UNIVERSIDADE CATÓLICA PORTUGUESA

FICTION WRITING AMIDST TODAY'S DEMAND FOR REPRESENTATION: "AUTHENTICITY" IN YOUNG ADULT (YA) LITERATURE

Dissertation to Universidade Católica Portuguesa to obtain a Master's Degree in Culture Studies – Literary Cultures

By

Maria Leonor Quintela Durão Syder Terenas

Universidade Católica Portuguesa – Faculdade de Ciências Humanas

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Abstract

In the last decade, issues of representation have been increasingly brought to the surface across all areas, including literary fiction. In the United States and then across the world, young adult (YA) literature has opened up possibilities for experimentation when it comes to inclusivity in fiction. Subsequently, writers have been trying to keep up with the diversity needs while being faithful to their themes as well as their craft. These attempts at inclusion, deemed more or less effective and/or respectful, are highly criticized by an attentive (online) audience which not only demands this representation but also often scrutinizes the work in an attempt to further examine its authenticity. Although, as this research aims to show, when it comes to the representation of identities, diverse books matter, movements such as #OwnVoices have been taking this concept beyond fiction/narrative itself – advocating for the need of the writer's profile to match the story they are depicting, which might be an extreme if not unhelpful solution. This dissertation, taking the case of the YA novel which has undoubtedly been at the center of and even encouraged these discussions, therefore explores how the issue of authenticity in literature, if taken to the extreme, may end up being detrimental not only to the cause itself but also to the very concept of fiction. In this sense, this dissertation aims to frame these complex discussions in the context which has made them possible: our polarized, hyper-mediated world, thus exploring how, despite seemingly straightforward, the nature of these debates may lie elsewhere than in insider/outsider distinctions or, even, in the concept (and ethics) of authenticity.

Keywords: fiction, young adult, representation, identity, authenticity

Resumo

Na última década, as questões de representatividade têm sido cada vez mais discutidas em todas as áreas, incluindo na ficção literária. Nos Estados Unidos e em todo o mundo, a literatura young adult (YA) ("jovem adulto") abriu possibilidades de experimentação relativas à questão da inclusividade na ficção. Neste sentido, os escritores têm tentado acompanhar as necessidades de diversidade mantendo-se fiéis aos seus temas e ao seu trabalho. Estas tentativas de inclusão, consideradas mais ou menos eficazes/respeitosas, são muito criticadas por um público atento que não só exige esta representação, como também examina com atenção as obras com que contacta na tentativa de "medir" a sua autenticidade. Embora esta pesquisa procure mostrar que, quando se trata de identidade, livros inclusivos (a nível da identidade que representam) são importantes, movimentos como o #OwnVoices têm levado este conceito para além da ficção/narrativa em si – defendendo a necessidade de o perfil do escritor corresponder à história que retrata, o que pode ser uma solução extrema, senão contraproducente. Esta dissertação, tomando o caso do romance young adult que, sem dúvida, tem encorajado e estado no centro destas discussões, explora como a questão da autenticidade na literatura, se levada ao extremo, pode acabar por ser prejudicial não só para a causa em si, mas também para o próprio conceito de ficção. Neste sentido, pretende-se situar estes debates complexos no contexto que possibilitou o seu surgimento: o mundo polarizado e hipermediatizado em que vivemos. Sugere-se que tais discussões vão além das distinções entre "insider" e "outsider" ou do conceito (e ética) de autenticidade, sendo moldadas por questões mais profundas relativas ao cenário atual.

Palavras-chave: ficção, young adult, representatividade, identidade, autenticidade

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Introduction

The American genre of the young adult (YA) novel, aimed at a readership from 12 to 18 years old, has known an exponential increase in popularity throughout the 2010s, having reinvented itself several times since its origins in the 1960s to accommodate new values and preferences. Especially attentive to the teenage audience they target, YA authors feel responsible and intend to fairly represent American teenagers and their (diverse) experiences. Extremely aware of the didactic role of the genre, they are careful with their depiction of minority or discriminated against identities, and this even when the narrative does not intend to be realistic (e.g., YA sci-fi; YA fantasy).

Connected through the internet, YA authors (voluntarily) involve their audience in the (re-) definition of the genre, and this almost directly, seriously taking into consideration the opinions, wishes, and criticism expressed online. Instead of understanding reviews as an expected follow-up to a book's publication, YA readers are sometimes present in the conception of the book itself, but, most importantly: in the attribution of what they deem to be its (closed, final) meanings, causing books to be re-thought, re-released, or even cancelled. In a movement deeply linked to the genre, called #OwnVoices, an increasing number of books (first YA, but not only) have been challenged on grounds of the misrepresentation of certain identities, appealing for author accountability, placing new limits on what is or not "acceptable" to be written about, on who can or cannot write it – thus limiting, in a more or less deliberated way, fiction to identity, making YA's fight for inclusivity somewhat contradictory – but not less important.

In fact, instead of focusing only on the genre's shortcomings or dismissing a movement led mostly by young people and their will to "do good", this dissertation aims to discuss why the fight for fair representation is revendicated especially by those who have been wronged, and how and why such a conversation is happening today, in our individualistic, hyper-capitalistic, hyper-connected world. Moreover, it intends to make a link with the ever-more prevalent ethics of authenticity, driver and protector of the right to be oneself – at a time where digital platforms, used for the sharing of opinions and ideas, blur the lines between what is and what is not "authentic".

More than trying to define what constitutes the (varied) American genre of YA literature, this dissertation therefore aims to examine what the existence of such a genre means for how

fiction is nowadays being constructed and perceived in relation to the issue of the fair representation of marginalized identities. In this sense, the focus is rather on the issues raised by the objects of study (YA novels) than on the objects themselves: it is a theoretical reflection on a phenomenon happening right now and which bears concrete repercussions in the publishing industry, contributing to the collective perception of what fiction is and should be in an "authentic world".

This dissertation is divided into three main parts, each containing three chapters. Part I aims to discuss the role of "culturally authentic" stories, which are considered to fairly represent the marginalized identities they feature, in our Western societies, starting, in Chapter 1, with a definition and brief history of young adult literature. Central to YA are the issues of representation and identity, concepts which Chapter 2 sets out to define, especially the role of representation in relation to identity, using mainly Stuart Hall's book on representation and Kwame Anthony Appiah's theory on identity, as well as the example of the representation of race and gender in American media. Subsequently, Chapter 3 then links fiction to identity by exploring how representation in fiction contributes to the formation of identity, and how the didactic role of culturally authentic stories (in the context of multicultural education) can contribute to one's understanding of oneself, of the world, and to the construction of a more inclusive and tolerant society.

Part II attempts to recenter these conversations in today's context, by describing, in Chapter 4, the relatively new all-ruling concept of authenticity defined by Gilles Lipovetsky, as it is promoted and re-thought in what we may call the "new" public sphere, whose construction is deeply related to the rise of the internet and digital platforms in a hyper-capitalistic society. Chapter 5 describes the rise and impact of book communities online, which drive and have shaped and disseminated the conversations around the representation of marginalized identities in fiction. Chapter 6 gathers these elements to examine today's paradoxical demand for authenticity in literature, widely promoted in a simplified way, through a popular case of misrepresentation: the bestselling YA novel *Eleanor and Park*, as well as through the movement such novels inspired, called #OwnVoices.

