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Despite Controversy, #OwnVoices is Here to Make a Difference

A staggering 95% of books published by major U.S. publishing houses over the past 60 years have been written by white authors (So and Wezerek). This fact alone makes it clear that publishing has a diversity problem. Recently, though, there has been a push for increased representation of minority voices. In April 2014, the nonprofit We Need Diverse Books began with a Twitter hashtag and sparked a conversation about the lack of diverse stories being published in children's literature (Templeton). But there was still a problem—We Need Diverse Books focused on increasing diversity of stories being told, not the diversity of those writing and publishing those stories.

This is where Corinne Duyvis comes in. In September 2015, the middle-grade author and co-founder of the Diversity in Kidlit blog suggested the hashtag “#OwnVoices” on her Twitter as a way to recommend books by diverse authors that feature characters who share the author's identity (or identities). The hashtag quickly gained traction and became a movement to push for and promote these authors and books as well as push for increased diversity in the publishing industry (Kirch). While the movement is often focused on children's and young adult literature, it has sparked conversations in adult circles as well (Alter, “In an Era”).

In a 2020 interview, Duyvis said, “I never predicted the impact this hashtag would have on the publishing industry” (Kirch). The significance truly is unprecedented—#OwnVoices is now “an integral part of the publishing lexicon: it's used in deal announcements, manuscript

wishlists, query pitches, trade reviews, thinkpiece headlines, and countless important conversations about representation of marginalized groups in different media” (Kirch).

The popularity of the #OwnVoices movement has made it clear that readers want better representation (seen in well-written and authentic portrayals of marginalized characters and cultures) and increased diversity across the publishing industry. Critics of the movement agree with the goal of raising marginalized voices but not the execution; many argue the push for #OwnVoices books is harming authors by gatekeeping who can tell certain stories and lashing out at writers deemed “not #OwnVoices enough.” Though this negative may hold true in some instances, the movement overall has had a positive and empowering impact on the industry that can be seen in publishers and readers reckoning with the importance of diversity and representation, a new focus on publishing diverse writers, and #OwnVoices books seeing great success.

1. The History of Representation in Publishing and the Beginning of #OwnVoices

When looking at representation in publishing, it is important to first look at the people who make up the industry. Lee & Low Books’ 2019 survey found that across all departments, people working in publishing are 76% non-Hispanic white, 74% cisgender women, 81% heterosexual, and 89% non-disabled. This shows a slight increase in diversity from the 2015 numbers, but only by a few percentage points in each category. Clearly, the industry does not reflect the same diversity seen across the country, where the 2019 U.S. Census estimates 60.1% of people are non-Hispanic white.

This lack of diversity can be partly explained by the low entry-level salaries in publishing. The Big 5 American publishing companies are all located in New York City, where

“conservative estimates generally say you need an annual salary of about \$40,000 before taxes to get by,” yet unpaid internships are a common way to break into the industry and entry-level editorial assistants only make around \$30,000 per year (Grady). The only people who can afford these jobs tend to be “those who are carrying little student debt and who can rely on their parents to supplement their salaries as necessary. And mostly, those people tend to be white” (Grady).

Unfortunately, this lack of diversity in the industry means marginalized voices are not lifted up. The *New York Times* article “Just How White Is the Book Industry?” explored some of the impacts a lack of editorial diversity can have on the publication of diverse stories. Amistad Editorial Director Tracy Sherrod told journalists Richard Jean So and Gus Wezerek that there is a clear “correlation between the number of people of color who work in publishing and the number of books that are published by authors of color.” The journalists found this unfortunate truth in their data—during Black editor Tomi Morrison’s career from 1967-1983 at Penguin Random House, 3.3% of books published were by Black authors. In the six years after her departure, that percentage reduced to just 0.4% (So and Wezerek).

This is disheartening in the knowledge that the 2019 survey found 85% of the people editing and acquiring books are non-Hispanic white (Lee & Low Books). It is even more disheartening to learn that, in interviews with 113 professionals across the publishing industry, a common reasoning against the publication of more diverse writers was a fear of “a lower quality of books being published” (Saha and van Lente 16). This stems from the fear of tokenism, which is “when writers of color are published in order to tick a ‘diversity’ box” as well as worries that their “core, white, middle-class audience will [not] see value in” certain books written by writers of color (16).

