLISHING IN THE FACE OF DIVERSITY

Diversity, on the surface, refers to differences that can generally be seen in others like ethnicity, race, gender, age, culture, language, disability, etc. With quick or subtle judgments this can lead to bias and discrimination during a time when urgent demands for change about the persistent lack of diversity in the ranks of publishing houses and the books they put out are higher than ever. The conversations surrounding diversity in publishing have consistently informed the industry's inability to make any concerted effort towards diversifying their workforce, authors list, or the books being published. Despite claims by the industry to dedicate efforts to de-homogenize both the industry and the content, the industry continues to operate at scale with no knowledge of what kinds of authors they are publishing or what kinds of stories and cultural representations they have produced.

In her book *On Being Included*, Sara Ahmed explains that "the aim of diversity work would not be to resolve the problematic but to include it as part of the conversation. The experience of diversity would refer us back to the diversity of experience" (Ahmed 79). Like Ahmed, my work is not to research and solve the issue of diversity within the publishing industry but to question why the issue of diversity in the 21st century is still prevalent in an industry that benefits from stories of cultural representation.

My investigation of the publishing industry began by figuring out which publishers are promoting diverse books and have a diverse workforce. After theorizing the "blindness" within the industry and the statistical information, my focus will shift to the consumer-oriented business model that has the industry focused on monetary value over cultural representation and art. The diversity conversation has a long way to go, and publishers looking to effectively promote authors of color and build a diverse workforce must go even further. Figuring out where the faults lie

within the industry will help us to better understand how to address the systemic issues and make sure that diverse books, authors, and professionals are finding their way in the most effective way possible.

CHAPTER I: JUST TO GET THE PAGES TURNING

The following theories and statistics will be used to better understand the significance of building a diverse community that will help impact the publishing industry. The framework is divided into two sections: (a) focusing on the concept of "blindness" and how it connects to the publishing industry and its lack of diversity and, (b) focusing on how social activism is combating this blindness in an effort to force change within the industry.

Concept of "Blindness"

My theoretical definition of the concept "blindness" when investigating the publishing industry implies their inability to recognize the scale at which they are working, or simply the industry's inability to recognize what kinds of authors they are publishing or what kinds of stories and cultural representation they are producing. The concept of blindness theorizes the industry's lack of transparency that isn't just a report into publishing's poor record of diversity but looks beneath and digs into why publishing with its fine words and initiatives is slow to show progress—and why much of the good that is being done to improve the industry is coming from outside of the mainstream entities that seemed very unwilling to change. Publishing houses operate at scale; for example, if a house publishes five books by well-known, successful Black authors, the house will mistake the success of those few individual authors for a transformation in the larger field. The trouble with this is that the houses that serve as influential public proxies have provided a false and potentially dangerous status on not understanding how this decision accumulates over time to constitute a pattern of the types of authors that get included in the narrative of diversity.

Hashtag Diverse

With the current climate of social action, hashtags have emerged in response to the lack of diversity in the publishing industry. Between #WeNeedDiverseBooks and #PublishingPaidMe, the promotion of diversity became a crucial step within the book community in an effort to call out the industry and push for progress. As both #weneeddiversebooks and #publishingpaidme became viral Twitter movements, the publishing industry has taken some note and began to make small, slow changes to show progress towards becoming diverse.

Historically, institutional racism has created obstacles for people of color trying to raise financial capital, but to achieve real equity, publishers need to look beyond advances given to authors and consider a change to budget allocation. In the article by James Tager and Clarisse Rosaz Sjaryf on the website Pen America, they quote Erroll McDonald, Vice President and Executive Editor at Doubleday, who explains that "it is generally assumed that editorial comprises the gatekeepers and it is they who are largely responsible for the dire state of diversity of voices in books" (Tager, Rosaz Shariyf 53). They go on to explain that marketing and publicity teams help position books and appeal to media consumers, while the sales team is responsible for championing and selling books. Salespeople presenting books to retailers often rely on marketing material alone, sometimes without understanding the themes of the books, causing the pitch to fail.

These shortcomings are where the industry needs to make changes to diversify. When the same self-perpetuated cycle of profit and loss is used in the entire publishing process from editorial to marketing, trying to publish books by authors of color is seen as a bigger risk than a white cis-heteronormative author than traditional budgets that have previously focused on white authors success will continue to persist.

In my research on advances and budgets, I came across the hashtag #PublishingPaidMe and found it important in the conversation of diversity but more specifically the connection between acquiring authors and the equity disparity. #Publishingpaidme came about after author L.L. McKinney had multiple conversations with other Black authors about being historically underpaid and underappreciated by the white publishing industry. One largely notable reference was a tweet by Jesmyn Ward, a well-known novelist, who explained that she received an advance of \$100,000 for her novel *Fought and Fought*. This was only after receiving \$20,000 for her first novel *Salvage the Bones*, which won her a National Book Award in 2011.

After switching publishers, she received a higher advance for her book *Sing, Unburied*, *Sing* but noted that it was still barely equal to some of her writer friends' debut novel advances ("How #Publishingpaidme"). As #PublishingPaidMe revealed the level of disparity in the industry, a need arose for a comprehensive track of advances; however, many major publishers have company policies that stop the discussion of these numbers. "In publishing, decisions are made on how 'mainstream' editors consider a book to be. There are no scientific ways decisions are made. And in publishing, mainstream means white" (Deahl).

In an article on NPR, Ellen Oh, one of the co-founders of the We Need Diverse Books (WNDB) campaign, stated that she was angered by the lack of diversity within publishing. This was spurred on by the 2014 book convention, BookCon, where she noticed the lack of diversity on an author panel that renewed a conversation about the publishing industry. The campaign was aimed at the lack of diversity in children's books but urged people of all ages to tweet about why diverse books are important, using the hashtag #weneeddiversebooks in their posts. After the success of the Twitter movement, she helped create the organization by the same name, which now provides diverse readers and writers opportunities to be part of a diverse literary world. WNDB

since has created programming initiatives, internship programs, mentorship programs, and summer reading programs (Neary, NPR). They aim to promote a wide range of diverse narratives in hopes that they become more commonplace and no longer seen as other. The campaign provided online readers a space that is free from the gatekeepers who regulate what books are seen, read, and reviewed, providing independent, reader-driven lists that reveal diverse books are being read and who is publishing them more effectively.

CHAPTER II: NUMBERS AREN'T EVERYTHING, BUT THEY'RE SOMETHING

The following theories will be used to examine the root causes of systemic whiteness within the publishing industry and why it continuously works in a slow progress of change, consumer-oriented focus, and focus on the commodification rather than the consumption of literature. The framework is divided into three sections: (a) breaking down statistical information to investigate the lack of diversity within the workforce of the publishing industry and what steps different houses are taking to rectify the root cause of whiteness within the workforce. (b) Examining how the industry's lack of diversity is hindering its ability to acquire diverse authors, and (c) looking into the industry's profit and loss report and how other departments of publishing houses are complicit in the systemic racism and lack of diversity within the industry.