Finally, Part III reframes the issue of authenticity in fiction by delving further into the different societal factors and entities which have transformed and molded these discussions, often hindering them – such as the appropriation of "authenticity" by publishers, described

in Chapter 7, and the critical thinking crisis (directly and indirectly) encouraged by and through digital platforms which are, in the end, (one of) the most important fora for debate we have today, and which determine, through the way they are built, how these conversations happen infrastructurally. The final Chapter (9) circles back to the concept of the author and to the idea of author intent to attempt to re-define the author's role, central to the debate surrounding the representation of minority identities in fiction.

Now, this dissertation presents a certain number of limitations, mostly due to the large quantity of topics it touches in a short number of pages. Its main limitation is perhaps that it does not dive into the representation of a specific identity (e.g., gender; race; sexuality; etc.), proposing instead a densely theoretical discussion on the act of representing the Other (specifically, the marginalized Other) in fiction and, in this sense, it does not aim to find any finite solutions to the questions it poses, but to bring attention to an issue which, although it has had its most impactful expression within the realm of American YA books, is now being raised in literature at large – everywhere in the Western world.

In this sense, this dissertation does not propose a comprehensive understanding of YA (in its diversity of form and content) – instead, it prefers to focus on a few examples which throughout the 2010s until today have been subject to controversies surrounding the authenticity and representation in fiction, starting with the ones around YA novels and the #OwnVoices movement, which make us question what the novel is, what fiction is (what it should be?), and what responsibility they have in terms of the representation of minority identities. Moreover, examples of a Portuguese imprint and novel serve to showcase the impact of YA and the #OwnVoices movement outside the U.S., in this case, in a small market like the Portuguese one.

The methodology largely relies on the definition and discussion of concepts such as: identity, representation, the novel, authenticity, and the public sphere, among others. Academic debates are combined with an array of informal sources such as articles and videos produced by young readers, authors, and other passionate individuals (largely present in digital spaces) who speak their mind on these topics and, through their online engagement, are making an impact on the book industry, which, driven by different motivations, is more and more attentive to its readers' desires and concerns. The inclusion of what we may call "community sources" is extremely important, as their contribution is what has been propelling, more than

any other critic, these debates. This approach seems to be only fair (if not the only possible) in the treatment of this topic: YA literature is committed to representing (American) teenagers, and so it seems coherent that we attempt to assess their opinions on the narratives which claim to represent them. Finally, the close reading of two books: YA novel *Eleanor and Park*, by Rainbow Rowell, and contemporary novel *Pão de Açúcar*, by Afonso Reis Cabral, serve to illustrate the discussion in two different ways.

Although the representation of marginalized identities is a relevant (and almost inescapable) topic today, across all types of media, these debates are usually restricted to one-sided arguments. If believing that literature is art (and art can express anything it wants) is not wrong, this statement alone fails to go back to the root of a movement which some find so easy to dismiss but which is and has been tremendously impactful, and is transforming, with and through a new ethics of authenticity, our relationship to ourselves, to our identities, and to the other.

To sum up, this research proposes, above all, a reflection on how debates surrounding the representation of marginalized identities in fictional narratives are being framed today, focusing on young adult literature: the new, popular American genre which places (a certain understanding of) authenticity at the forefront of fiction writing – in hopes of bringing structural change. Fiction, however, might not subject itself to any agenda, especially not in the strict and straightforward way some might desire, and attempting to tame it may be counterproductive, if not impossible. This does not mean that the novel has not had a role in the perpetuation of harmful representations – however, it can also repurpose itself to play a relevant part in the liberation from such representations.

In this sense, this dissertation aims to discuss various perspectives regarding the representation of the Other in books, and how it is both supported and challenged by the complex ethics of authenticity. It also aims to examine what this implies for fiction writing in a hyper-mediated, capitalistic world, which, by providing structure to these discussions, also ends up shaping them.

Part I | The role of culturally authentic stories

Chapter 1 | A brief definition and recent history of young adult literature

Gaining traction in the late 1960s in the United States (Cart 2018), young adult literature, commonly referred to as YA, is a category of fiction meant for readers from 12 to 18 years old. The recounted stories and topics should, in theory, be related to the age and experience of the protagonist and consequent target audience. However, readers often tend to read about characters at least a few years older or younger than them, and YA novels are appreciated by teenage and adult readers alike (Kitchener 2017). Having had its peak in the middle of the 2010s, YA literature is now more widely accepted amongst critics. In Guttermann and McCluskey's words: "there's perhaps no category of literature more impactful than YA" (2021).

Although established in the second half of the 20th century, young adult literature can be traced back to centuries ago, and back to beloved classics. *Time* magazine, for instance, considered in a 2021 article *Little Women* (1868) by Louisa May Alcott one of the best YA novels of all time, even if this book was written before the concept of "teenager" came to be. Closer to the YA literature of today, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger (1951), for instance, is another work cited in the *Time* magazine article. In it, we follow the story of sixteen-year-old Holden Caulfield who deals with feelings of angst and confusion as he tries to understand his place in society. Both of those novels, however, are said to be YA using modern criteria, as this age category of "young adult literature" was only possible from the moment the concept of "teenager" in America is said to have been invented, in the 1940s (Savage 2007).

In fact, until the 1950s, the people of the U.S. were divided mostly between adults and children. After the Second World War, the term started being used to refer to youth culture – giving the 12 to 19 age group their specific place in society. A "product" of the mass age, it quickly became associated to the rebellious and even delinquent phases of early life. If the first attempt at a definition was made by American psychologist G. Stanley Hall in 1898, who suggested that "adolescence" covered people of ages 15 to 24 years old (Savage 2007), its popularization in the 50s, however, was made by the "business people", who "were becoming aware of teenagers as a well-defined market, […] as a caste apart, or even, in the

view of some anthropological thinkers, a culture apart" (Dwight 1958). Already then, "teenager" was a marketing category.

Before the young adult novel, the so-called "junior" novel defined the 40s and 50s. These novels were "typically sweet-spirited romances", "science fiction" stories, or "adventure tales", in short, "formulaic genre fiction" which failed (nor necessarily strived) to fairly represent the experience of the American teenager (Cart 2018).

The first novels which were called "young adult" (for readers 12 to 18 years old) appeared only later, specifically in 1967, with the publication of *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton and *The Contender* by Robert Lipsyte, new stories which were innovative in their "unsparing contemporary realism" (Cart 2018). *The Contender* featured an African American teenager as the main character, one of the first to appear in literature for young people. Later, Robert Cormier's 1974 novel *The Chocolate War* tackled the complex feelings of sadness and anxiety, not shying away from unhappy endings such as the ones one may face in life (Cart 2018).

All in all, Michael Cart reminds us, "teenagers today want to read about teenagers today" (2008), and YA has made this, to a certain extent, a possibility. Ground-breaking in its beginnings, seen as a need when it first appeared despite not being immediately consensual, it was made to "[welcome] artistic innovation, experimentation, and risk-taking" (Cart 2008). Though the YA of today, popularized throughout the 2010s, has largely evolved from what it was in the 1960s, the will to represent the American teenager, to cater to "a teenage readership" by matching "its evolving interests and its socioeconomic, emotional, and psychological needs" remains (Cart 2018).