Michael Strother, a former editor at Simon & Schuster, said he had to fight for his team to bid on Black author Angie Thomas's #OwnVoices novel *The Hate U Give* despite its hot-topic plot and good writing. Strother noted that one of his white colleagues asked, "Do we need Angie Thomas if we have Jason Reynolds?" (So and Wezerek). This was a flawed question for many reasons, but mainly because Reynolds and Thomas, while both being Black YA authors, write very different stories. While this question could have come up about two white writers, Thomas's race was an issue—the space for writers of color in the industry is so small that the thought of adding another to the mix can make publishers hesitate. This attitude makes sense when looking at another big problem in the industry: the audience it caters to.

Large publishers in the United States and the United Kingdom focus on an audience that is white and middle-class (Saha and van Lente 35). This leads writers of color and their books to be treated differently than their white counterparts (2). Often, they are urged to alter their manuscripts to better appeal to a white audience, like how Pakistani author Moni Mohsin was told to change the Urdu words she included in her novel to be "more palatable to an English-speaking audience" (Irfan). Further, a common practice to predict sales of a prospective book is to compare it to similar ones, which gets in the way of publishing a variety of stories and authors because it leads publishers to "privilege books that repeat certain patterns of established authors, making it harder for 'new voices'" (Saha and van Lente 3). Due to this, publishing books by writers of color can be seen as "a particularly dangerous investment, which [...] affects not only their acquisition but how they are promoted and sold" (12).

With this audience focus comes a lack of representation in books. Rudine Sims Bishop explained the importance of representation best by describing books as windows that can act as sliding glass doors (that readers can "walk through in imagination to become part of whatever

world has been created or recreated by the author”) or mirrors (that readers can see reflections of themselves and their personal experiences in). Notably, she writes, “When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part.” Books featuring accurate and respectful representation are important to serve as mirrors in this way, but Bishop also notes that diverse books can serve as sliding glass doors for children in majority groups to better understand the world and their connections to people both similar and different to them.

Lack of representation is not the only issue, though. It also matters who is telling these stories. It is all too easy for majority authors to unknowingly perpetuate harmful tropes and representations in their work. Take Jeanine Cummins’s 2020 novel *American Dirt*, for example. After being chosen for Oprah’s Book Club, many began talking about the book’s stereotype-filled representation of a Mexican mother and son traveling to the U.S. border. Cummins is white and many people of color who read this book called it “trauma porn,” criticized its one-dimensional characters, and noted the way it wrongfully depicts the U.S. “as a safe haven for migrants” (Grady).

For more broad examples, harmful tropes for LGBTQ+ characters include queer characters being killed purely for shock value (aptly known as “Bury Your Gays”), flamboyant gay male characters whose only personality traits are being sassy and fashionable, bisexual characters who are especially promiscuous, and transgender characters who are confused or treated like “freaks” by the narrative (Lo, “Avoiding LGBTQ Stereotypes”).

Regarding Asian American characters, author William Wong pointed out they are often portrayed as either “a ‘model minority’ who excels in academics and business or bad guys like

gangsters, influence-peddling political contributors, and spies for China” (qtd. by Shropshire and Tytler 160). Black men are often portrayed as “violent and brutish” and Black women are often portrayed as “dominant [and] lazy,” playing the role of “the Welfare Mother” (Green). While these representations are harmful on their own, they also end up leaving “little space for the greater portion of complex, well-rounded, realistic portrayals which could exist if given the chance” (Shropshire and Tytler 160).

That is not to say all stories written about diverse characters by non-diverse authors are bad, though. Some well-received examples include the 2016 novels *Underground Airlines* by Ben Winters and *The Cosmopolitans* by Sarah Schulman, both featuring Black protagonists written by white authors (Shapiro). The main problem is that these authors are often heralded for their efforts while minority authors are cast to the side (if they get published at all). Even if *American Dirt* had avoided harmful tropes and stereotypes, it begs the question: of all the fiction published about Mexican migration, why was this novel the one bought for a seven-figure advance and so heavily advertised (Grady)? Why does this not happen as much with minority authors?

