

5-2017

What Color Is the Threshold? An Exploration of the Materiality of Racial Descriptions in Marketing Paratext in Adult Fiction

Jordana Beh Wathey
Portland State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/eng_bookpubpaper



Part of the [Mass Communication Commons](#), and the [Publishing Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Wathey, Jordana Beh, "What Color Is the Threshold? An Exploration of the Materiality of Racial Descriptions in Marketing Paratext in Adult Fiction" (2017). *Book Publishing Final Research Paper*. 27. https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/eng_bookpubpaper/27

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Book Publishing Final Research Paper by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: pdxscholar@pdx.edu.

**What Color Is the Threshold?
An Exploration of the Materiality of Racial Descriptions in
Marketing Paratext in Adult Fiction**

Jordana Beh Wathey

Paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts in Writing: Book Publishing.
Department of English, Portland State University
Portland, Oregon
May 16, 2017

Research Question:

How are characters of color and authors of color marked as such in marketing copy?
How are publishers navigating the internal tension between 'diverse' books and racist
descriptions?

Oral Exam Committee:

Kathryn Jurgens
Per Henningsgaard
DongWon Song

The conversation in book publishing has established that the industry is remarkably, well, white. We abstractly understand that minority groups have not been represented well, if at all, in our literary history; and, I would add, most publishers including the tenor-setting Big Five, want to change this heteronormative face of the book industry. In fact, the question in all American media today is how do we make our fictional worlds better reflect our lived existence? But, as we talk about improving the inclusivity of our chosen medium, there is a conversation that is being missed as we canvas the landscape of the publishing industry: first, how are these books being marketed and sold; and second, have we considered what we're saying to the audience. This paper will not point to a silver bullet to cure the woefully monochromatic book industry, but it will ask us to pause and more carefully consider the material effects of the words we use as markings of race and ethnicity, particularly in consumer-facing language. First we will look at why we should take this measured look at marketing language, and then discuss examples where the materiality of the marketing language predisposes the audience to stereotypical racial assumptions.

The Mark of Marketing

Up to this point, the discussion of increasing the presence of characters of color and other underrepresented groups has focused on children's and young adult literature; and even at that, our focus remains on acquiring more representational work and editing with a careful and inclusive touch. Genre aside, the discussion of how to make literature more representational of our world stops at the front and back cover, leaving us to ponder the text and images inside the book. We seem to forget that at the end of the day, books are a commercial product.

The conversation about editors, agents, writers, and publishers is good and necessary, and we in the industry can pat ourselves on the backs for acquiring works with protagonists who aren't straight white men. But the moralization of when we are doing good and right work to affect change in the publishing landscape seems misplaced. We need to see ourselves represented in our media in order to feel recognized by the rest of our culture. This means that the end goal of making media more inclusive is not

just to navel gaze at our own civilized enlightenment, but to exchange that media with an audience who is historically underrepresented. It is not enough to publish a book by or about characters of color; we need to share that book with consumers. After all, books are written to be read.

In his examination of the textual history of black writing as it is marked by a white-dominated publishing industry, John Young discusses writers, editors, and publishers to unearth the power structure that dominates those relationships, and produces “images of blackness that perpetuate in implicit black-white divide between authors and readers.”¹ Though he briefly touches upon aspects of advertising that reinforces this structure, the discussion of marketing is largely ignored. I would argue that beyond editorial process, marketing is the keyholder for actually getting the book in the hands of an audience, and the real mediator between publisher and reader.