Throughout my research I was concerned with what I found—many years of no attempts at quantitative self or outside analysis of the industry in publicly available data, specifically looking at the development of diversity within the industry. Until recent years, numbers had not been released on the workforce within the houses; neither had lists documenting the diversity of titles being published, book awards, or even book reviews. The problem with this blindness is that it sustains the status of whiteness within the industry because no one can see the shortcomings. An article posted on the Pen America website they reported that between the years of 1950 and 2018, 95 percent of American fiction books were written by white authors. Pen America further argues that recent figures indicate that both the industry and the books it puts out are still disproportionately white. I found it important to lay the groundwork for understanding just how long and substantial the disparity is within the industry with physical numbers in order to then

consider the theoretical and rhetorical implications that may be taking place within the wider conversation of diversity within the industry.

Opening the Cover on Staff Diversity

In one of the first reported surveys that documented the disparities found in the publishing industry's workforce, Lee & Low Books's Baseline Survey publicly exposed that 76 percent of the professionals within the industry overall identified as white in 2019 (blog.leeandlow.com). Despite previous attempts to correct the disproportionate whiteness within the industry, publishing has lagged in changing the systemic inequalities that people of color face while trying to succeed within the industry. With the largest hub of publishing houses located in New York City, one of the costliest places to live in the US, people of color are generally more likely to lack the advantages of living off a low entry-level salary without external sources of financial help. Among low-entry wages, there seems to be little progress for people of color in promotion and advancement as well as retention.

Although in the current climate, we find houses amid promised shifts launching signature initiatives, hiring new personnel, and making high-level strategic decisions to prioritize diversity. Leading the question of whether changes are major steps toward progress or band-aids over gushing wounds. Without diversity within the industry's professionals, the systemic cultural status of whiteness can be found not just in its workforce but also in the books it publishes. Comparing results of their 2015 and 2019 surveys, Lee & Low Books concluded that "the field is just as white today as it was four years ago" —and that this will remain the cyclical nature of the industry for continued years if words continue to come from the industry without action (blog.leeandlow.com).

For this section my purpose is to take a look at the publishing industry overall and break down its lack of diversity, finding how these shortcomings are affecting all steps of the publishing process. My investigation will focus on race and ethnicity; however, any effort looking into diversity cannot ignore other identities that are equally underrepresented. By no means do I believe that just diversifying the industry solves the systemic racism that has persisted, but I think it is important to understand that this is a place that needs to be changed, improved, and investigated further. Diversity can no longer be thought of as just a set of practices or methods that the dominant culture attempts to use to maintain its status; it must become a target to reach for.

The Numbers Tell a Story

Although there are very few public reports showing the demographic makeup of the publishing industry's workforce, Lee & Low Books released two baseline surveys that document numerical evidence measuring different categories of diversity within the industry as a whole.

In 2015 Lee & Low Books took the first baseline survey; among the findings:

- The publishing industry overall was 79 percent white
- Executives in the publishing industry were 86 percent white
- Editorial departments were 82 percent white
- Sales departments were 83 percent white; marketing and publicity departments were 77 percent white
- Book reviewers were 89 percent white

In the most recent follow-up survey done in 2019, among the findings:

- The publishing industry overall was 76 percent white
- Executives in the publishing industry were 78 percent white
- Editorial departments were 85 percent white
- Marketing and publicity departments were 74 percent white

- Interns in the publishing industry were 49 percent BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color)

Although the publishing industry concedes that it does in fact have a problem with a lack of diversity, this information alone cannot solve the entirety of the problem. While having hard numbers that show a lack of strong progress, if we remove the personhood from the problem then we run into further issues. This information is only to demonstrate the lack of progress.

In investigating this disparity an alternate argument about diversity in publishing came about: “rethinking diversity,” coined by Dr. Anamik Saha and Dr. Sandra van Lente, who explained that we can no longer believe that increasing the number of ethnic and racial minorities in the publishing industry workforce will automatically lead to better representation in the books being published. The focus on diversity should shift from the workforce to finding writers of color and publishing them successfully. "The debate shifts from a focus on the quantity of minorities who work in publishing to the quality of the experience, particularly for writers of colour" (Saha, van Lente, ReThink 2). Their argument drafts the idea that for more representation within publishing should acquiring more authors of color or diverse backgrounds as an end goal with the goal of producing more books that have diverse stories. Not to just acquire diverse books or increase diversity just within the workforce of the industry. While a diverse workforce that is given the resources and freedom without being burdened to speak for the community they identify with is a benefit, van Lente and Saha believe that the foundation to diversity within publishing is by growing the diversity of authors being published. .

Saha and Van Lente's report calls on members of the industry to reflect on and challenge their practices, behaviors, and cultural biases. They specifically ask publishers to develop strategic alliances with and invest in processes that will have lasting development in the industry. We no

longer need another report on the industry's poor record on diversity; rather, we need notions of quality and partnerships for change. In 2020 multiple authors launched a different number of online campaigns that raised awareness of disparities in pay for writers and a push to help close the gap on racial inequality in publishing. Although the industry has announced promising strategies for change, the industry is still not as close to the progress one would expect.

Moving to the Chapter on Change

With its historically underexplored financial and institutional factors, some of the publishing houses have taken to social media to present progress within the industry by their hand as proof at an attempt to correct the lack of diversity that exists. As new policies and strategies for internship programs, writer outreach, equity training, and partnering with diverse communities have been founded at different houses. However, that doesn't change the systemically ingrained structures that still affect entry-level pay, employee retention, and professional mobility that hinders people of color within the workforce of publishing. Despite how overwhelmingly white the industry is, there is growth within the internship level, that provides little hope in seeing change that could begin to move up the unbalanced ladder. "Systemic change requires more than goodwill. It necessitates specific, far-reaching, and sustained policy revisions and company-wide commitments that outlast any single political moment and persist despite inevitable hurdles and setbacks" (PenAmerica).

With the development of signature initiatives to prioritize diversity, the Big Five US publishers—Hachette, HarperCollins, Macmillan, Penguin Random House, and Simon & Schuster—are determined to address recruitment and retention with structural changes. These include the creation of new funding initiatives, new hiring programs and recruitment events, formal appointments for DEI officers, and data tracking to analyze employee diversity. The need for

greater opportunities within the workforce is urgent, and given the slow rate of turnover, additional roles within the industry could open the possibility for more people of color to be appointed. While changes have been made, it's clear that the overall, underlying problems remain. Book publishing is a cultural production that currently "reflects and reproduces existing racial inequalities that demonstrate how diversity acts as a form of racial governance that commodifies authors of color while simultaneously devaluing them" (Saha, van Lente 1).