This leads us to the importance of #OwnVoices. Stories of marginalized characters by writers of the same identity (or identities) often have “an extra degree of nuance and authority that comes with writing from lived experience” (Whaley). It is easy for authors writing outside of their identities to make mistakes or not represent the character’s identity as well as they could have. Jennifer Weiner, author of the 2004 novel *Little Earthquakes*, expressed in 2019 that she could have written her main Black woman character more accurately, saying that she likely just “imagined a privileged white woman and poured this [B]lack woman inside of her” (qtd. by Shapiro). N. K. Jemisin, author of the bestselling *The Broken Earth Trilogy*, similarly said an

asexual character in her 2012 novel *The Killing Moon* was not represented as well as he could have been (qtd. by Shapiro). By no means do all writers writing outside of their identity make these kinds of mistakes, and these mistakes do not mean a book is inherently “bad,” but it is still important to ensure marginalized writers are able to tell their own stories, too. Further, #OwnVoices books are necessary both for readers seeking nuanced representation of their own identities and for readers wanting to read about characters with different perspectives and identities than their own.

2. The Movement’s Impact – Empowering Diverse Authors, Publishers Seeking Books

One of the movement’s largest impacts has been creating a demand for these kinds of stories. Some publishers specifically request #OwnVoices manuscripts and many are heavily publicized as being #OwnVoices, with the connotation that the representation in the book will be authentic, upon release. There are lists on large booksellers’ websites, book review blogs, and other places across the internet devoted to the promotion of new #OwnVoices books. This is a game-changer, as these kinds of books were not given this type of attention before the movement began.

As a natural extension of the larger social movement around whose voices are and aren’t heard in the U.S., the movement’s focus on the children’s and young adult literary sphere makes sense. Children and teenagers naturally want to see characters like them in stories, whether that be in television shows, films, books, or other story-driven media. They want to see themselves on book covers and read about characters like them being superheroes and saving the world, having a meet-cute and falling in love, and being characters who are not defined by a single trait or stereotype. When it was common to hear the phrase, “You can’t put a black girl on the cover, it won’t sell,” in meetings in 2008 when former publishing professional Preeti Chhibber began

working in the industry, these books were something hard for young readers of color to come by (Templeton). The founder of the movement herself was frustrated with the lack of good disability representation and queer representation in books, which led to her creating the hashtag (Kirch).

Both before #OwnVoices and into today, many marginalized writers turn to self-publication upon being “shut out of traditional publishing venues” (N. K. Jemisin paraphrased by Shropshire and Tytler 160). While it can be rewarding to simply have a book out in the world for people to read, this path is not as lucrative or successful as traditional publishing. This was shown in a 2012 report that found about half of the self-published authors surveyed made less than \$500 in a year (Flood). #OwnVoices has put a new pressure on publishers to find and publish marginalized authors since 2015, which has likely led many that would have turned to self-publication find success in traditional publishing. Additionally, every marginalized writer that is published traditionally both makes the industry slightly more diverse and leads their books to reach a wider audience.

With the resounding popularity of #OwnVoices and the push for more diverse authors and stories, marginalized writers are seeing positive changes in the publishing industry. There is still a long way to go, but many great resources for marginalized writers have been created since #OwnVoices began in 2015. An initiative called #DVPit (short for Diverse Voices Pitch) started in 2016 as an annual event for marginalized writers and illustrators to share their story pitches and be connected with agents. This has been incredibly successful, with over 50 books in the last five years having now been published through these pitch events (“Book Successes”).

Also, several new publisher imprints were created in just the year 2020 dedicated to publishing diverse authors, such as Legacy Lit by Hachette Book Group (So and Wezerek) and

Joy Revolution by Random House Children's Books (Kantor). These imprints are important not only because they focus on publishing marginalized authors today but because they will continue to publish them in the future. Krishan Trotman, the Black woman who will be leading Legacy Lit, said it is common to see a "huge boom of books—all of a sudden Black women are hot or urban fiction is hot—and then there will be a backslide" and that is why these imprints are so crucial to diversifying the industry (qtd. by So and Wezerek).