The marketing text may seem like the decoration on a well-wrought manuscript. Yet if we turn to Gerard Genette's exploration of paratext we find that it is exactly this extra-textual material that makes the work known to an audience and accessible to readers: “Thus paratext is for us the means by which a text makes a book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers, and more generally to the public.”² This paratext, then, which includes back cover descriptions and author bios among other material trappings like title, author, images, forwards, and the like, is a necessary and inescapable piece of presenting a manuscript to the eventual end goal of a readership. And notice, here, how the paratextual elements are not necessarily statements of fact, but rather work to engender an interpretation for those who encounter it. Genette goes on to say that even *factual paratext*, consisting of statements that are verifiably true, by its “mere existence makes some commentary on the text and bears on its reception.”³ Genette shows us that beyond true and false, the words we choose to use on this “threshold” of a text colors the way audience encounters the entire work in virtue of their very presence or absence, and the wealth of

¹ John K. Young, *Black Writers, White Publishers: Marketplace Politics in Twentieth-Century African American Literature*. (Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2006) 6.

² Gerard Genette, “Introduction to the Paratext,” translated by Marie Mclean, *New Literary History* 22 no. 2 (1991): 261, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/469037>.

³ *Ibid.*, 265.

connotations that accompany language. The paratext gives the audience directions on how to “read” the work; and the directions themselves are liable to layers of influence and interpretation.

Moreover, the language used in marketing paratext is important for the discussion of inclusivity in publishing because of where it lies in the author-publisher-product-reader supply chain. The marketing influence we are discussing here is direct to consumer, and the first thing an audience will see about the book. The marketing copy is often located on the outside or first pages of a book, often so as to not interrupt the text, and again we look to Genette to describe how this paratext works to bring the reader in: “Rather than a sealed frontier, we are dealing in this case with a *threshold*, or—the term Borges used about a preface—with a “vestibule” which offers to anyone and everyone the possibility of entering or of turning back.”⁴ As the welcome mat of the book, paratext, then, gives readers the opportunity to enter the book with a certain set of expectations; but also gives them the option to turn away, to put the book back down, to look for another option in our media landscape. This point just goes to reemphasize the importance of paratext in delivering a literary work to its intended audience.

To properly understand the ramifications of a book's marketing as it affects the audience reception and perception of that work, we must first look at the materiality of its text. A book, regardless of its electronic or print nature, is subject to the laws and problems of language. A close examination of language will help us paint the picture of how marketing choices and audience conditioning intersect in paratext. We will then apply these principles to books in the genre of adult fiction, a huge segment of the book publishing platform that has shockingly seen little to no conversation about the treatment of authors and characters of color. These principles will be examined both in terms of publisher-controlled paratext—including back cover copy, metadata, and author bios—as well as media reviews, which are less under the auspices of a publisher, but speak to the conditioning of an audience and the eventual positioning of any given book.

⁴ Ibid., 261.

Problem of Language

The issue in language that works to either undermine or bolster our efforts at literary inclusivity has two parts. First, language always already conditions a reader by its very presence or absence; the presence of identifying language will mark a character or author by their race, for better or worse. Secondly, the words we use and their placement does further work to arouse an interpretation at the same time that they may state a fact. And to investigate how word choice relates to creating an identity of race, we must first understand the way words work to include or exclude, and how the very nature of language works against our efforts to represent anything holistically.

A discussion into the philosophy of language far outstrips the scope of this paper; but let's accept for a moment a post-structuralist view of the way words come to convey meaning. Rather than embody thinginess themselves, words point toward a greater, intangible meaning that succeeds in communicating to us, the audience, in virtue of the relationships between these different signifiers. So, we employ language to tell us not just a positive fact (say, the ball is blue), we are also stating negative facts (the ball is not red, green, or purple, etc.) even if those negative relationships are not expressly stated. Thus, we can extrapolate that in the same way our identifying language always already creates a relationship of difference, an us-versus-them boundary that prescribes to which camp you belong. If our publishing landscape is so overwhelmingly white, which we can evidence through our bookshelves let alone cold hard data, the “us” is an implied white-centric understanding of literature against which any identifying marker is pitted. Even when trying to be as appropriate as possible, we run the risk of what Derrida calls a “performative contradiction”⁵ where making the utterance belies your meaning and undermines the work you are doing to be inclusive. While we may be using terms as broad and inclusionary as is possible within our current cultural moment, we are, by the virtue of their presence, already marking the person as other.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, translated by Patrick Mensah, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) 3.