In other words, publishing houses are attempting to capitalize on the demand for diversity by producing more books with stories that feature marginalized communities, enacting programs that show outreach in these communities, or showing online participation in activism and outreach. However, authors of color continue to struggle for opportunities, highlighting the way this reinforces the economic and cultural status of the dominant culture. With Twitter communities like #ownvoices—a campaign that is calling out the industry for its lack of books about marginalized communities written by authors who identify within those marginalized communities—the industry can no longer stand behind the notion that authors of color are writing for smaller and more racially defined audiences and are, thus, less likely to produce a profitable book.

While the industry keeps score about who's buying books, they are assuming that white readers are still the dominant consumers of culture, instead of recognizing the push for diverse literature by the reader community that wants to read stories about their own representation. With most books being published in the US not by people of color, the publishing industry is slow on changing their business concepts and the way they see and value the market.

Acquiring Outside the “Norm”

Acquisitions refers to the process of acquiring an author to publish their manuscript; however, for this instance we will also extend the term to include the discovery of writers by agents. In this process writers of color can be inadvertently disadvantaged by the traditional ways in which agents discover new authors. The majority of agents scout in creative writing courses, networking events, recommendations, and literary competitions. As Dr. Anamik Saha and Dr. Sandra van Lente explain in their book *Rethinking “Diversity” in Publishing*, authors of color have a harder time being acquired through conventional means due to the racially exclusionary obstacles that are financially and culturally debilitating. “Traditional ways in which agents find writers creates an immediate obstacle for those from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds in particular” (Saha, Van Lente, *Rethinking* 13).

Specifically, creative writing courses can be places of exclusion due to their lack of accessibility through high costs and availability in lower income areas or universities. During my time in Denver, Colorado, I witnessed the work of a non-profit foundation, Margins, who puts together a yearly conference called The Word: The Storytelling Sanctuary, that provided a platform for voices to be heard beyond social, cultural, political, and economic barriers. They put together this conference as a response from the community looking for a space where writers at any level of experience can explore emerging trends in literature. This space was created for writers and by writers on the margins, with the desire to help promote inclusive representations of experiences in literature for communities who have historically been excluded.

Although there are writers from the margins being acquired, after they are acquired, they’re steered into reproducing racial and ethnic stereotypes in a clear strategy to replicate past success. Because of the perceived risk of publishing a writer of color, they are pushed to conform to the dominant culture of whiteness. Despite the space that these writers of color inhabit, they are still

forced to push through the systemic barriers that prevail within the publishing industry, continuing this narrative of whiteness. While there is no doubt systemic racism exists throughout the publishing process, more proactive measures in finding writers of color beyond traditional routes require more creativity and labor-intensive effort. In looking at the process of acquiring authors by both publishing houses and agents, it leads me to reflect on the lack of diversity within both of these workforces, drawing back to the statistics by Lee & Low Books. If there are no people from diverse backgrounds working within these spaces, the likelihood for these authors to be seen within the industry diminishes. Acquiring a book first comes from someone's desire to read said book; with the systemic biases within the industry and the potential biases of the dominant culture, writers of color will continue to face perceptions of lower value.

Another important part of reforming the industry is to widen their understanding and perception of who their audiences are and the necessity to discover and acquire writers of color who reflect the diverse demographic of readers they sell to. "Racism and capitalism, as two distinct historical forces, come together to organize populations into those without value (those who are racialized), and those with value (the nonracialized)" (Saha, van Lente 1807). Meaning that despite their important contributions, writers of color remain marginalized and overlooked, revealing the nature of cultural production residing in a space of systemic racism.

The discourse around how writers of color struggle in getting their books published is not always about the perceived lack of quality but more a case of publishers not knowing how to reach the audience who would find their book interesting. In order for publishers to publish more diversely, they need to challenge their own assumptions and push against the monocultural nature. In acquiring writers of color, publishers' lack of diversity within their own workforce is a substantial problem, but if they do not understand that there is an audience for writers of color,

then that is equally a substantial problem. With the current push for diversity coming after a raging political climate, the industry still lacks an understanding of who readers are and what they are searching for.

CHAPTER III: THE PROFIT AND LOSS OF DIVERSITY

The following theories will be used to examine the root causes of the systemic whiteness within the publishing industry and why they continuously work in a slow progress of change as well as their consumer-oriented focus and the commodification of literature. The framework is divided into two sections: (a) breaking down publishers' marketing strategies and their lack of knowledge in seeing complex stories written by authors of color, and (b) discussing how this marketing strategy hinders the ability of authors of color to be marketed and "sold" correctly.

As I researched diversity within the publishing industry, I found that most of the focus was placed on the editorial department. While this is an important place to focus efforts, it is not the only department within the industry that has a strong necessity for diversity. Profit and loss sheets (P&Ls) are a mixture of predictable information like manufacturing costs and the unpredictable, sales. P&Ls are used by every publisher in order to make sure that the book being acquired will hit the profit margin before being presented to be published.

The industry uses sales and projections to justify publishing the manuscript, what the advance to the author should be, or even how many books will be printed, but those sales projections are based on comps and previous titles. In terms of books written by authors of color, this leads to lower advances and less money to the author since the likelihood of previous titles or comp titles are not going to be there because of their underrepresentation within the market. An important aspect to publishing more diverse books is acquiring culturally specific marketing teams who understand how to distribute diverse books and know what it takes to create an audience for these books.

The ONE and Only

Throughout my research I came across this common theme, the idea that if two books are written by two authors of color that may have some similar content, tropes, or anything else, then only one author should be published to stave off any risk of loss. Explaining further, it's the belief that a book by one author with the same theme as a previously published book written by an author with a same or similar background can only be seen as different versions of the same story. And only one story needs to be told. In recalling a story by Ayesha Pande, Pen America

affirmed that all too often, trying to sell or acquire a book by a person of color means having to “educate” white people that this is actually an important story, and no, this story is not the same as that story. Just because they were both written by Black people doesn't mean they're telling the same story. Even if they're two stories that in some way delve into the traumatic experiences of racism, it's still not the same story. But that level of nuance is something that they don't understand. (Reading Between)

Another common problem with the one-is-enough theory is the obstacle that diverse books appear to be published at a higher rate. This is due in part to the most common genre for writers of color being literary fiction, which is also the highest-profile genre. For instance, this theory comes to mind whenever there is a month of celebration—let's say Black History Month for instance—generally bookstore owners or publishers will spend the entire month posting books by Black authors. So, when you walk into the bookstore or see the posts, you assume that there are so many books being produced by Black authors and stories about Black characters that you don't scroll further or walk around the corner to see that those are, in fact, the only books by Black authors. Simply the problem is if you put all the writers of color into this one category and they're highly visible, everyone thinks there are a lot more writers of color compared to others. Although my example doesn't look specifically at the genre, the concept is still the same: if you are only

looking at one specific part of the problem, you are missing the larger picture. If we focus on the books that are placed in the front of the store during a specific time, we are led to believe that there is no problem with diversity, but if you look at the remainder of the store, you see the problem as a whole, a lack of diversity.