A good example of a recent YA series is *Harry Potter* by author J. K. Rowling, its first volumes having been published in the 90s. Since then, a myriad of YA books has made its way onto the shelves, topping bestseller lists, being adapted into movies and TV shows, and impacting young people all over the world. Its shared tropes (such as the "found family" trope, in which characters find friends with whom they come to share a family-like bond (Vélez 2020), as seen in *Harry Potter* and *Six of Crows*[1]) and story arcs (such as Joseph Campbell's hero's journey, in which a main character goes through a series of challenges

[1] *Six of Crows* is a YA duology by Leigh Bardugo. The first volume was published in 2015 and the second, titled *Crooked Kingdom*, in 2017.

and transformations) have made for what is nowadays known as the YA "genre". Indeed, although it still encompasses many different genres (e.g., romance; fantasy; science-fiction), YA is now sometimes referred to as a genre in its own right: the "teenage genre".

After the success of the *Harry Potter* series, now considered to be a recent youth classic of sorts, many other series appeared, such as, notably, *The Hunger Games* (2008), which was first published in the 2000s and marked the beginning of a dystopian era that would be popularized by film franchises (e.g., *Divergent* [2011]; *Maze Runner* [2009]) in the 2010s. With teenage characters at the center, readers follow their adventures in apocalyptic worlds, fending for themselves, forming life-long friendships, and finding love, all away from the adults.

Besides the wildly popular fantasy and science-fiction genres, other genres were setting up the scene for what would become known as YA. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky (1999), for instance, an epistolary coming-of-age novel, is considered one of the earliest examples of contemporary YA. In it, unconventional teenager Charlie navigates adolescence and all its challenges. Later, author John Green greatly popularized the genre with his novel *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012), one of the best-selling books of all time, which depicts a love story between two teenagers suffering from cancer.

Generally, and despite there not being one concrete true-for-all definition, YA books tell the stories of characters who are 13 to 18 years old, but, regardless of the protagonist's young age, they can "feature a wide range of content, including sex, violence, and drug or alcohol abuse" (Fleetwood 2019). However, contrary to adult books, usually, YA "isn't graphic or gratuitous" (ibid.) and seeks to treat the difficult subjects at hand with the care one would have, maybe, when explaining them to a teenager. These are stories of firsts: experiences, love, loss, usually recounted in easy-to-read narrative writing with gripping characters and plots, and well-known tropes. These points are what make YA literature a genre instead of just an age-category like the ones mentioned above.

Now, to gain an even better understanding of what YA is, it may be fitting to confront it with the other genres it is sometimes compared to. In fact, although sometimes equated to coming-of-age or Bildungsroman novels, YA literature differs from these categories in several ways.

Although coming-of-age often explores the passage from childhood or teenagerhood to adulthood, and therefore frequently features teenage characters, the focus is rather on the exploration of one's identity, eventually, of one's (at least partial) emancipation. However, the target audience may not be, contrarily to YA, strictly teenagers. Moreover, a coming-of-age can feature graphic descriptions. In the same way some coming-of-age novels may also be considered young adult literature (e.g., *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*), not all YA novels could be said to be coming-of-age. Some YA stories feature teenage characters without necessarily making them go from a teenager to an adult (e.g., *The Fault in Our Stars*) (Hazelwood 2023).

When it comes to the Bildungsroman, the comparison is more difficult to make as the term refers to a rather specific type of novel (more so than coming-of-age or, even, young adult). Although many YA novels do follow a similar structure to that of the Bildungsroman (which sees the protagonist suffer a loss, set out on a journey, and grow [MasterClass 2021]), they do not necessarily end in maturity. Such a "Bildungsroman-like" storyline can be observed especially in popular YA series such as *Harry Potter* and *The Mortal Instruments*, only the journey takes several volumes, and more than one character is central. However, these two examples refer to fantasy series throughout in which, although the characters do undergo sometimes great psychological transformations, the focus often lies elsewhere, as the story is plot-driven: in both cases, the protagonists need to defeat an evil antagonist, and it is this defeat, and not the protagonists' self-realization, which marks the end of the story – even when personal, psychological growth is part of the journey.

Then again, these three categories (young adult, coming-of-age and Bildungsroman) overlap partially, meaning that a novel can fall into more than one category or share characteristics with others from other categories. If *Time* included, in their 2021 list on YA books, *A Catcher in the Rye*, this novel is often considered to be a coming-of-age but also a Bildungsroman, depending on the analysis one makes, which goes to show not only how sometimes purely indicative these categorizations might be, but also how they can change over time – especially when it comes to young adult literature, which has changed, through the years, just as its target audience has.

To sum up, what might differentiate young adult literature from those other "types" of books is its exclusive insistence on representing teenagers and, nowadays, of showcasing diversity

in a fair way. YA books do not necessarily seek to see their character reach maturity or self-realization (although many characters do learn, and the reader does learn with them), or not as much as they seek to transmit certain ideas to reader.

In an ASCD article from 2006, the author very clearly refers to YA literature (or YAL) as a genre, exactly due to its didactic role: "[YA] can help tweens and teens handle the plethora of emotional, social, developmental, and physical changes they experience", "increasing their capacity to manage life problems." In this view, when integrated into school curricula, YA is therefore about "teaching life lessons", "broadening perspectives" – it can function as "a bridge to alienated students" and help them develop literacy skills (ASCD 2006).

In their essence, YA books have a didactic role. In this sense, they are comparable to middle grade (8 to 12 years old) and children's books. Due to YA literature's commitment to fairly represent their diverse target audience (a readership with specific expectations and needs) this genre of books gains a specific objective; moreover, its increasing popularity has made it, today, highly commercial, with everything this entails – aspects which we will be discussing throughout this dissertation.

The "new" genre of young adult literature, with each of its developments throughout decades since its appearance, may have "shocked" some readers in the sense that it, in its variety, certainly challenged older narrative forms (by addressing and, to some extent, helping "create" the teenager, for instance), and opened new realities, something YA very much strives to do. However, one can argue that instead of attempting to "render the ordinary strange", it tries to render what is maybe falsely considered strange ordinary, or at least to challenge people's way of seeing while also helping people feel seen – a difficult task.

Now, having gained massive popularity during the 2010s, it is fair to argue that young adult literature is and has become a cultural phenomenon of sorts, with a wide, diverse, committed, and attentive readership. As we will discuss in Part II, the growing interest in young adult can be explained by looking at the new diverse, authenticity-praising, and globalized world we live in, making YA a powerful genre which contributes to generating change. In an interview for *Time* Magazine, author and panelist Jason Reynolds argued that by reading young adult literature "we can become more of who we already are and feel safer within ourselves simply by meeting characters who call out to us by the names we call ourselves" (2021).

Nowadays, young people seem to be aware of the importance of representation for their own emancipation and individuality. This desire for representation has become a need across all types of media, and, therefore, all types of literature, creating new challenges for fiction writing. But what do we mean, exactly, when we refer to representation?

Chapter 2 | Representation: a meaning-making endeavor

2.1 On identity

Starting in the 19th century, modernity established in Western societies what would be the long-lasting ideas about the world we have today (Appiah 2018, xiv) – ideas on gender, race, and identity. Despite society's evolution regarding human rights and the better understanding of our own selves as well as others, many conceptions we have of the world from that time remain, which all contribute to the formation of identity. To gain a better understanding of this concept, in his 2018 work *The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity* (2018), Kwame Anthony Appiah defines identity according to several narratives which shape who we are (classification; color; creed; country; class).