As a corollary, at the same time we investigate the identity markers that we use to denote various races, genders, professions, and characteristics, I also want to problematize the way we talk about the issue in general. With a great debt owed to the #WeNeedDiverseBooks campaign, the publishing industry stood up and took notice of the very monochromatic landscape of the book world. However, as we started to talk about diverse media which *includes* persons, we easily made the language slip to start talking about those various persons as diverse. You will notice that at no point in this research do I personally refer to anything as “diverse” or the issue in general as one of “diversity.” In 2015, *New York Times Magazine* opinion writer Anna Holmes derided the trite usage of the word “diversity” as we now encounter it stating, “it has become both euphemism and cliché, a convenient shorthand that gestures at inclusivity and representation without actually taking them seriously.”⁶ Here she is discussing hiring practices and how we often try to quantify diversity (as if it's not a statement of difference but rather a benchmark that can be reached), but I think the lesson can be extrapolated to characterize the often casual way publishers talk about writers and characters of color, and the way we as publishers' efforts to create a frontlist that is representational of the whole world. Diversity is not a static state to be achieved, but rather working to make publishing an inclusive industry will take constant work and constant reassessment in order to push back against a western-centric literary norm. This serves as a framework for observing how other terms also give a nod to inclusivity while nevertheless undermining efforts to change our literary landscape.

Having moved through the theoretical set up that seemingly leads to no obvious solutions to aid in the marketing of writers or characters of color, we can now look at a handful of examples and how they, in just a few short words, speak to the larger, systemic problems in our promotion of non-white literature. We will investigate the implications of the presence versus absence, prioritization, and situation of the textual markings of identity language can hurt, help, or just decenter the efforts to make a more inclusive publishing industry.

⁶ Anna Holmes, “Has ‘Diversity’ Lost Its Meaning?” *The New York Times Magazine*, October 27 2015 https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/01/magazine/has-diversity-lost-its-meaning.html?_r=5

Presence vs. Absence

Without a doubt, the white hegemony of our literary canon deserves multiple volumes of detailed research. But more within the purview of this paper, the continued dominance of a white-centric literary history is perpetuated through assumptions of a white, male default, until told otherwise. Even when treated with the most delicate of language, the continued silence of a “norm” allows the presence of racial identifiers to designate an *other* by default. Kirkus Reviews gives us the opportunity to see this all too common situation inverted, and feel the shift of balance through an exercise of presence versus absence.

Kirkus reviews has been “an authoritative voice in book discover for 80 years.”⁷ While we know that book reviews certainly help in cutting through the noise of the thousands of titles that are published each year, there’s no guarantee they will lead to book sales, nor are do they represent paratext that lies within a publisher's control. But nevertheless, and even in an age where the internet allows everyone to have and voice an opinion, book reviews continue to act as bastions of our culture who claim (with good reason) to be an influential player in the industry conversation.

In late 2015, Kirkus made the conscious decision to mention the race of every main character in the children's and young adult books they review. I emphasize the consciousness of the decision, because, as Children's and Teen editor Vicky Smith wrote in May of 2016, “it hasn't been easy;” and it hasn't been easy because it goes in the face of “a centuries-old tradition in literature written in English, which from its inception has assumed that both audience and characters are white unless stated otherwise.”⁸ To decenter an audience assumption, Kirkus had to push back against their everyday practices and be more deliberate in their conversations about race and who exactly each book is “for”.

⁷ Home page of Kirkus reviews, accessed April 17, 2017, www.kirkusreviews.com.

⁸ Vicky Smith, “Unmaking the White Default,” *Kirkus*, May 4, 2016, https://www.kirkusreviews.com/features/unmaking-white-default/#continue_reading_post.