In the common confounding in-between, writers of color face an identity trap in the one-is-enough notion, where publishers capitalize on stereotypical stories and capitalize on the success they believe will come. Another instance where the industry commodifies culture and race is the way writers of color are doomed no matter if they don't tell a stereotypical story or tell a story that white gatekeepers believe they have already read. Publishers subsequently place authors of color in boxes, tied to the expectations of the publisher and the industry at large. Unfortunately, in this identity trap, the monetization of trauma is compounded by the commodification of race. The hunger for stories from writers of color comes from a complicated, politicized place, reducing authors to their identity. Even with intentional efforts to promote voices of color, the idea of a diverse book can overshadow the actual content of the book or the author who has written it.

Margo Hendrick, in her book *Race and Romance: Coloring the Past*, references this very thought that first came from Nancy Leong:

Racial capitalism is described as “deriving social or economic value from the racial identity of another person” (Leong, 2013, 2152). In particular, racial capitalism is the process “in which a white individual or a predominately white institution derives social or economic value from associating with individuals with nonwhite racial identities” (2154). Because racial capitalism is also a “systemic phenomenon” (2152) in which “nonwhiteness” has... become something desirable[,] for many, it has become a commodity to be pursued, captured, possessed, and used (2155). (Hendrick xiv)

Reflecting on Hendrick's and Leong's argument, I can't help but think of the very public debate over the novel by Jeanine Cummins, *American Dirt*. After receiving a seven-figure advance for the book and a massive first print run, the book received glowing reviews from famous authors and landed on many popular book lists. When the book was first released, the reviews changed, calling out the author for writing a story about Mexican migrants even though she identified as white. Cummins had written a story that was not hers—and according to many reviews, she didn't do a good job of it, seemingly fetishizing the pain of her characters. *American Dirt* in society has now become a conversation about cultural appropriation and about how the publishing industry chose this particular story of Mexican migration to champion—when there are many, many more authors telling this story from within the community.

Comparison is the Death of Individuality

The process of comping, or finding comparable titles in order to predict sales, is the core of commercial publishing. Although far from an exact science, it is generally an industry standard to base part of the information going into the P&L report by comparing like titles to the manuscript that is being evaluated for publication. Comps help the publishers potentially project how well they expect the book to sell and the general level of resources to use during the publishing process. One issue is the decision to compare strictly using like titles written by someone who shares the same racial or ethnic identity as the author. These particular comparisons bring about many discussions about whether or not race should come into the comparisons at all. Relying on comps leads publishers to think that a more conservative, dated approach is better, making them less likely to take the chance to publish books by authors of color. The lack of sufficient data for authors of color could affect the way their titles are comped, leading to disadvantages in the marketplace and the potential to hold these authors back.

Jean Ho in their article on NPR accounts that "Black people and people of color have been cultural producers across art, literature, music, for decades. It's just now that we're in a time in the history of publishing where we're starting to get more representation and pay for our work, getting the awards for our work, getting recognized" (Ho). As the nation's population moves toward a minority-majority, the hope to see more books by and about people of color becomes the primary challenge. In the past years, change has been slow to come, but with the publicity of new surveys and studies and the pressure for transparency, the industry is being pushed to make strides toward a more diverse industry.

SOCIAL ACTIVISM FOR ROMANCE

Literature is a tool for empowerment, liberation, representation, and storytelling with participation in a space of identity and community formation. The act of reading can be a contribution to intelligence, an act of stress relief, or a moment of brief escape. Diverse books can offer an authentic experience of different abilities, cultures, beliefs, skin colors, etc., and can be essential to humanizing people who are traditionally marginalized in society. The question of whose stories get told and by whom is not something that we can ignore any longer as a society.

In her book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison explains that "cultural identities are formed and informed by a nation's literature, and that what seemed to be on the 'mind' of the literature of the United States was the self-conscious but highly problematic construction of the American as a new white man" (Morrison 39). Especially with the growth of social media, a recent global pandemic that set a rise in book sales, and a worldwide call to action that forced forward an age of reformation. People are looking at books now more than ever to be sources of inclusive storytelling, education, and outreach. But like all other things, society does not agree on the books that should be bestsellers or on the ban list, finding the argument over diverse books more complicated than ever.

With this new generation of social media, communities for readers are becoming a trend, opening access to instant communication with authors and creating spaces for discussion on the evolving landscape of literature and publishing all while tracking the impact contemporary readers have on the industry.

My purpose is to investigate both the power of collective mobilization through online activism by reader communities that have a clear focus on impacting diversity in publishing and the book community. I'll try to explain what reader communities are, their impact on social

activism, how they're manufacturing change, or how trends based on societal reformation of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Looking specifically at how these communities have driven and provided diversity within the romance genre by acquiring diverse authors, social action/activism as a collective, and how the dynamics of the romance genre have changed.

CHAPTER IV: READERS GONNA READ

The following theories and statistics will be used to better understand the significance of building a diverse community that could impact the book community. The framework is divided into two sections: (a) statistical information to understand the lack of diversity within the book community and, (b) exploration of how this community has helped outreach for acquiring diverse authors. In the first section, I will break down the importance of diversity within the book community. In the second section, I will discuss how the current political climate is affecting the book industry and community. In this section, I will focus on how the community is promoting diversity and how a community collective in the current political ground is pushing for change.

Actively Communicating Diversity

Diverse literature can be described as texts that include categorizations such as religion, race, ethnicity, social groups, gender, and ability identity. While diversity was hardly ever given as a challenge within the industry, it may be an underlying and unspoken factor that is now being seen as a place about issues and people others have long not considered. Like much of the information on the publishing industry, book sales data—specifically diverse book sales—are mostly proprietary and purposefully locked away. Although this is some of the most important information in the industry that determines both book contracts and authors' advances, the information is inaccessible to anyone outside of the industry, which becomes a large problem. If we want to understand the contemporary literary world, better book data is crucial. Understanding why this information is so important and why it is kept under lock and key is influential in unlocking it for public use. Similar data is collected by academics, helping to provide some insight into the Big Five houses that have historically been dominated by white authors and continue to systemically reinforce whiteness within the industry.

Sara Ahmed explores in her book *On Being Included* that "any system of measurement requires a unit of measurement... documents come to provide such measurements. Documents are not simply objects; they are means of doing or not doing something" (Ahmed 85). She goes on to explain that although we need documents that keep track and report numbers of diversity, these documents should not be seen as the answer to solving the lack of diversity issue within the industry. Simply put, although we have to use numbers and information to show the lack of diversity, we cannot rely on the numbers to be the entire conversation of diversity.

A report produced by The Ripped Bodice, a romance bookstore, tracks what percentage of books published each year are written by BIPOC authors in the traditional romance publishing genre. On their website, they document that the list is generated with every romance novel published by the leading romance publishers in a given year directly from the publishers' websites, distributors' websites, and catalogs. They then take the number of total books released by a publisher against the number of books written by authors who are BIPOC and calculate the percentage that is used in the list. They go on to explain that their focus was on race because although other groups are still underrepresented in the genre, racial diversity is the specific area they chose to focus on because of how lacking it is within the industry.