Although identity is particular to every individual, we think of it as shared, sometimes between entire populations: "[…] An identity with others in the same social community can make the lives of all go much better in that community; a sense of belonging to a community is thus seen as a resource – like a capital" (Sen 2007, 2). In this sense, identities are social and assigned to each individual by others (Appiah 2018, 3) along with the labels that accompany them. Even if labels can be useful in the sense that they can make us better understand how we fit in the world and give us reasons for thinking and acting a certain way (Appiah 2018, 9), they also lead, as we will discuss in the next section, to the creation of stereotypes, which, despite being sometimes based on some truth, are nearly always wrong, or at least incomplete.

Nothing is exact when it comes to identity, as itself and its "parameters" can always be contested. Moreover, there exists not only one identity, but identities which overlap and add to each other (e.g., one can be both a woman and a doctor). The groups to which we belong define what these identities are or will be (Sen 2018, 4). Additionally, the (social) importance of an identity can vary according to many factors (e.g., wealth, age, disability, employment status; "In political contexts, though, an identity group can be avowedly global" (e.g., women; children; gypsies, among others) (Appiah 2018, 18).

Identity is constantly being discussed and questioned. Some opinions on others' identities are more radical than others. One view, called "essentialism", claims some individuals have intrinsic natural characteristics, underlying to their condition, which give them and others their (shared) identity (Appiah 2018, 26). This view is not only false but also detrimental, as

it enforces stereotypes and creates more generalities, which paradoxically are easier to accept, especially when negative, and it is these generalities or misconceptions which are then used when one tries to make sense of the world (Appiah 2018, 28). Although no "inner essence" can explain why people of a certain social identity are that way, this is often used to explain identities different from ours. Indeed, we "ascribe a great deal of significance to the distinction between those who share our identities and those who don't, the insiders and the outsiders, and we do this with identities new […] and long-established, large or small, superficial and profound" (Appiah 2018, 31). Although we do hold some power when it comes to choosing our identity, as it is up to us to decide if we want to privilege one identity over another, for instance, identity is ultimately "negotiated between insiders and outsiders" (Appiah 2018, 79). Identities are not "natural", they are made, and they carry meanings. They teach us who we are, how we should behave, and how others should behave towards us.

In history, not everyone or every group has had the same opportunities for negotiation, which means not everyone has had the same opportunity to choose their identity (Sen 2007, 4). In this sense, "[…] identity can firmly exclude many people even as it warmly embraces others" (Sen 2007, 2). Marginalized groups (such as, in the U.S., people of color; disabled individuals), which can be described as discriminated against and/or minorities groups, have had to and still must fight for their identities to be visible and understood (e.g., black and Latino populations in the U.S.). Moreover, the fact that identities are not intrinsic to the individual, that they are plural, that they overlap, has only more recently been accepted (if not "found out") in our modern Western societies. 19th century ideologies and concepts are being dissected to form new ones, namely, as we will discuss in Part II, due to the new ruling ethics of authenticity.

To give an example, the two genders (male/female) have been assigned throughout centuries according to the persons' reproductive organs, although intersex people[2] have always existed. Even at a biological level, there are no such harsh divisions between the two sexes, and yet, because of this binary system, individuals get assigned one of the two. In history and across cultures, the different sexes play different roles in society, making it difficult to change those labels and stereotypes, as any alteration would change the society's structure.

[2] A person born intersex is one who does not fit, on a biological level, to the male or female sex binary.

Ideology and reality are often in conflict as, despite the borders in our maps, "people do not live in monocultural, monoreligious, monolingual nation-states, and they never have" (Appiah 2018, 88). For long, certain identities, even ones with a strong presence, influence, and participation in the social fabric, were not able to be recognized in the ideology of American society.

Although we may feel the need to re-construct our identities in a way which feels "natural" to us, as in with conformity with ourselves and our conscience, and not society, and cut ties with what might have negatively influenced our journey to self-discovery, "none of us create the world we inhabit from scratch; none of us crafts our values and commitments save in dialogue with the past" (Appiah 2018, 67). Understanding the past is essential, if not unavoidable when wanting to construct or re-construct our present, as radically rejecting the past would have (and seems to be having) rather opposite or unwanted consequences. Nonetheless, "history and background" are not all we can turn to to construct our identities.

Indeed, there are "a great variety of categories to which we simultaneously belong" (Sen 2007, 19). The beliefs carried out through history might then be translated or not into practices and communities, and therefore activities, which will grow and change and even disappear as time passes. Paraphrasing Italo Svevo, Appiah writes: "[…] the reality of linguistic and cultural variation within a community […] can be in tension with the romantic nationalist vision of a community united by language and culture. [This] tension is the rule, rather than the exception" (2018, 86). In the case of the U.S., a nation built by people coming from a multitude of different places but predominantly ruled by a British and then American white ideology, this tension is apparent. In spite of the efforts made since the nation's creation, many remain, and the 2010s have been a notorious decade when it comes to attempts to shift (or add to) the master narrative.

To sum up, Appiah defines identity in terms of actions, behaviors, and thoughts. When one's identity is misunderstood or erased, this can lead on an individual level to feeling repressed and misunderstood, and at a societal level to being discriminated against or even violented. To live in and to be part of society, one needs to understand one's identity and make sure it is understood by others. Society in this sense is not fixed. Nations are not fixed, and it is up to the people and then the government (or the other way around) to construct a new way, as "there are always choices to be made in shaping national identity" (Appiah 2018, 90) and

"nations are invented and […] always being reinvented" (102). In this sense, when attempting to change society's structure to better accommodate every individual, identity can come as a form of solidarity. It does not however allow one to speak on behalf of everyone who shares that identity. Although it affects one's experience, there is no guarantee that others will feel the same as one's identity is multiple and unique.

Even with most Western governments' acknowledgement of the multi-cultured origin and/or landscape of the nation they rule, "belief in an essential difference between Us and Them persists widely and continues to be thought by many to be inherited" (Appiah 2018, 131). Appiah stresses: "the unities we create fare better when we face the convoluted reality of our differences" (2018, 104). By acknowledging difference, one is not dividing but uniting, adding what (or who) was invisible to the visible. Asking for representation is therefore not only a way of negotiating one's identity but of affirming it and (re-)integrating it in society.

2.2 On representation

Indeed, as of the 21st century, advocated by activists and demanded by many off and online, representation can be a way of acknowledging difference and addressing the plurality of our identities. Before diving into more concrete examples, such as the one of race and gender in the (American) media, we will attempt to discuss, in some detail, what representation is, how it is constructed, and how it produces knowledge in our societies.

According to its simplest definition in the dictionary, representation means "one that represents" and "the description or portrayal of someone or something in a particular way" (Merriam-Webster). Although both give some insight on the term, the latter is more closely related to our subject. In culture studies, representation "is the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language"; it links concepts and language, enabling us to refer to the either "real" or imaginary world of objects, people or events (Hall 1997, 17).

In the production of meaning, there are two systems (or processes) of representation involved. In the first one, all things (objects, people, events) are "correlated with a set of concepts or mental representation" in our minds, organized and classified in various ways in a "system of representation" (Hall 1997, 17). Despite differences, we generally share the same conceptual map, the same system of representation; and language (more precisely, a

common language), the second system of representation, is what allows us to exchange those meanings and concepts (Hall 1997, 18). The process which relates "things", concepts, and signs, is called representation (Hall 1997, 19). Now, there are three main approaches to explaining the representation of meaning through language: the reflective[3], the intentional[4], and the constructionist. We will focus solely on the latter.