I want to take a moment and note that in this move, Kirkus is talking only about their reviews of children's and young adult books, and for good cause. Research shows that children who encounter more books younger in life are more likely to do well in school and be readers into adulthood.⁹ And furthermore, children are more likely to engage with stories that feature characters who look like them, with whom they connect. The result of this research is that much of our discussion around the inclusivity (or lack thereof) in literature focuses on juvenile books. But in her article, Smith makes a statement that reinforces why I believe the conversation about marketing needs to be had within the world of adult literature. Smith says “parents and caregivers of children of color want books that reflect their children, as do librarians and teachers serving children of color,”¹⁰ and importantly, it is these adults in the lives of children who have the buying power to find and purchase books featuring characters of color. It seems that if we expect adults to purchase multicultural books for children, we should also expect them to be interested in multicultural books for themselves. Or, if we can introduce the importance of more inclusive literature to an adult audience, perhaps they will be more likely to support such books for children. Regardless, adult and children’s literature is interconnected, and allows us to extrapolate lessons from one genre into another.

Later in her essay, Smith goes on to clearly articulate the pushback she and Kirkus in general have received as they begin this new venture into giving each character equal footing:

On the one hand, a child is a child is a child—race shouldn’t matter. On the other hand, I remembered working as a children’s librarian in Memphis and scouring reviews for any evidence that a book was about a black child, since my shelves were groaning with books about white kids and my young readers were almost all black. Complicating things was an insidious third hand: if I did identify the character as black, was I sending a message that might cause some *not* to buy the book? Oh, dear.

So, then, we can see this debate laid out plainly, which only goes to reinforce the necessary othering that accompanies identity language. Whether white, black, Korean, Hispanic, or what have you, naming the race of a writer or character will seemingly distance interested readers of other racial groups, while at the

⁹ Here I will defer to research done by the Cooperative Children’s Book Center, and other information compiled by the Children’s Book Center, available on their websites.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

same time trying to alert more inclusive consumers to books they can turn to for perspectives other than their own. And this tradition of like-with-like is decades old. John Young noted that even back in 1923, publisher Boni and Liveright was advertising *Cane*, by Jean Toomer, as “a book about Negroes by a Negro.”¹¹ And though it's not explicitly stated in advertisements anymore, Smith's trepidation at pigeonholing these books as black, white, Asian, etc. indicates that unspoken sentiment is still unconsciously present in the minds of marketers and consumers today.

The way Kirkus talks about characters of color is an indication of the state of book reviews and discussion. This move points out two things: first, that reviews are an important piece of paratext that sets the tone of an audience's reception of a book; and second, that presenting the race of all characters combats the white assumption but leads to a pitfall of stereotyping a book by the main character's race: a black book, a hispanic book, an immigrant story, etc. Therefore, within the discussion of presence versus absence, there is still room for marketing copy to further nuance the presentation of writers and characters of color to fight back against the trope of a single experience and a single story.

Spatiality

If any identifying language is already marking a writer or character of color, it seems we have fallen into a catch-22 of sorts where there is no path out. But working within the confines of presence versus absence, there exists a world of possibilities of how we talk about race, with varying effects.

Even when fully acknowledging the demarcating nature of language, doing everything possible to circumvent the problem, and using the most appropriate signifiers, we still affect consumer bias through the order of words. The materiality of type and linear structure of language forces a hierarchy, and even in the spaces when we use racial markers to equalize the playing field, there is already a disadvantage based on positioning and prioritization, and the very space words occupy. Giving one identifier primacy over another reinforces what we discussed above with the assumption of a “white” default.

¹¹ Young, 4.

In Viet Than Nguyen's breakout debut novel *The Sympathizer*, Grove Press introduces us to the protagonist as a “man of two minds,” before going on to racially divide him between “half-French, half-Vietnamese.”¹² ¹³ This book is posed to an American audience, and though our protagonist is not racially American, this description gives primacy to the western half of his genetic makeup, which, I would argue, reassures audience of their ability to assimilate with the story. The red cover, the clearly Vietnamese author name, and the Vietnamese sketch on the front cover will naturally lead a reader to assume this story has Vietnamese roots; but by prioritizing the French heritage of the protagonist over the his Vietnamese heritage, we seem to be giving priority to his affiliation with western culture as well.