This backslide was notably seen in the wake of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement—the publishing industry had "proudly announced that it had seen the error of its ways [of the lack of diverse stories being published] and fully intended to correct the situation" (Myers). Then, in a retrospective 1986 article, author Walter Dean Myers expressed frustration at the lack of follow-through. He wrote, "It's clear to me that if any race, any religious or social group, elects to place its cultural needs in the hands of the profit makers then it had better be prepared for the inevitable disappointments." As a publishing company, or any socially-criticized business for that matter, it is easy to claim a new focus on diversity while continuing to cater to the same white audience because it is a tried-and-true way to make a profit. Businesses tend to be resistant to change unless their profit is jeopardized, and big publishing followed suit.

As a result of the movement sparking a conversation in publishing spheres and leading many in the industry to request #OwnVoices manuscripts, there have been many successful #OwnVoices books published since the movement began. Angie Thomas's 2016 novel *The Hate U Give* has spent over 200 weeks on the New York Times Best Seller list for Young Adult Hardcover as of May 2021, was adapted into a film in 2018, and has been lauded by reviewers for its deeply empathic and powerful portrayal of a Black teenage girl who witnesses the death of her friend at the hands of a police officer (Kirkus Reviews). Tomi Adeyemi's 2018 fantasy novel

Children of Blood of Bone, the first of a trilogy that features a majority Black cast in a world inspired by African mythology, similarly became an immediate bestseller and was optioned for a film before it even released (Barbiero). In 2020, Aiden Thomas's novel *Cemetery Boys*, following a Mexican teenage gay transgender boy as he navigates his powers to speak to ghosts, made history as the first fiction book with a trans character written by a trans author to make it onto the New York Times Best Seller list (Vargas). Even more stunning—all three of these examples are debuts.

Duyvis has noticed the impact of the movement with her own books as well. In a 2020 interview, she said, “When my sci-fi YA novel *On the Edge of Gone* was released in 2016, it featured only the third explicitly autistic lead written by an openly autistic author. [...] Now, in 2020, there are over 20 such titles.” When her queer debut novel *Otherbound* released in 2014, “queer YA novels were still rare enough that you could easily keep track—whereas today alone, there are seven queer YA books released, most by openly queer authors” (qtd. by Kirch).

In line with Duyvis's observations, there has been a noticeable increase in the racial and ethnic diversity of children's and YA authors being published in recent years. In 2011, University of Wisconsin-Madison's Cooperative Children's Book Center found just 6.4% of children's and YA books published that year were by writers of color. In 2015, that rose to 10.7%, and in 2019, it rose to 24.2%. While the percentage was slowly increasing before the #OwnVoices movement began in 2015 (with a 1.1% average yearly increase from 2011-2015), it largely increased in the years following (with a 3.4% average yearly increase from 2015-2019). This increase was likely the result of several factors, including We Need Diverse Books being established in 2014, but #OwnVoices making headlines and pushing for increased diversity of authors likely played an important part.

There is no doubt that these successes and these changes in the industry have impacted marginalized writers and encouraged them to seek publication. By having historically been “othered” by publishers, seeing this promotion and celebration of #OwnVoices books has shown another side to the typically white-focused industry. Further, these conversations could be impacting internal employees too, as 2019’s publishing “interns [were] significantly more diverse than the industry as a whole,” with 49% identifying as people of color, 49% identifying as part of the LGBTQ+ community, and 22% identifying as having a disability (Lee & Low Books). Hopefully, this push for diverse books, authors, and publishing employees will stop those interns from leaving the industry due to feeling “othered” or unsupported; it definitely has the potential to.