An important notation they make during an interview about their findings goes into the race and identity of the characters within books in the genre and why they aren't part of the statistics. The Ripped Bodice explains that "the fictional characters and settings are extremely important, however, the fictional characters in these books aren't being negatively impacted by discrimination in real life. Real people who write books are, as are the real readers who purchase them. We need creators from marginalized identities getting paid to tell their own stories in publishing" (The State).

In looking at their breakdown, the total industry-wide percentage of BIPOC authors in the romance genre was 12.30 percent in 2022, only marginally higher than the 11.90 percent the year prior. The Ripped Bodice opened in 2016 and is the first romance-only bookstore in North America, run by sisters Leah and Bea Koch. Although their report addresses white supremacy within the industry and an anti-racism agenda, there hasn't been much movement within the industry to make change, although there are some presses that show great improvement. Personally, as someone who reads around 75 books a year a majority of them within the romance genre, I'm particularly disappointed in the presses that are known to produce other diverse books within the genre but report a minuscule number, showing very little intersectionality in how they're choosing which authors to publish.

Committees for Change

Despite these numbers, there are many people on social media platforms bringing attention to books that represent all kinds of diverse backgrounds. We Need Diverse Books is a website and non-profit that strives to diversify the publishing industry and make bookshelves more equitable, generally focused on children's literature. In a time when organizations are fighting against diversity in schools and libraries, the work that this organization and community does is crucial in combating the loss of diverse books. Having donated over 100,000 diverse books to schools and libraries, this community organization has also created internship grants to help marginalized voices join the publishing industry and created mentorship programs in hopes of helping writers get published. Their work has helped to increase the number of diverse books written by diverse authors between their inception in 2014 and 2022.

In 2016 the Indie Love Conference started in Atlanta, Georgia with one purpose: to promote the work of Black independent romance authors and create a community around them.

Despite political turbulence, the success of the conference has created a thriving romance community and industry within Atlanta. In an interview for AtlantaMagazine.com, DL White, an Atlanta-based romance author, explains, "Romance encompasses so much—it's activism, it's women with autonomy, it's women in nontraditional roles. Romance tells our story in a way that brings hope. I think a huge misconception of romance is that it's all sex, it's all unrealistic daydreams of the perfect man" (Jacinta, AtlantaMagazine.com). Today's romance genre presents main characters navigating serious issues, including domestic violence, substance abuse, and depression. With trade publishing being notoriously rigid gatekeepers of the established formulas, self-publishing has opened up doors within this genre for authors that may not have been published otherwise. This convention and community provide a space where these indie authors can cultivate a following.

BookTok, a popular subset of TikTok, heavily focuses on popular romance tropes and sexually explicit writing, or "smut," that revolves around white, heterosexual main characters and targets almost exclusively white and heterosexual female readership. Nevertheless, some influencers have amassed a following and created a community that searches for diverse readers and promotes books by diverse authors. Countless BookTokers are making it their mission to bring diverse reads into the mainstream.

Tania, or @sorrimalwaysbooked, an influencer from New York City, went viral after her post on TikTok calling out the BookTok community for always discussing the same books by the same white authors. By expressing her opinions on Twitter, she ignited a conversation about diversity within the BookTok community, creating #BlackBookTok in hopes that more books by Black authors will be found, discussed, and promoted. Kayley from @chronicallybookish is a book lover with a chronic illness. Using her first-hand experience, she reads, reviews, and recommends

books that represent people with disabilities. Even the publishing industry is attempting to be part of the conversation like Penguin Random House's UK account @litincolour, which is helping to get more books by authors of color onto school curriculums. All of these influencers express concerns for representation within the book community, books, and publishing on their platforms while also belonging to the marginalized communities they are trying to serve.

The hope is that the success of social media and BookTok will help to promote the works of authors who might not otherwise succeed in an industry that has continuously left no space for them. But at current it seems to be a slow-moving battle like the one within the publishing industry.

CHAPTER V: HASHTAG COMMUNITY

The following theories and personal experience are used to better understand the significance of the bookish community that impacts reading culture and book sales. The framework is divided into two sections: (a) theories that help understand the bookish culture and their communities and (b) how these communities are using their platforms for social activism. In the first section, I will break down what these reader communities are and how their mobilization has impacted the publishing industry. In the second section, I will discuss how the activism created by the book community creates space for diversity to develop at a faster pace within the publishing industry. I will look specifically at the romance genre and explain how BookTok's hyperfocus on the romance genre has created a space for change through the use of cultivation theory.

Bookish Culture

According to Webster's dictionary "bookish" refers to academic or scholarly pursuits and a strong devotion to literature ("Bookish"). However, this term has been taken over by social media users conceiving a new definition to describe the culture of people who love books. As social media became an instant success, the introduction of online literary communities like #bookstagram, #booktok, BookTubers, and Goodreads constructed a space devoted to book conversations, reviews, chats with authors, and sharing favorite reads. In the current climate these platforms have become powerful tools for readers and authors offering unique opportunities to explore, discuss, and promote books in innovative ways. These platforms have also in the current climate been used as a coalition towards social activism and the fight for diversity, equity, and inclusion within the book industry. While social media communities are thriving and intended to connect readers across the world, there are differences in how the platforms function.

#Bookstagram, a community on Instagram, is used for visual aesthetics and enables followers to post pictures with their current or favorite reads, book nooks, bookshelves, local bookstore recommendations, and more. With this focus, Instagram followers can write captions that can be book reviews, link blogs, and add additional information or create a conversation with the community and followers. BookTubers found on YouTube, the long-form video-sharing platform, produce content that is centered around offering book club vlogs, reviews, and discussions on literary topics, book reviews, or just showcasing books they love with viewer engagement through comments, likes, and subscriptions that provides a sense of connection.

BookTube established the digital literary criticism space, giving diverse voices and opinions a platform to be heard that impacted reading choices on a global scale. #BookTok, a community on TikTok the video-sharing app, allows users to create and share short-form videos. This platform has focused on book reviews or recommendations with attention-catching videos and has become one of the largest growing forces in enhancing the popularity of authors and books. The Goodreads platform is a digital book database used by members in order to track the books they are reading, find recommendations, write reviews, participate in challenges, and join multiple genre-based reading groups formed specifically on the platform.

With millions of active users, these platforms create a substantial and engaged audience within the vibrant literary community online. Behind these communities and posts are followers trusting the opinions of fellow enthusiasts and influencers making these platforms influential in shaping reading choices and trends. As social media use hits an all-time high, publishers have noticed the influence this community provides with this form of influencer marketing becoming a significant part of book promotion strategies. As of 2022, #BookTok has seen over 56 billion views opening up opportunities for publishers and writers to find new audiences and publicize their work.

So, the main question here is if these platforms have no problem getting followers to read, what does it get them to read?