In addition to location, we should consider the way certain words give primacy in virtue of their quantity and precision. In the metadata description for *The Leavers*, the debut novel from Lisa Ko, we are introduced to Polly, “an undocumented Chinese immigrant.”¹⁴ We go on to learn that her son has been adopted by “well-meaning white professors”¹⁵ on Amazon and the publisher's website, “a white family”¹⁶ on Powell's website. I want to take a moment and notice that neither of these racial descriptors are mentioned on the author's own website.¹⁷ But I also want to question the implications of juxtaposing a character who is not American, and furthermore not a citizen, with a family that is just *white*. Whiteness, here, becomes a metonym for legal, stable, thoroughly American, and, at least in the first description, well-educated because it is directly opposed to identifiers that go into more detail and occupy more space on the page, and in our understanding of the characters.

¹² Amazon.com listing for *The Sympathizer*, accessed April 3, 2017, https://www.amazon.com/Sympathizer-Novel-Pulitzer-Prize-Fiction/dp/0802124941/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1494431475&sr=8-1&keywords=the+sympathizer.

¹³ As a quick caveat, this description appears in the metadata available on Amazon and Barnes & Noble, and the back cover of the paperback edition. Powell's and Grove Press's own website do not reduce the protagonist's “two minds” to his racial makeup. For the point of this discussion, we will examine the book description on Amazon since it is such a giant in the bookselling world.

¹⁴ Amazon.com listing for *The Leavers*, accessed May 9, 2017, https://www.amazon.com/Leavers-Novel-Lisa-Ko/dp/1616206888/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1494431623&sr=8-1&keywords=the+leavers

¹⁵ “The Leavers: A Novel,” *Algonquin Books*, accessed May 9, 2017, <http://algonquin.com/book/the-leavers/>

¹⁶ Powells.com listing for *The Leavers*, accessed May 9, 2017, <http://www.powells.com/book/the-leavers-9781616206888/1-6>

¹⁷ “The Leavers: A Novel,” on Lisa Ko’s website, accessed May 9, 2017, <http://lisa-ko.com/theleavers/>.

These two books exemplify how juxtaposition and prioritization subtly affect how audience feels about characters, stories, and works as a whole. Even within the space of mentioning both western and non-western races, location poses another issue when using marketing copy to try and create an inclusive literary environment.

Disrupting the Canon

A large part of what we are talking about here is unsettling the long-standing, literary canon which as been, as is much of our culture, white and male. But in the desire to assimilate books by or about persons of color with what is largely deemed “literature” and perhaps give unfamiliar readers a point of entry to the work, we are at the same time disrupting a lineage of writing that has evolved within the colonizing confines of heteronormativity.

The marketing tactic of comparing a new work to an author or title with which readers are already familiar is commonplace, and helps readers quickly establish how an author's style or plot will or will not appeal to their literary sensibilities. But again, and this is an admittedly circular argument, comparing debut works to the established literary canon reaffirms a norm centered on western traditions; yet audiences best understand the literary tradition they are already familiar with. Nevertheless, it is a fruitful discussion to investigate how title comparisons disrupt or reinforce the work to publish more inclusive literature.

Dinaw Mengestu's 2014 novel *All Our Names* is positioned on the renown of the author. A past MacArthur Foundation grant recipient and named to multiple lists of authors to watch, it seems fitting to use his name as leverage to promote the novel. But Knopf chose to situate Mengestu within a tradition that does not reflect his Ethiopian heritage. Rather, the metadata tells us that he is “writing within the grand tradition of Naipul, Greene, and Achebe.”¹⁸ Now, Achebe is a name that rolls off the tongue when

¹⁸ Amazon.com listing of *All Our Names*, accessed May 9, 2017, https://www.amazon.com/All-Our-Names-Dinaw-Mengestu/dp/038534998X/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1494461083&sr=1-1&keywords=all+our+names+2014.

discussing African literature, but associating Mengestu with Graham Greene seems a statement of canonicity, of appealing to a large and assumedly white audience. In the same vein, the marketing copy for Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*, which we have previously discussed, compares the author to both Graham Greene and Saul Bellow.¹⁹ Two authors we can celebrate on their own literary merit, both of whom have comparisons to a white literary canon placed visibly into their metadata to reinforce that this book by an author of color is still appropriate for a white audience.