In the constructionist approach, language has a social character, where meanings are constructed rather than found or made, using concepts and signs (Hall 1997, 25). Meaning is therefore not inherent to the things and people of the world, it is fixed by human beings within a culture, in such a way that "it comes to seem natural and inevitable" (Hall 1997, 21). Meaning is "constructed by the system of representation", "by the code which sets up the correlation between our conceptual system and our language system" (ibid.) (e.g., thinking of a tree and the word "tree").

Ferdinand de Saussure first defined the production of meaning as depending on language, and the sign as being composed by a signifier (the form) and a signified (the idea) (Hall 1997, 31). To Saussure, signs are arbitrary and marked by difference (they function largely according to binaries, e.g., mother/father; white/black, etc.). Language is divided into *langue*, the system of language, and *parole*, the speech acts (spoken, written) made possible by language. In Saussure's structuralist model, *langue* (i.e., the rules and codes of the language, the formal aspects of language) is the language's social part. However, although language is rule-governed, it is also "open-ended" (Hall 1997, 33-35). Indeed, as signs are produced within history and culture, meaning is constantly being subjected to both history and change (Hall 1997, 32). When one belongs to a culture, one is aware of these systems, of how they refer to the world. Different cultures therefore have different word systems, language systems (Hall 1997, 22). Moreover, because meaning must be "actively [interpreted]", it can never be precise (or never completely). In this sense, the reader, the interpreter, plays as much a role as the writer (Hall 1997, 32-33).

[3] In the reflective approach, meaning is thought to lie in the objects, people, events, etc., of the real world. Language therefore merely reflects the "true meaning" of the world (mimesis), only this theory itself fails to reach what this "true meaning" is (Hall 1997, 24).

[4] In the intentional approach, it is the author who imposes their "unique" meaning on the world through language. Language, however, is never just subjective as it is also negotiated and learned (Hall 1997, 25).

Later, building on Saussure's model, Roland Barthes proposed a semiotic approach to popular culture, and a method of analysis for visual representations. Barthes delineated two levels for the study of signs: a more descriptive level called "denotation", and another level, in which one interprets the signs, called "connotation" (Hall 1997, 38). This approach reinforced how meaning and representation "belong to the *interpretative* side of the human and cultural science whose matter – society, culture, the human subject" is not ruled by truth, as interpretations never produce the absolute truth and are rarely definite (Hall 1997, 42).

On the other hand, beyond words, Michel Foucault was interested in the production of language itself, called "discourse", or "passages of connected writing or speech" (Hall 1997, 44), based on the idea that rules and practices produce meaningful statements and regulate discourse within a specific historical context. In this sense, discourse is not only about the production of knowledge through language as well as through all social practices. Language and practices, through these discursive formations, produce and define knowledge, therefore excluding or limiting it, in such a way that "nothing which is meaningful exists outside discourse" (ibid.).

Furthermore, these discursive formations and the production of knowledge were to Foucault indissociable from power. To him, "all political and social forms of thought […] were inevitably caught up in the interplay of knowledge and power" (Hall 1997, 48). When linked to power, knowledge becomes "truth", or rather "a discursive formation sustaining a regime of truth", with "the power to make itself true", consequently affecting the "real" world by regulating, punishing, and constraining (Hall 1997, 49). Discourse creates what Foucault calls "strategic knowledge", or *savoir*: how knowledge around objects (and so, the objects themselves) is constructed "in specific contexts", "according to particular relations of power" (Hall 1997, 185). Power itself is not static, it circulates, making each of us both oppressors and oppressed, and is productive and not necessarily negative. The body, for instance, is at the center of different formations of power/knowledge, and is produced within discourse (Hall 1997, 51). Even the subject itself, although able to produce texts, ultimately operates and exists within the limits of the "episleme" (the discursive formation/regime of truth) of a particular period and culture (Hall 1997, 55).

The signs' historical, contextual "birth" implies that meanings always change from one culture or period to another (i.e., signs are contextually produced). There exists a certain

"cultural relativism", or a lack of equivalence, between cultures and periods, which sustains not only the need for translation but also the importance of contextualization (Hall 1997, 61). Culture is a process, and meaning is constantly being interpreted, and depends on interpretation, on a decoding, which in turn happens using a shared code, or shared social convention (Hall 1997, 62).

To sum up, representation is "the process of putting in concrete forms (that is, different signifiers) an abstract ideological concern" (O'Sullivan 1994, 265). Representation is about seeing and making seen. According to John Hartley, "representations rely on existing and culturally understood signs and images, on the learnt reciprocity of language and on various signifying or textual systems" (2002, 202), and it is through them that we learn reality. Not all signs are treated equally, there is a process of selection through which some signs are privileged over others, which is why "it matters how concepts are represented in news media, movies, or even in ordinary conversation" (ibid.).

2.3 Race and gender in American media: an example

In the *SAGE Handbook for Gender and Communication*, titled *Gender and Communication in Mediated Contexts*, Dwight E. Brooks and Lisa P. Hébert tackle the question of gender, race, and media representation, situating our society as consumption-oriented and heavily mediated already in 2006. With the appearance of the internet and new technologies, the question of mediation has become even more complex and polarized, as audiences are impacted by what is presented to them by various types of media. How one constructs their social identities "is shaped by commodified texts produced by media for audiences that are increasingly segmented by the social constructions of race and gender. Media, in short, are central to what ultimately come to represent our social realities" (Brooks and Hébert 2006, 297).

Throughout the chapter, the authors discuss not only the question of underrepresented or discriminated groups but also other groups such as the "white male" who also construct their own identities through the media. In this sense, taking the case of race and gender, they collect evidence of ways through which populations in the U.S. have been gravely misrepresented (if represented at all) and the impact these views have had in American

society. Although, for instance, some texts might be purposefully stereotyping, audiences will take the information they get (representative or not) as the truth (Brooks and Hébert 2006, 302).

Stereotyping "is a signifying practice" (Hall 1997, 257); it essentializes (makes certain characteristics seem "natural", "intrinsic" to the individual) (Appiah 2018, 26), fixating difference and norms for what is or is not "normal", and consequently excluding everything which does not fit. In this sense, stereotypes help maintain social and symbolic order, by setting criteria for what is acceptable. Moreover, stereotyping is indicative of inequalities present in hierarchical societies, which it helps perpetuate, setting forth the specific values and ideologies of the ruling group; in this sense, it is an example of symbolic violence (Hall 1997, 257-259). Furthermore, as "stereotypes refer as much to what is imagined in fantasy as to what is perceived as 'real'", there is a side of fantasy and projection to stereotyping (e.g., orientalism, in which Asian culture and particularly Asian women were fetishized) (Hall 1997, 263).

This is the case of the marginalized populations analyzed by Brooks and Hébert, such as the black female population. Black female representation in the media "determines how blackness and people are seen and how other groups will respond to us based on their relation to these constructed images" (bell hooks[5] apud Brooks and Hébert 2006, 299). However, as research has shown, "the only way to see the structures, tropes, and perceptual habits of whiteness, is when nonwhite (and above all, black) people are also represented" (ibid.). As stated by Brooks and Hébert, these arguments may also be valid for women of Indian, Latin American, Puerto Rican and Asian descent present in the U.S. (2006, 302). In this sense, attention must be brought not only the content of what is being shown but also to who is producing it and making it visible. Since "the power of the colonizer is fundamentally constituted by the power to speak for and to represent" (Marina Heung[6] apud Brooks and Hébert 2006, 302), the power of the colonizer being, in other words, the power of the dominant system of representation, counter-movements are essential. Pushing for diversity, contesting the dominant system, is therefore necessary among the people constructing and

[5] hooks, bell. 1992. *Black looks: Race and repre- sentation*. Boston: South End Press.
[6] Heung, Marina. 1995. "Representing ourselves: Films and videos by Asian American/Canadian women". In A. Valdivia (Ed.), *Feminism, multiculturalism, and the media: Global diversities*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

disseminating the images, as they are the wielders of institutional power and could make way for more kinds of representation and especially fair representation.