While BookTok and the other social media groups are revitalizing publishing, the downfall is their proclivity to mirror the industry in some significant ways, including one of its biggest problems: lack of diversity. My aim is not to just call out the lack of diversity that presides in yet another side of the book industry; however, I do still think that it is important to see just how systemic this problem is. Despite its glaring lack, BookTok is allowing users to build a community around reading together while also providing a space for discussion and outreach.

There's no argument that BookTok is popularizing reading; with the success of viral videos, many authors have seen upticks in their sales and profits, seeing the profound difference this online community is making within the industry. Yet, with this uptick many users are calling out the app's issue for consistently popularizing the same types of books generally written by white authors and feature predominantly white characters. This trend is followed by booksellers trying to profit off the success of these viral books, saturating the market on another scale. Over the last few years, BookTok has been one of the most influential sources of book discoveries, influencing many backlist titles to become bestsellers years after their original release.

TikTok has functioned well as a tool of influence in consumer markets because a user's feed isn't compiled of accounts they've chosen, but rather suggested videos the app has chosen based on the user's interests. In an article by Wordsrated.com, they documented that as of September 2023, BookTok has over 181.7 billion viewers and helped in selling around 20 million books in 2021, a total of 2.4 percent of the total book sales for that year. With billions of views, a new concern for social media and the book industry is now coming to light for young readers, whether or not they are gaining a well-rounded literary viewpoint from an online social media

platform. With the rise of banned books in schools and the limited variety of books going viral, the potential exclusivity of books being read by these young readers is a concern for many researchers.

Recently controversial book opinions have gone viral about the effects of BookTok reading culture, specifically on the virality of the romance genre and the stipulations that come with a book being popularized in the community. Comments have disparaged the romance genre and the necessity for sexual content, the excess of books being written about teenagers, or the unlikelihood that current books being published will never be considered classics or great reads. These comments make it clear that while the growth of the romance genre from BookTok is good, it may in fact not be cultivating a knowledgeable base for engagement. This is not to say that people don't enjoy BookTok books because I've been trapped a time or twenty reading a book suggested by a captivating video, and as someone who favors the romance genre, I don't find it unworthy of critical thinking because of its popularity. But I do think that TikTok as a platform is not a place that can host complex, nuanced, and complete conversations on literature and publishing because of the nature of the platform and the overly saturated content that prevails. With its engagement based on trends and algorithms, a member of the community will only get shown what they have previously liked or what the app thinks they should like, not the wide variety that exists in the world of books.

Instead of creating a pattern of recommendations and readership, these online forums could be aimed at incentivizing readers to go to local bookstores or cultivate a more diverse and open-ended version of content, reading more diverse books or authors or even hosting reading events. Of course, everyone is entitled to read what they like, and if they desire to only read specific genres, I am not anyone to tell them otherwise. But to have an entire platform that has such a strong hold

on the community but does not actively try to expand the inclusivity of it should raise alarm bells and push the community to expand and change. We must as a community think of the harm we might be doing, both as consumers and creators, when we don't challenge or demand more from the platform we use and the community that we have built. However, the ebb and flow of different platforms has played a role in influencing book sales although in different ways. What sets TikTok apart from other platforms is its popularity with the younger generation. While that influence can pose problems, when it comes to getting the younger generation interested in reading, there aren't many more effective tools.

Despite the negatives, I still believe that the book communities created on these different platforms are beneficial to the industry. We are seeing where this space is opening up as readers look for something traditional publishing isn't providing, pushing others in their community and the industry to answer where these books are, and why aren't they being promoted. While in-person book clubs and reading groups still exist, online communities have revolutionized the way books are recommended and discussed, creating an accessible space for literary enthusiasts. Social media and online book communities open up opportunities for publishers and writers to find new audiences and publicize their works, making them an extremely useful tools.

According to a 2020 study about diversity in trade publishing, there was a fear among publishers that diverse reads are too niche and would not appeal to core audiences. However, BookTok has shown that this is certainly not the case, with an increasingly diverse audience who want more representation and are actively searching for it, there has been a rise in diverse influencers with a focus on diversity by the industry.

#OwnVoices over #OwningVoices

Published in 2022, an article by Leonie Rutherford, Katya Johanson, and Bronwyn Reddan analyzes the concept of #ownvoices writing within young adult fiction in Australia. “The #ownvoices movement originated on Twitter in 2015 in response to perceptions that the book industry prioritizes diverse books rather than diverse authors,” a common notion that today still exists (Rutherford, Johanson, Reddan 573). This hashtag spanned across multiple platforms, advocating for books written with authentic representations of lived experiences. The authors explain that the importance of #ownvoices is about describing and uplifting authors from marginalized groups who are writing stories about marginalized characters within that group.

Dina Delic, a Librarian at the Morrill Memorial Library, explains

the number of stories featuring white, non-marginalized authors compared to marginalized authors is a huge difference, with white, non-marginalized authors and stories continuing to dominate bookshelves and bestsellers lists. Or you have authors writing the stories of marginalized groups after conducting little to no research, with the justification that, “well, no one else is writing them, so why not me?” This is where the need for #ownvoices comes in because the idea that marginalized authors are simply not writing their own stories is a false one. (“The Importance of #OwnVoices”)

The very notion that Delic is bringing up is a complex one going back to the systemic issues within the industry. For ages publishers have said that diverse books will not sell, so books by diverse authors about diverse stories were acquired at a minimal rate. However, books in the contemporary romance genre from authors like Willow Winters, Danielle Lori, and K. Webster are consistently acquired, paid larger advances for their manuscripts, and continue to release books with harmful stereotypes, fetiszations of race, and body shaming. By using the #ownvoices to

uplift diverse authors, we send the message to the publishing industry that diverse stores and authors do exist, and they are marketable and being read.

#Ownvoices helps to provide a level of authenticity to their storytelling in an industry where the voices and writing of marginalized people have been filtered through the lens of white perspectives in an industry where authenticity is something desperately needed.

Author Priscilla Oliveras has received notoriety for her contemporary romance novel *West Side Love Story*, an adaptation of the classic story of Romeo and Juliet; it is a romance of star-crossed love, feuding families, and the bonds of sisterhood. Two competing marachi bands from San Antonio, Texas, one a first generation, all-female band and the other a traditional all male band compete to win the grand prize and the title of best marachi band. The two main characters are the eldest children of the two feuding families who meet at a New Year's Eve party and have a secret affair that intensifies with the drama of the competition. Against all odds, the star-crossed lovers make beautiful music together. Oliveras, a Puerto Rican-Mexican American, writes from a place of perspective and consideration for her characters, focusing the story on family dynamics and sisterhood while also staying true to the genre of romance. She portrays strong Mexican heritage and community throughout her story while also touching on real topics of gentrification and immigration that would not be seen in romance novels written outside the perspective of #ownvoices.