The Monolith of the Single Story

The above discussion exemplifies the way marketing copy can reinforce an us versus them narrative that further entrenches assumptions of the racial divide. But I want to emphasize that there is an unlimited space beyond the barrier of white and non-white; and it is only in promoting the work as a whole that we can move past reducing writers and characters to race, turning even the richest work into a black book, etc. John Young eloquently expresses this phenomenon in reference directly to work by black writers, saying:

Minority texts are edited, produced, and advertised as representing the 'particular' black experience to a 'universal,' implicitly white (although itself ethnically constructed) audience. The American publishing industry, that is, has historically inscribed a mythologized version of the 'black experience' onto all works marked by race, in much the same way that, for much of the twentieth century, American jurists ascribed an innate blackness to all bodies marked as such, even if at the invisible and seemingly unknowable level of a drop of blood.²⁰

We see that same principle at play in the first sentences of marketing copy in the above examples. By polarizing the “illegal Chinese immigrant” and the “white” adoptive parents in *The Leavers*, both mother and child are reduced down to race and the whole host of implications that accompany it. And even when discussing a mixed-race protagonist, marketing departments waffle about how to describe the “norm”: the description from Patricia Park's *Re Jane* changes from “half-Korean” in the *New York Times*²¹ to “half-

¹⁹ Amazon.com listing of *The Sympathizer*.

²⁰ Young, 4.

²¹ “Editor’s Choice,” *New York Times*, June 5, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/books/review/editors-choice.html?_r=0.

Korean half-American” on Powell's website,²² to “half-Korean half-white” on the author's own website.²³

Clearly, no one has come up with a way that feels quite right to delineate the genetic makeup of our protagonist. Maybe that's because there is no right way. Maybe that's because it doesn't matter.

Regardless, the examples above show the room for improvement and the incredible nuance involved in the materiality of the text. To end of a more hopeful note, the following examples display recent works by or about persons of color that exemplify the wholeness of the human experience and the irreducibility of a person down to their race.

Marketing a Story, Not a Race

When treated with care and consideration, marketing copy can be the first indication of the wholeness of our human experience. It combats the monolithic single story and appeals to a compassionate audience who yearns to see elements of themselves reflected in literature. And proves that a character or a writer need not look like them in order to have a story that is relatable.

The Amazon description for Mosin Hamid's new bestseller *Exit West* succeeds in so many ways. There's no mention of the characters' race; instead the descriptions focus on the universality of the central love story set amidst a violent world. And in Hamid's biography, he's not “Pakistani” but was “born in Lahore, Pakistan, and has spent about half his life there and much of the rest in London, New York, and California.”²⁴ This says both that Hamid is a writer of color, and that he is the exact same as anyone in the audience.

Brit Bennett's *The Mothers* was released to critical acclaim in October of 2016. Bennett, who writes often on issues of racial injustice, said in an interview with the New York Times that “writing

²² Powells.com listing for *Re Jane*, accessed May 9, 2017, <http://www.powells.com/book/re-jane-9780525427407/17-0>.

²³ “Re Jane,” on Patricia Park’s website, accessed May 9, 2017, <https://www.patriciapark.com/re-jane>.