Now, fair (rather than "good", or "positive") representation is one that does not essentialize or stereotype, that allows for the formation of identity without restricting it, and therefore contributes to the construction of one's identities by promoting choice. This brings us to the important and indispensable question: how can we challenge, and, eventually, shift, a dominant regime of representation?

Despite constant efforts made to fix it, meaning is always changing – according to different time periods, cultures, etc. "Trans-coding", for instance, is the phenomenon of taking an existing meaning and re-appropriating it so it accommodates new ones (Hall 1997, 270) (e.g., with the trans-coding of the notion "black" and "fat", which generally have derogatory connotations: "black is beautiful"; "fat is beautiful"). But how does trans-coding happen? To contest the dominant regime or representations, Hall delineates three different counter-strategies.

The first one is "counter-stereotyping", as in, to reverse the stereotype which is already existent (e.g., making the poor discriminated black man a rich discriminating black man). The downside of this reversal, however, is that the result is still a binary, therefore still reductionist and limiting, and still stereotypical, just in a different way (Hall 1997, 272). Another strategy is to substitute the "negative" with the "positive" (ibid.), in an attempt to foster the acceptance and celebration of difference. This strategy therefore serves mostly to add to the already existing pool of negative representations within the dominant regime of representation. Although it does increase the ways through which one population might be represented, it does not necessarily contest the dominant regime which these new, positive representations end up becoming a part of (Hall 1997, 274).

The third and last counter-strategy presented by Hall "locates itself within the complexities and ambivalences of representation itself, and tries to contest it from within" (ibid.). It is more concerned with the forms of representation than with introducing a new content. It accepts and works with the shifting, unstable character of meaning, and enters into a struggle over representation, while acknowledging its complexity and the fact that, since meaning can never be finally fixed, there can never be any correct, clear-cut answers (ibid.).

Brooks and Hébert argue that choosing diverse source and production materials is key to fair representation. In a film production, this could mean casting more diverse actors in various roles. Some of these efforts can be observed all throughout the 2010s, for instance, in film and television productions, namely by big companies such as Netflix. An example is teen romance movie *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (2018), the first of three, which features an Asian main character and was also adapted from a young adult novel of the same name by Jenny Han. Another is the teen comedy-drama show *On My Block* (2018–2021) which features diverse characters from different backgrounds and sexual orientations, without necessarily counter-stereotyping, or giving an only "positive" view (Bowen 2018).

In short, as Brooks and Hébert write in their conclusion: "layered representations challenge static constructions, leaving, in turn, ambivalent space for alternative definitions of gender, race, and even sexuality" (2006, 312). However, as argued in the constructionist approach, it is also essential to keep in mind that what kind of representation exists and why it is a product of a specific time and culture. Although one may attribute the "resurgence" of a certain regime of representation (in society) to "truth", Hartley argues the demand for "positive images does not get far because not everyone agrees in what counts as 'negative' or 'positive' representation" (2003, 203).

Nowadays, we may be seeing a rise in the first two counter-strategies (counter-stereotyping and replacing "negative" with "positive"), namely in the context of fiction books and more specifically in YA novels. Not without its challenges, there is no doubt that the fight for representation in the media is extremely important when it comes to identity formation and life in society.

For instance, in his 2021 blog post, children's author David A. Robertson writes how the stories he read as a child failed to teach him about his own origins as a "Cree kid[7] living and growing up the city" (Robertson 2021). He explains that, not only were there no books that represented his reality, but there was also the added layer of stereotypes perpetuated in and by the media. According to him "this absence of truth had a negative impact on [his] self-perception, and on how others perceived [him], and Indigenous people generally" (2021). To Robertson, stories can truly impact the readers for better or worse, uniting and dividing, especially when it comes to marginalized groups. His father's accounts on Cree culture

[7] The Cree are one of the largest First Nations groups in Canada.

helped compensate for the lack of diversity he found in books. Thanks to his father, Robertson learned how, by allowing us to see the world through someone else's eyes, stories (and narratives across all types of media) help create a community which acknowledges difference without forgetting people's universal condition as human beings.

This point is supported by Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie[8] in her talk *The Danger of a Single Story* (2016). In it, she goes beyond the need for recognition itself, and pinpoints how the single story (in books and elsewhere) limits one's perception of things – to one single outlook, one single possibility. This is, of course, linked to power: "How [the stories] are told, who tells them, when they're told, how [many] are told, are really dependent on power"; "Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person" (Adichie 2016). This goes in line with what we have discussed regarding how the dominant discursive formations make themselves true.

What may be particularly interesting at this point, then, since the focus of this dissertation will ultimately revolve around fiction writing, is the issue of "truth". To Robertson, a lack of diversity in books signifies "an absence of truth": "We need truth. Kids need truth […]" (Robertson 2021). Now, to Robertson, diverse stories and diverse authors are essential, as it is them who often put forth stories with diverse heroes, allowing for recognition as well as for a better understanding of the Other. As it will be discussed in later parts, this capacity for understanding is extremely valued in the modern day, indeed, "identifying with others, in various different ways, can be extremely important for living in a society" (Sen 2007, 19). Stories are a way through which we can identify with others and understand ourselves. The next part will therefore attempt to link fiction, representation, and identity formation, highlighting why representation matters in books.

[8] In June 2021, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie self-published on her website a personal essay titled *It Is Obscene: A True Reflection in Three Parts*. The piece caused controversy as, among the various themes it addresses (social media discourse, literary culture, freedom of speech), it also touches on her views on trans rights, which have been considered by some as transphobic (Gutterman 2021). Having this in mind, we will nonetheless consider Adichie's theory useful in understanding identity formation.

Chapter 3 | Fiction and identity formation

3.1 The novel: an anti-genre

Let us begin with a brief discussion around what the modern novel is, or rather, what it can be. In Terry Eagleton's view (2005), there is no exact way to delineate rules for fiction, nor for the novel. In a broad sense, fiction is not truth, and must not be confounded with reality or truth (as it is different from fact, but then again, in a novel, fact and fiction sometimes intertwine). However, while it is not truth, fiction is not a lie, because, by being fiction, it should be seen (by the reader) for what it is, and not for truth or for anything pretending to be true. Fiction rather seeks to exemplify in a realistic way (and to not merely be an example), and this even in the case of novels which aim to be realistic (Eagleton 2005).

The novel "[eludes] definitions, but [also] actively undermines them. It is less a genre than an antigenre. It cannibalizes other literary modes and mixes the bits and pieces promiscuously together": the novel breaks rules as a rule (Eagleton 2005). Although the modern era traces the first novel to the emergence of the middle classes, different scholars trace the beginning of the novel to different epochs and points in history (ibid.). The predecessor of the novel, called "romance", can be traced back to the 18th century, and it was a kind of novel that was disposable, enchanted, sensationalist, written by women, and not yet considered literature nor art. It has evolved, throughout modernity, into the modern novel, a "disenchanted" romance (ibid.) which affirms common life, in which "values are at their most diverse and conflicting", as it is often constructed as a mix of elements of language, content, form; it is "a model for modern society, not simply a reflection of it" (ibid.)