3. Where is the Line Drawn? Limitations and Cancel Culture

As with any movement to change an industry, there are potential negative effects. Critics often describe #OwnVoices as limiting because it can pigeonhole minority authors into only writing about characters who share their exact identity (or identities). In a Refinery29 article about this issue, writer Kat Rosenfield shared the story of an anonymous author with a “recognizably ethnic surname” that received a rejection for his book centered on a white female protagonist with the note, “If you happen to write another book with a male protagonist, preferably #OwnVoices... I would be glad to read it.” Clearly, this kind of direction about what an author can and cannot write about if they want to be published is an issue—while this author’s book could have been rejected for a multitude of reasons, the note left him so frustrated with the industry that he scrapped his manuscript entirely (Rosenfield).

That is a specific example, but it is not a stretch to imagine this happening to other marginalized authors who this movement is trying to support. Some go so far to say that this movement borders on censorship. In a similar vein, Lionel Shriver wrote in a 2016 *New York Times* op-ed, “If we have permission to write only about our own personal experience, there is no fiction, but only memoir” (qtd. by Grady). It is easy to see why the thought of this would be troubling.

Another negative that has been attributed to this movement is the “cancel culture” mostly run by Twitter users pertaining to diverse books deemed not “#OwnVoices enough.” The two most prominent examples of this are Kosoko Jackson’s cancelled 2019 novel *A Place for Wolves* and Amélie Wen Zhao’s delayed 2019 novel *Blood Heir*. Jackson’s novel followed a gay and Black main character (like himself) in 1990s Kosovo during the brutal Kosovo War. Before being released to the public, his book was accused of “appropriating a setting [...] that he wasn’t qualified or entitled to write about” as someone not related at all to Kosovo or its people and was heavily criticized for setting “a romance against the backdrop of genocide” (Templeton). Due to this reaction, Jackson chose to pull his book less than a month before its scheduled publication and after 55,000 copies had been printed (Templeton). Similarly, a couple advance readers of Wen Zhao’s *Blood Heir* said the book’s “depiction of slavery was racially insensitive” and it immediately became a trending topic, with many who had not read the book calling for its cancellation. Wen Zhao also chose to cancel her book’s release, though she ultimately decided to move forward with publication after some revisions (Alter, “She Pulled Her Debut”).

Social media outrage can be intense and unrelenting in this new age, with Twitter making it easier than ever for anyone to publicly call out a book, author, or publisher (Saha and van Lente 34). In a 2017 *Vulture* article titled “The Toxic Drama on YA Twitter,” writer Kat

Rosenfield expressed that Twitter is “a platform where outrage travels quickly and often out of context,” continuing to say that these successful cancellations of problematic books “have emboldened people to feel like initiating some of these complaints on Twitter can lead to some concrete action” (paraphrased by Alter, “She Pulled Her Debut”). Further, this social media backlash has led some authors to feel forced to reveal private information about themselves to prove their book is #OwnVoices and/or prove that they have a right to tell a specific story (Rosenfield). This was notably seen when YA author Becky Albertalli came out as bisexual in an emotional 2020 essay. She is best known as the author of her successful 2015 debut *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* and its blockbuster 2018 film, *Love, Simon*, both of which follow a gay teenage boy who falls in love and navigates coming out. Albertalli wrote, “I have been scrutinized, subtweeted, mocked, lectured, and invalidated just about every single day for years, and I’m exhausted,” mentioning how she was often seen as “a straight woman writing shitty queer books for the straights, profiting off of communities [she] had no connection to.” She explained her inspiration to write *Simon* was from both her high school experiences and her ten years of volunteer work with LGBTQ+ youth, and she only began to question her identity when working on *Simon*’s sequel following the love story between two teenage girls (which she was also criticized for writing as a “straight” woman). At the end of her emotional piece, Albertalli asked for everyone to “be a bit more careful when we engage in queer Ownvoices discourse” and “make space for those of us who are still discovering themselves.”

This movement’s goal is to help diverse authors and promote authentic diverse stories, but where is the line drawn between helping and hurting? How can proponents of the #OwnVoices movement avoid gatekeeping the art form they love?