²⁴ Amazon.com listing for *Exit West*, accessed May 9, 2017, https://www.amazon.com/Exit-West-Novel-Mohsin-Hamid/dp/0735212171/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1494461395&sr=1-1&keywords=exit+west.

about ordinary black people is actually extraordinary... it's absolutely its own form of advocacy.”²⁵ She goes on later in the interview lament “I’ve had people shocked that the book is not set in the South or some northern urban city, but it’s like, black people exist everywhere.” Bennett, here, is fighting against the hegemony of the single story, and beyond this paratext, the marketing copy for her book supports the same work. The cover copy in *The Mothers* mentions “contemporary black America”²⁶ and the Amazon metadata sets the story in “a contemporary black community in Southern California.”²⁷ But really what the copy does is paint a picture of some teens who grow up together and come to wonder how they ended up where they are. Their blackness, of course, affects these characters and their circumstances, but they are never reduced to their race because they’re so much more than their genes.

Finally, we turn to Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing* will be released in fall 2017. The description for this book says it draws on “Morrison and Faulkner” (notice that Morrison is listed first), and lauds Ward as “a major American writer,” with no qualifications. Most importantly, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is added to the literary canon as “a majestic new work and an essential contribution to American literature.”²⁸ Ward is celebrated for her literary merit, her story about a black family is not black history, but American literature, and she is connected to Morrison, carrying on a tradition of black, female authors that continues to push an agenda for representation and inclusivity. The description for Ward’s book does not sell her or her work short, nor does it pigeonhole it as black literature. Rather, it celebrates the unity of our literary history, and the expansiveness of the human experience.

²⁵ Alexandra Alter, “‘The Mothers,’ a Debut Novel, Is Already Creating a Stir,” *The New York Times*, October 9, 2016. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/10/books/the-mothers-brit-bennett.html?_r=0

²⁶ Brit Bennett, *The Mothers*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 2016).

²⁷ Amazon.com listing for *The Mothers*, accessed May 9, 2017, https://www.amazon.com/Mothers-Novel-Brit-Bennett/dp/0399184511/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1494461425&sr=1-1&keywords=the+mothers.

²⁸ Amazon.com listing for *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, accessed May 9, 2017, https://www.amazon.com/Sing-Unburied-Novel-Jesmyn-Ward/dp/1501126067/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1494461802&sr=1-1&keywords=sing+unburied+sing.

Examining the theoretical and somewhat subconscious effects of the racial markings of marketing language does not leave us with a clear-cut solution. In fact, there is a plurality of ways to make author and characters' race known to a reader. But, I would offer, some ways are better than others, and some methods work to heighten the connectivity between audience and object instead of reinforce assumptions of who the book is “for”.

Even as publishers are (at least performatively) concerned about heightening the inclusivity of marginalized groups in literature, we still find so many audiences clamoring for more representation of themselves. A recent *Publishers Weekly* editorial accused the U.S. publishing industry of ignoring the Latino market, missing customers that are “hungry for stories, starving for role models.”²⁹ We're missing the mark somewhere. This is not to say that we have reached a place of equilibrium or that marginalized communities should be grateful for what (little) media representation they receive, but it seems that these books still aren't getting into the hands of people yearning to see themselves and their culture accurately reflected and appreciated in our media landscape. There's work to be done, and much of it in the marketing department. In a 2015 NPR article, publicist and writer Kima Jones bemoans that writers “have the burden of feeling like a publisher doesn't know how to market them, how to talk about them, how to 'find their audience',”³⁰ a problem located specifically within the purview of marketing and publicity. Improving the state of our monochromatic publishing industry is a team effort—writer, editor, publisher, and marketer all work together and must each have a nuanced idea for how to connect a book with an audience, and how to stop treating that audience like a monolith. This will take patience and hard work, but with a closer examination of the effects of the language used to indicate race, literature can better promote empathy and understanding, and allow audiences to enter fictional worlds that maybe don't look like their own.

²⁹ Nelson A. Denis, “Dear Publishers: Latinos Read Books, Too,” *Publishers Weekly*, January 20, 2017, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/columns-and-blogs/soapbox/article/72557-dear-publishers-latinos-read-books-too.html>.