He glanced at his watch, his gut tightening with dread when he read the time: 6:13 p.m. Had ICE and Homeland Security officials just descended? Or had they shown up at the community center earlier, brandishing weapons no doubt, at peak time for after-school classes? Right when parents were dropping off their children and latchkey kids arrived on their own. All confronted with the harsh ugliness and often heartbreaking injustice of an ICE sweep. (Oliveras 184)

When you read a love story about a character with a minority identity that is also written by someone from that identity, you are getting an inside look from someone who has experienced the similar feelings or stereotypes as their characters. Someone who does not identify with that same diverse group can only give readers an outside assumption or perspective of their character's life, risking a very singular story. Although specifically the romance genre does have common stereotypes and tropes, there is still space to raise objections of inauthenticity, appropriation, trauma mining, and commodification. Books not created by writers within that marginalized identity may perpetuate white supremacist characteristics like mistranslation, alternate or incorrect spelling of language, or offensive descriptors of sensitive experiences.

Writing about characters of color and their experiences within a white gaze can be demeaning and sorely inaccurate if the author is not within that culture and experience. However, despite the authors' best efforts when outside these marginalized backgrounds, any research or information acquired may not always correct the necessary positionality challenges that come with the accuracy of intention and execution of the story. Oliveras subverts the notion of the white gaze by using this scene in her novel not to remove accusations of terror or abuse by the authorities but to give an accurate and sympathetic representation of a Mexican American family and community challenged by the threat of deportation and separation. Her ability to write from a marginalized perspective in the construction of her plot implies the powerful impact race has on narrative—and on narrative strategy. Looking again at the article by Rutherford, Johanson, and Reddan, they explain that "theories of recognition underpin identity politics, through which marginalized groups demand recognition of aspects of self which are neglected or demeaned by the dominant value and norm system of their society. They detailed studies that explained how victims [of colonization]

have suffered severe psychological harm by being depicted as inferior humans" (Rutherford, Johanson, Reddan 575).

Rutherford, Johanson, and Reddan further explain like the own voices hashtag that failing to recognize stereotypical characterizations in literature damages readers to their concepts of self and potentially causes a form of harm. But, if these stories are written from the viewpoint of an author that belongs to the community, these harmful stereotypes and characterizations can be mitigated and help to remove the harm. The hashtag provides increased awareness to the contributions of diverse authors and stories and force the publishing industry to make changes in a saturated market.

Social Media Mobilization

A Facebook group created by four female, Latinx authors, the "4 Chichas Chat" draws discourse about their own romance novels, romance novels that have been written cross-culturally, and discussions of diversity within the industry. Along with the previously discussed #ownvoices movement on Twitter and the "4 Chichas Chat" on Facebook, there is the equally notable #weneeddiversebooks, #publishingpaidme, and #WhatWoCWritersHear.

#Weneeddiversebooks was started in 2014 when the founder of We Need Diverse Books went on Twitter and shared a prompt "we need diverse books because" with more than 20,000 people around the world responding. The campaign was created to address the continuing lack of diversity in children's literature by authors hoping to garner attention to create change. Despite this campaign originating for children's literature, it has grown to be used for all genres of books. #Publishingpaidme is a social media campaign that shows whose stories publishers value and whose they're willing to pay for, says Constance Grady in an article for Vox.

The campaign began when YA author L.L. McKinney, who is Black, was calling for authors to share the advances they had received for their books. Once McKinney started the spreadsheet it took on numbers from multiple authors, showing proof of the systemic biases within the publishing industry. Grady explains, "The biases affect which books publishers choose to invest in, and that, in turn, affects which books end up succeeding. And while Black authors have always known the biases were there, #publishingpaidme showed just how dramatic their effects could be" (Grady). This hashtag and subsequent campaign came about for the simple purpose of transparency within the industry, something that through research I found the industry circles around but doesn't quite touch. Much of their information is proprietary, half-documented, or just simply doesn't exist at all.

This campaign comes after controversial cross-cultural books were published by white authors that received seven-figure advances while books of similar topics written by authors within the Latinx community were given minimal budgets and overlooked by larger publishing houses. #Whatwocwritershear is a hashtag that was started in 2017 by author Joanne Harris with stories about the sexism she faces as a women writer. This rampant problem in publishing was documented by many women of color. Her purpose was to advocate for equality and inclusion within the publishing industry while drawing attention to the extreme sexism she and other authors of color have faced as writers.

The similar characteristics of these movements are the inauthenticity in representation of the everyday realities experienced by marginalized readers, the appropriation of both representational and economic justice, the relentless depiction of physical and psychological trauma, and writing that focuses on stereotyping characters or tropes that are marginal to the main

arc of the story. This notable lack of representation and accountability by the publishing industry shows a systemic bias toward people of marginalized groups.

With hopes of having conversations about romance novels, diversity within publishing, and current events, the "4 Chicas Chat" hosted by Priscilla Oliveras, Alexis Daria, Sabrina Sol, and Mia Sosa, is a platform that has created a safe space for conversation and contemplation. In an interview with Entertainment Weekly, they were asked about the romance genre grappling with issues of inclusion and potential failures that face the publishing industry in the face of the push to diversify. Sol replied, "I've seen a change also along the lines of more authors not being afraid to call out the problems that they're seeing rather than just maybe talking about it amongst themselves. They're being vocal about it; they're being public about it" (LeeLenker). Sol's response amplifies the importance of these conversations and the mobilization that is happening. The ability of a collective of readers to push an entire industry towards change is evident in their ability to force reaction and make significant changes to the publisher's bottom lines, both in good and bad ways. With one review that goes wrong or a viral video that pushes the popularity of a book, the industry can instantly see a change that demonstrates the power readers have.

Most notable are the issues of trauma mining that appear in many social media reviews by reader communities detailing the repetition of suffering for entertainment purposes. There is this one-dimensionality of the characterizations where the author is profiting from the experiences of marginalized groups that they don't identify with but are essentially writing for. A referral to the hypersexualized, stereotypical brown or black body, forced to be commodified as the "other" within the romance genre through the overly sexualized characterized Latina, or the innocent virgin and devout catholic girl. The contemporary romance novel by Annette Chavez Macias's, *Big Chicas Don't Cry*, tells the story of four cousins who navigate love, loss, and the meaning of

family over one year. The four main characters contend with secrets, traditions, and a fierce love for each other and their *abuelita*. After tragedy strikes the family in multiple forms, the women fight to forgive and move past the 15 years of separation that has torn them apart. This is a story of love, community, and the struggles of four Latina women. Chavez Macia's characterizations of her four main female characters use a very different type of subjectivity. She depicts them each as having very different points of view, personalities, and even features, providing different representations of the varied types of Latina women.

"No, I'm not. I don't know why you think I'm such a prude."

"Um, because you're almost thirty and still a virgin?"

"I'm not almost thirty, Selena."

"Your birthday is only five months away, Gracie."