There is no doubt that the intense scrutiny and forced outing of authors such as Albertalli is a negative side effect of how the #OwnVoices movement has been used on Twitter, but the movement's popularity on social media has positives, too. In an article about the issue, journalist Alexandra Alter wrote that some view "the discussion about cultural appropriation in fiction as a necessary, if painful, step toward addressing the lack of diversity in publishing" ("She Pulled Her Debut"). People have to talk about this issue in order for change to happen; there are bound to be some negative effects and people who go too far, but the discussion around diversity and whose voices should be heard is important. It is also important to note that the outrage around books like *American Dirt* and *A Place for Wolves* is not just because those specific authors wrote something potentially harmful to marginalized communities, but because of "ongoing frustration with [the publishing] industry" that continues to publish white-washed books and books with harmful and/or offensive representation (Templeton). A lot of the outrage and frustration comes from people questioning, "How did this book get so far into publication without [anyone] spotting the issues? Why did an agent decide to represent this book? How did an editor make it through edits? Marketers and salespeople through creating the plans?" (Chhibber qtd. by Templeton).

In other words, this outcry over books with harmful portrayals can seem like a personal attack on their authors, but it is the industry that is at fault. These controversies will likely not stop until publishing makes a true change—and that is where Twitter and other social media is significant.

Twitter is where #OwnVoices began and is where it continues to be discussed six years later. This use of social media may be crucial in "sustain[ing] change this time" after decades of publishing claiming to work on increasing diversity just to push it to the side and make no

meaningful or lasting change (Templeton). With “many of the changes publishers make com[ing] in response to criticism or outside pushes,” such as Flatiron Books hiring an editor-at-large to focus on acquiring books by writers of color after publishing the controversial *American Dirt*, the persistence of the #OwnVoices movement on social media is important (Maher).

It is also worth noting that Twitter has users that push things too far and be unnecessarily cruel across all topics and movements; the YA side of Twitter has no more “bad-faith voices” than other sides of Twitter. Further, it is not Twitter users and other critics who have the power to cancel or delay books—it is the authors and the publishers who make the decision, and publishers often “don’t *want* to pull books that close to pub date; for one thing, it’s lost money, and publishing is a business” (Templeton). In other words, #OwnVoices has not created a hostile environment of censorship and cancelled books. Instead, it has inspired an ongoing conversation about the importance of marginalized voices being heard and amplified as well as a way for publishers to get direct feedback when a book is published with historically harmful representation.

4. #OwnVoices as the Beginning of a Chilling Effect or of True Change in Publishing?

Another potential negative to the movement is how it could lead majority writers to shy away from including diverse characters in their books out of fear of writing something inaccurate or offensive. This is not at all what the #OwnVoices movement wants, but the heavy policing of books—especially in the young adult realm, as seen in the examples above—can be intimidating. An anonymous author quoted in Rosenfield’s article “What is #OwnVoices Doing to Our Books?” put it well when they said, “[Readers] tantalize us with the possibility that if we just do enough research, if we hire enough sensitivity readers, if we go to enough diversity classes, it’ll

be enough. But it'll never be enough." Some even say this movement has led to censorship in the form of a "chilling effect," which, in this context, means majority authors may be self-censoring what they write to avoid backlash (Alter, "She Pulled Her Debut").

People also criticize the increased use of sensitivity readers following the rise of #OwnVoices and book cancellations. Sensitivity readers are typically a part of a marginalized group an author writes about and focus on "guarding against potentially offensive portrayals of minority groups" as well as add an extra layer of quality control during the editing process (Alter, "In an Era"). Sensitivity readers are not new to the industry, but there has been a clear increase in the wake of social media-led controversies around "racist, homophobic or otherwise culturally tone-deaf" books (Alter, "In an Era"). Some worry this reliance "could lead to books that tiptoe around difficult topics" and claim classic narratives such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* could have easily been completely altered by the sensitivity readers of today (Alter, "In an Era").

However, this increase in sensitivity reading is important to ensure books published today are not regurgitating the same damaging stereotypes and tropes that have historically been published. Dhonielle Clayton, a sensitivity reader, former librarian, and YA author, said, "It's a craft issue; it's not about censorship" (Alter, "In an Era"). These readers are not dissuading authors from writing about hard-hitting topics related to marginalized groups; they are simply meant to help the author (and future readers) from misrepresentation (Alter, "In an Era").