Now, literature has always been intimately linked to the creation of our (European) societies – specifically, of our nations. In *Imagined Communities* (1989), Benedict Anderson defines the nation as an imagined (i.e., we do not know everyone who inhabits it) political community, both inherently limited and sovereign (rather than universal, as it is limited within more or less "elastic" boundaries); in this sense, what distinguishes communities is *how* they are imagined (and not a question of falsity or truth) (Anderson 1989, 6-7). Anderson's analysis puts forward the role of the novel and of the newspaper in first imagining the communities (18th century). Because the structures of the first novels were composed of an omniscient narrator, in which the readers are like God (they see everything),

acts are described “in time” but performed at the same time in this imaginary world (Anderson 1989, 25). For instance, one may read about a character’s whereabouts in a certain chapter and then about what another character was doing at that same time in the next (“meanwhile…”). This characteristic is reflective of the simultaneity of the people in the nation (Anderson 1989, 26). Moreover, in the 18th and 19th centuries, the hero became “our young man”, a representative body whose identity as a young man of the nation surpassed the intricacies of his personal life (Anderson 1989, 32). This idea of the simultaneity of the people in the nation was also highlighted by the newspapers and the imagined linkage (calendric coincidence or related topics) of the news chosen, bringing people together: consuming news represented, therefore, an imagining of the nation as fiction (Anderson 1989, 35).

Today, capturing “normalcy” and “everyday life” is the norm. The realist novel, which aims to “show the world as it really is”, is a product of modern times, it reflects our civilizations’ fascination for itself, accompanying its evolution, refusing nostalgia and utopia, making it “reformist in spirit” and committed to the present, but to “a present which is always in the process of change” (Eagleton 2005). The novel is a popular, mainstream genre which draws from ordinary speech, and its interest in common life, in common people, makes it a “democratic kind of art” which brings one closer to life itself: it was realist novels which allowed for common people to appear in society before they had the right to participate in it (ibid.).

As Eagleton notes, referring to a novel as “realist” means that it is not, itself, reality: fiction is art, and art is constructed, performed: no matter how realist we may feel a novel is, it signifies, still, a representation of something (2005). It is inevitably limited, but it does, however, invite the reader to think, as its meanings transcend form and content, presenting its subjectively shaped ideas as universal truths, but often giving space (also due to the reader’s awareness that fiction is not, indeed, reality) for such considerations to be held and developed independently of the stories limits’ (the great novel may be ideological, or contribute to the construction of ideology, but it is rarely merely propagandist, merely condescending). Now, not all novels are realist or radical (even when they portray marginalized experiences), and not all novels will *stay* realist or radical, depending on when a book is being read, for instance (today, Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868) may not show “the world as it is” nor be considered radical, unless it is read in its historical context).

Nonetheless, the novel's commitment to the "now" is, to Eagleton (2005), related to the rise of individualism in our societies, making subjectivity a trait of modern literature, something which also makes it precarious, as it fails to be grounded in modern values, as there were in the past. The novel, more than ever, is more character than plot-driven, making its characters look inwards, into their own subjectivity, and often affirms itself as the concretization of the subjectivity of the author. In the modern subjective, individualistic world, there is space for all narratives, making "all objectivity [an] interpretation" (Eagleton 2005). But what of values in such a world? Taking into account the definition above, the novel may as well be considered "the product of an alienated world"; however, it remains "one of the few objects in a reified society which manifests in its every objective detail the subjective freedom in which it was born" (ibid.). In this sense, the novel holds cultural power.

In *The Art of the Novel*, writer Milan Kundera reflects upon the origins of the novel in Europe, and how it has accompanied man since the beginning of the Modern era (2005, 5). To Kundera, the novel is "Europe's creation", and the "sequence of discoveries" is what constitutes its history (Kundera 2005, 3). In his view, these discoveries (the sequence of novels) belong to the whole of Europe, which, before the 19th century, was originally "just" a geographical place where various people took ideas from the pagan societies that preceded it; there was a transfer of learning, ideas were taken from everywhere – becoming what now constitutes that which we consider to be "Western culture" (Appiah 2018). Therefore, the novel and its history may as well constitute a common knowledge pool which may benefit everyone – by helping construct, preserve, and transfer culture.

Now, thinking of the novel as a sequence of discoveries not only appeases a seemingly strict definition of literature imposed by the existence of a canon, for instance, but it also reaffirms what literature may be all about, what it has always been about – throughout centuries, in the more recent decades, and (hopefully) in a near and far away future: "the novel's spirit is the spirit of continuity: each work is an answer to preceding ones, each work contains all the previous experience of the novel" (Kundera 2005, 18-19). If the novel is now, as Eagleton stresses, more fragmented in its content and form, hyper aware of its subjectivity (and the world's), it is still very much regarded as the transformative object it has always been.

Indeed, in *Uses of Literature* (2008), Rita Felski focuses not on how books propose an "aesthetic rapture" or "encourage moral reflection and self-scrutiny" (Felski 2008, 15), but

rather on what the readers can take from them. For one, books provide knowledge. What kind of knowledge is a broader question, but when looking at the impact of literature itself (e.g., in the creation of the nation), it is undeniable that it may have brought us something of value. Despite literature's "defective mirror" on one hand, and critics' past attempts to join literature and truth on the other (Felski 2008, 79), reading can give one "a deeper sense of everyday experiences and the shape of social life" (Felski 2008, 83).

Moreover, books can make the reader feel seen. Different from mimicking a "me" on paper, recognition is about "exploring what it means to be a person": "in a mobile interplay of exteriority and interiority, [recognition happens when] something that exists outside of me inspires a revised or altered sense of who I am" (Felski 2008, 25). This goes in line with Jason Reynolds' statement that we can become more of who we already are "by meeting characters who call out to us by the names we call ourselves" (2021). Characters in novels are not people, but we may think of them as persons, or as "conveying the attitudes of persons, as upholding or questioning larger ideas and collective ways of thinking" (Felski 2008, 32). Recognition creates a sense of community. We recognize aspects of ourselves in the stories, in the characters, and so in the description of others. Such "flashes of intersubjective recognition, of perceived commonality and shared history" (Felski 2008, 39) contribute to today's notion of having an identity, to self-identification: "cognition is recognition" (see Steiner 1995).

Furthermore, Felski notes that, although literary works do not know the impact (or lack thereof) they will have in society, nor how they will be received, "knowledge and genre are inescapably intertwined", as "all forms of knowing – whether poetic or political, exquisitely lyrical or numbingly matter-of-fact – rely on an array of formal resources, stylistic conventions, and conceptual schemata" (2008, 83). But content and form are not the only makers of meaning, as readers are always part of the process: "the work only comes to life in being read, and what it signifies cannot be separated from what readers make of it" (Felski 2008, 87). And readers are situated beings, reading "with the context provided by their own experiences and beliefs" (Appiah 2018, 57). When reading, one links what one reads to what one knows, but just as people exist in context, characters are written in context, and better understood when one is aware of it. Though we may identify with what we are reading, there is, since not all contexts are explicit nor familiar to us, a big chance of encountering otherness in a novel, and it is also through it, as we will discuss in Part II, that we make sense of who

we are. In this way, literary texts provide ways of dealing with the "complexities of recognition" (Felski 2008, 46), complexities which are received by the reader in unpredictable ways.