"Just because I don't talk about sex all the time like you do doesn't mean I've never had it," Gracie huffed. "Besides, not all virgins are prudes." (Chavez Macias, 10)

Although Chavez Macias uses the trope of the virginal Latina, depicted for her character as a representation of her repressed childhood trauma there are no overt stereotypes or constant pressure to announce her virginal status. Throughout the novel, Gracie owns her sexuality and religion, and the character is very open about her past trauma and mental health. These traits show the distinct difference in a novel that was written from the perspective of #ownvoices. Throughout the novel Chavez Macia's allows her characters autonomy and allows for the values of her female characters to prevail over the desires or values of male characters. She places family and culture at the forefront of the story while centering the matriarch and a majority of the women characters within the novel, a rarity for this genre.

Diversifying Romance

Latinx art—specifically literature—is a space to articulate, represent, and negotiate issues of power, language, orality, ethnicity, community, migration, diaspora, struggle, social justice, home/land, and belonging. This is not something new but rather the desire to elevate these voices and the awareness that Latinx authors can and should impact broader conversations. Through books, the reader's mind rises to meet the author's, and the result is profoundly expanded with a sense of the world as a place where people of color matter as neighbors, citizens, friends, and lovers. Literature humanizes readers by inviting them to find value and humanity in others. Now more than ever, the publishing industry values these reading communities for the significant impact they have on the industry from calling out the industry itself on where it's lacking to the must-read, these communities demonstrate their ability to make change in the industry as quickly as one viral post.

As a billion-dollar industry, romance is one of the most popular fiction genres in the United States, shedding its previously “trashy” identity to amass an unbelievable following on social media. “The romance industry is more responsive to reader feedback than any other genre... Romance novels do not determine what readers think; readers determine what romance novels get published ... the global audience for romance fiction in fact [constitutes] a lively, reflective, high-engaged community” (Tapper 254). Romance is intrinsically feminine, with its two main components of a love story and emotionally satisfying ending, in a world that is still very much misogynistic and policing women’s bodies and minds. Early romance novels were based on heterosexual white women rejecting social norms and overcoming personal struggles to find happiness, a theme that continues today with more diversity. Margo Hendricks in her book *Race & Romance: Coloring the Past* questions these very ideas of the romance genre:

Caught between the rock, literature, and a hard place, genre fiction of the worst sort, the romance genre has had a contentious existence. Part of the issue lies in romance's generic fluidity: is it a genre, a literary mode, or merely a literary convention similar to metaphor or trope? Is romance an emotional state of being tied to relationships that are sexual in nature but inevitably lead to the protagonists "falling in love and enjoying a happily ever after" life? Or is romance all of these and therein lies the problem? (Hendricks 2-3)

Hendricks actively demonstrates the several factors that contribute to the complexities of the romance genre and the opportunity it provides for diversity. For a genre that's had its share of negative press, it provides the perfect area for the evolution and creation of a space that is breaking the "traditional" idea or representation within the genre and industry. If we are already questioning the themes of the genre, it is beneficial to then diversify the writers that are creating clear and distinct subversions of the typical thought formations of romance.

With the diversification of content and cultivation of reader feedback, the romance genre has seen increased willingness by readers and authors to work towards forward-thinking solutions, breaking away from the systemic racism that prevails in most of the publishing industry. Changing the stereotypical portrayal of romance as a genre ruled by white, middle-class heroines whose only goal is marriage and domesticity, modern romance publishers are making strides by commissioning novels, creating imprints, taking reader feedback, and constructing lists that reflect the true range of possibilities available to a woman in this era.

The romance industry, with its increased global readership, has encompassed a multiplicity of cultures and content. While other publishers have remained averse to explicit political content, romance publishers are taking note of their readers and making progressive political statements when it comes to the books they commission, considering the diversity of both the authors they

choose and the books being published. "Authentic experience brings increased resonance and affect for gender diverse readers and the inevitable 'missteps' of cis writers come at both psychological and political cost for readers" due to their lack of deep experience that is required to create an empathic identification in readers (Rutherford 579).

In this current era, when so much change is happening due to mass mobilization, the importance of the reader community for the publishing industry is immense. They are forcing change that has taken the industry years to even acknowledge; however, diversity within the professional sphere and the books themselves still lag behind the diversity of the US population. Although social media platforms and online reader communities have raised the threshold for participation in the literary field, these mobilizations have disrupted the relationship between publishing companies and readers, influencing publishing strategies and economic stability after reader comments express desires for diversity and change from the industry.

Perpetuating or countering stereotypes within the romance genre is another realm in which reader mobilization has become a demonstration of power for communities. Lauren Cameron, in her article investigating romance publishing and its reputation, explains that "by building a community of romance readers, the shame associated with reading it loses power and disappears. The fact that readers continue to read the genre despite the shame placed upon them shows that the genre is interesting and worthy" (Cameron 5). As the romance genre moves into contemporary status—moving to inclusionary storylines, themes of suspense and mystery, and happy endings that don't include marriage and children for the heroine (if she doesn't want it)—it pushes back against the gendered roles found in romance novels from the past. Characterizations within these novels can be complex and multifaceted in ways that defy stereotypes. It is important to recognize not only that stereotypes exist but how they can be challenged when they do exist. Chavez Macias's

characterizations of her four main female characters, range from the church-going virgin, the over-sexualized woman who has a fear of relationships, the outspoken and fierce leader, and the family-oriented cousin. Despite having all of these stereotypes within her books, she has placed complexities that divert from just the typical stereotypical Latina representation, making them more than just the simple terms that may at first define them.

"That was true. Moving to New York would mean overhauling my entire life. I didn't know anyone in New York except Nathan. Which meant it would be too easy to revolve everything I did around him. I couldn't risk that. Not again" (Chavez Macias 253). In this passage, Selena, one of the cousins, is pressed between the choice of moving to New York for a job and being with a man she is in love with or staying in California with her family. Her choice becomes complicated by her desire to not be consumed with the man she loves, who in turn lets her go so that she can make the choice she truly wants and take the job in New York. In this storyline, Chavez Macias is subverting the typical romance genre plot line that the women will always end up giving up her desires and decisions for the love of the man. Selena does get the happy ending, but not all of her cousins do, and despite moving towards love, she makes the decision for herself and for her career, in direct opposition to the "traditional" notions of the romance novel. Chavez Macias does this with all four of her characters, allowing them to make decisions based on their own desires and not under the thumb of love and a man.

Romance is a genre about women taking control of their bodies, something that female readers can share with the characters they read about, finding a type of empowerment from the connection. Romance in its contemporary form, specifically Latinx romance, subverts the patriarchal status quo, placing women outside the position of other. However, stereotypes, no matter who writes them, are complicated, and sometimes it is difficult to tell the difference between

a stereotype and a culture's values and characteristics. It depends on the context. The most important factor is whether a character can change and if they are allowed to have complex, multifaceted personalities that can't just be broken down into one characteristic.

In the current era, where the fight for more representation is happening daily, our literary industry should be leading the way in advancing that conversation and correcting the systemic issues they have long been part of. I don't think that society will let the publishing industry continue to thrive in its systemic whiteness and will look toward new outlets that are advancing diverse voices and stories.

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