³⁰ Jean Ho, “Diversity In Book Publishing Isn't Just About Writers—Marketing Matters, Too.” *NPR*, August 9, 2016. <http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2016/08/09/483875698/diversity-in-book-publishing-isnt-just-about-writers-marketing-matters-too>.

Works Cited

- Alter, Alexandra. “‘The Mothers,’ a Debut Novel, Is Already Creating a Stir.” *New York Times*, October 9, 2016. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/10/books/the-mothers-brit-bennett.html?_r=0
- Amazon.com listing of *All Our Names*, accessed May 9, 2017, https://www.amazon.com/All-Our-Names-Dinaw-Mengestu/dp/038534998X/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1494461083&sr=1-1&keywords=all+our+names+2014.
- Amazon.com listing for *Exit West*, accessed May 9, 2017, https://www.amazon.com/Exit-West-Novel-Mohsin-Hamid/dp/0735212171/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1494461395&sr=1-1&keywords=exit+west.
- Amazon.com listing for *The Leavers*, accessed May 9, 2017, https://www.amazon.com/Leavers-Novel-Lisa-Ko/dp/1616206888/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1494431623&sr=8-1&keywords=the+leavers
- Amazon.com listing for *The Mothers*, accessed May 9, 2017, https://www.amazon.com/Mothers-Novel-Brit-Bennett/dp/0399184511/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1494461425&sr=1-1&keywords=the+mothers.
- Amazon.com listing for *The Sympathizer*, accessed April 3, 2017, https://www.amazon.com/Sympathizer-Novel-Pulitzer-Prize-Fiction/dp/0802124941/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1494431475&sr=8-1&keywords=the+sympathizer.
- Bennett, Brit. *The Mothers*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2016.
- Denis, Nelson A. “Dear Publishers: Latinos Read Books, Too.” *Publishers Weekly*, January 20, 2017, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/columns-and-blogs/soapbox/article/72557-dear-publishers-latinos-read-books-too.html>.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*. Translated by Patrick Mensah. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.
- “Editor’s Choice.” *New York Times*, June 5, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/books/review/editors-choice.html?_r=0.
- Genette, Gerard. “Introduction to the Paratext.” Translated by Marie Mclean. *New Literary History* 22 no. 2 (1991): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/469037>.
- Ho, Jean. “Diversity In Book Publishing Isn’t Just About Writers—Marketing Matters, Too.” *NPR*, August 9, 2016. <http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2016/08/09/483875698/diversity-in-book-publishing-isnt-just-about-writers-marketing-matters-too>.
- Holmes, Anna. “Has ‘Diversity’ Lost Its Meaning?” *New York Times Magazine*, October 27, 2015. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/01/magazine/has-diversity-lost-its-meaning.html?_r=.
- Kirkus Reviews home page. Accessed April 17, 2017, www.kirkusreviews.com.
- Ko, Lisa. “The Leavers: A Novel,” on Lisa Ko’s website. Accessed May 9, 2017, <http://lisa-ko.com/theleavers/>.

Park, Patricia. "Re Jane," on Patricia Park's website. Accessed May 9, 2017.
<https://www.patriciapark.com/re-jane>.

Powells.com listing for *Re Jane*, accessed May 9, 2017, <http://www.powells.com/book/re-jane-9780525427407/17-0>.

Powells.com listing for *The Leavers*, accessed May 9, 2017, <http://www.powells.com/book/the-leavers-9781616206888/1-6>

Smith, Vicky. "Unmaking the White Default." *Kirkus*, May 4, 2016.
https://www.kirkusreviews.com/features/unmaking-white-default/#continue_reading_post.

"The Leavers: A Novel," *Algonquin Books*. Accessed May 9, 2017,
<http://algonquin.com/book/the-leavers/>.

Young, John K. *Black Writers, White Publishers: Marketplace Politics in Twentieth-Century African American Literature*. Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2006.