In all this discourse, it is important to clarify the purpose of #OwnVoices and its mission. Duyvis is outspoken about how this hashtag "should be a tool, not a blunt weapon" (qtd. by Kirch). In other words, #OwnVoices is meant to promote the publication of diverse stories written by diverse authors, not meant to attack authors for "not being #OwnVoices enough" or

for stopping the publication of a book by a white person about a character of color. The context of this movement is crucial, and writer Kayla Whaley put it well when she wrote, “Given the history of marginalized groups being spoken about, and for, in all areas of society, it’s especially important that we don’t ignore diverse voices by focusing only on diverse content.”

It is important for authors to write a diverse cast of characters—#OwnVoices is not saying straight white people should never write Black or gay characters, it is just saying that minority authors should be given the opportunity to tell their own stories. #OwnVoices is not saying to stop publishing non-#OwnVoices books, just that publishers should ensure they are publishing a range of authors and not just the stories written by white people for white people (such as *American Dirt*’s depiction of Mexican immigrants through an obviously white and privileged lens or books that perpetuate the “white savior” narrative).

Further, writers *should* write characters they do not share an identity with; a diverse cast often makes for a richer story.

See V. E. Schwab’s 2020 novel *The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue*, for example. This follows the immortal life of white main character Addie LaRue from 1700s France to modern-day New York after being cursed to never be remembered. Popular YouTuber and book reviewer Cindy Pham brought up the obvious lack of nonwhite characters in this 448-page book. Addie travels throughout Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States and comes across multiple white historic figures, but never any people of color. “When a story is focused on the legacy [of] people who are forgotten about throughout history, it seems almost ridiculous to totally leave out people of color and be completely fixated on this white woman who, systematically speaking, plays a large role in erasing those people of color,” Pham said in the video. While she clarifies that not every book needs a diverse cast to be good, the lack of

diversity in this book stands out based on its plot and its theme. She said this book could have been better “if Addie had met women of color that were forgotten about in history,” as it would both parallel her curse and strengthen the book’s message. It cannot be said for sure that this book would have had a richer story if it featured more diverse characters, but Pham makes good points about how characters of color could have easily added to the narrative.

Another argument against #OwnVoices and other similar pushes for diversity is that the progress shown in the industry so far is just performative; publishers are just wanting more diverse writers “out of fear or embarrassment of not being seen as inclusive” rather than trying to “solv[e] structural inequalities” in the industry (Saha and van Lente 34). That argument begs the question: can performativity lead to real structural change? Even if the increased requests for marginalized writers’ stories, the increased diversity of writers being published, the new publisher imprints created to focus on diverse books, and more women of color being named to leadership and executive positions (Alter and Harris) are results of performative diversity, these are stepping stones for the possibility of much larger change in the future.

5. Conclusion: The Positives Outweigh the Negatives

Despite some criticism, the quick rise and enduring popularity of #OwnVoices has had an overall positive and empowering impact on the publishing industry. Whether writer, editor, publisher, or reader, the renewed focus on diversity and raising the voices that have historically been ignored is important to create lasting change.

Moving forward, the publishing industry needs to focus on the structural issues within—publishers need to cater to an audience that reflects the diversity of American readers, more people of color need to be hired and supported, salaries need to increase, and unpaid internships

need to end. The #OwnVoices movement has been (and will likely continue to be) an important way to keep the literature community talking about what makes good representation and the importance of having a diverse industry that caters to a diverse audience.

All in all, #OwnVoices has incited long-lasting conversation, led to publishers specifically requesting diverse stories from marginalized authors, and been a part of the increase of children's and YA writers of color being published. None of the arguments against this movement outweigh the positive impacts this hashtag has had. While there is still so much to be done before the industry is as diverse as its audience, it is already a very different landscape than just ten years ago. As seen here, #OwnVoices could very possibly be the push that leads to lasting change.

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