Generally, reading fiction has been proven to help develop one's emotional intelligence, enabling one to collect knowledge in an efficient way, facilitating one's capacity for empathy and critical thinking, allowing one to accept the intricacies of life (Seifert 2020), and this is also what makes reading such a useful tool for education.

3.2 The YA novel: didactic and genre-bound

In some ways, the definition of the young adult novel corresponds to Eagleton and Kundera's views; "abreast" with the times (with the "now"), the YA novel of today is a product of its time: its conception has been informed and made possible by all the novels which came before it. However, despite its modern desire of welcoming a plurality of voices, YA does not seem to want to reflect society's alienation or disunity, like Eagleton suggests about the novel, on the contrary: as it wishes to safeguard, celebrate, and inform on various identities, YA is very much moved by a number of values (of inclusivity and diversity) which readers of the genre expect. The lack of such values or, especially, their violation, is, as we will be discussing, often quickly (and publicly) condemned by readers. Today, readers are at the forefront of heartfelt discussions, driving, beyond the work of critics and academics, real change in the book industry, and therefore, in society: "the popular consumer is an alert and critical consumer" (Felski 2008, 60), and readers help shed light on the multitude of ways through which a work may (or not) be valuable.

Like their readership, YA authors are well-aware of the power of stories when it comes to the creation of knowledge/power, and they "see themselves as educators" (Waldman 2019): they want to educate young people on the world "as it is" (as diverse), but also, to construct a positive view on diversity. In this sense, YA allows, just as, in general, the novel did (and does), for marginalized individuals (part of the "common people") to appear in society before they get to a place of (bigger) agency within it, shifting power relations. Aware of the concrete goal of their books, and of the vehemence with which readers express their interpretations online, YA authors constantly seek the acknowledgement of their audience

that their expectations of recognition, of fair representation, have been met. In this sense, we may argue that, although YA does not always aim to be realistic about everything (think, for instance, of YA fantasy), it does, nonetheless, aim for "truth" in terms of the (marginalized) identities it is trying to depict. However, this "truth" is inherently historical and ideological, and YA in particular is constantly re-updating itself by exploring themes relevant to the *current* teenage population (also, arguably, a commercial strategy).

Now, if modern literature is disruptive in the sense of being an "all-out, uncompromising attack on the foundations of culture" (Felski 2008, 107), today, we often conceive "the shocking as synonymous with the new" (Felski 2008, 115). Readers are therefore not necessarily looking to be shocked by harsh or uncomfortable stories but surprised by "new" stories, such as ones about or with diverse characters. This, in itself and in YA books, can be considered "shocking" in relation to the misrepresentation of the past. Only, today, due to heavy reader expectations and commercial demands, young adult novels, greatly committed to responding to what defines the category they (aim to) belong to (as inclusive, diverse, easy-to-read), are limited in their "possibilities of shock".

In fact, genres (like the novel) and sub-genres (like YA, fantasy, romance, etc.) are not only a way of grouping works, but they also consist of "specific systems of expectation and hypothesis", which in turn "[provide] means of recognition and understanding" (Neale 1990, 46). When one is experiencing a media piece, these systems help render it comprehensible, and central to the understanding of genre is the concept of verisimilitude (meaning "probable", "likely"), as well as the social and cultural functions genres perform (Neale 1990, 45). These systems of expectation involve various regimes of verisimilitude, "various systems of plausibility, motivation, justification and belief" (Neale 1990, 46), which differ from genre to genre, dictating different rules and norms which can, or not, depending on the genre, be transgressed or ignored. Following Tzvetan Todorov's model, Steve Neale highlights two types of verisimilitude applicable to representations: (1) generic verisimilitude, related to the rules and norms genres follow; (2) social or cultural verisimilitude, which stems from public opinion, or the public discourse surrounding a said representation. To Neale, none of these two types are synonymous with "reality" or "truth" (Neale 1990, 47).

Although the novel has the potential of being an "antigenre", the YA novel, to even be YA, must closely conform to genre conventions, and this not only due to it also being an age category: beyond cultural verisimilitude, young adult literature seeks (and its readers expect) cultural authenticity. As stressed in Chapter 1, what makes YA different from other genres is its aim to represent its teenage audience, to cater to their interests, and to educate on and give voice to marginalized communities. If worrying about representation seems only natural when discussing literature which has an educational goal (i.e., children's literature; middle grade; young adult), YA literature in particular seems to have evolved, in the last decades, into a genre more constrained than free. But let us, first, discuss what the criteria for fiction should be when, by making students into attentive readers (and therefore, attentive citizens), we aim to create more inclusive, democratic societies.

3.3 Towards a multicultural education: cultural authenticity in literature

If culture can be understood as the ways in which people live and think in the world, most social scientists define culture as consisting of the complex and changing "symbolic, ideational, and intangible aspects of society – the values, symbols, interpretations, and perspectives that distinguish one group of people from another", and that it must be viewed as a whole, as a shared experience by a group of people (Short and Fox 2003, 6). As culture is meaning but also the process through which meaning is made, culture is constantly under construction (Florio-Ruane 2001, 27[9]), and, in this sense, the role of education, and, especially, of multicultural education, has a transformative goal of reducing inequality, of giving voice to marginalized cultures, promoting social justice and combating the dominant structures of oppression and discrimination (Short and Fox 2003, 7).

As discussed in Chapter 2, identity is not "natural", but made, not unique, but plural, and although we do hold some power when it comes to choosing our identity, it is ultimately negotiated between insiders and outsiders. Representation opens possibilities for negotiation, for choice. If culture is a process and meaning is constantly being constructed and interpreted, in history, not everyone or every group has had the same opportunity to choose or even to negotiate their identity (Sen 2007, 4), and this is what multicultural

[9] Cited by Short and Fox: Florio-Ruane, Susan., and Julie deTar. 2001. *Teacher education and the cultural imagination: Autobiography, conversation, and narative*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum.

education aims to fight against, namely through literature. In this sense, "storytelling can be seen as a means to counter the effects [of] marginalization and oppression on children" (Sims Bishop 2003, 23).

In the book *The Complexity of Cultural Authenticity in Children's Literature: Why the Debates Really Matter* (2003), researchers Kathy G. Short and Dana L. Fox attempt to reframe, define and provide criteria, based on Rudine Sims Bishop's understanding of the concept, for cultural authenticity in books, meaning "the extent to which a book reflects the worldview of a specific cultural group and the authenticating details of language and everyday life for members of that cultural group" (Short and Fox 2003, 5). Because Short and Fox recognize the complexity of the theme, as "often the debates quickly [move] to simplistic insider/outsider distinctions, specifically whether whites should write books about people of color" (Short and Fox 2003, 3), the book gathers an array of different perspectives.

In a more general sense, according to Sims Bishop, cultural authenticity "is the success with which a writer is able to reflect the cultural perspectives of the people about whom [they are] writing and make readers from inside the group believe that the writer 'knows what's going on'" (Sims Bishop 2003, 29). In short, it allows the people portrayed to feel represented by depicting their culture accurately; it works to integrate them into society. In this sense, it serves to "destigmatize cultures and allows for greater understanding between different populations" (ibid.). Highlighted here is the "reader's sense of truth in how a specific cultural experience has been represented within a book, particularly when the reader is an insider to the culture portrayed in that book" (Short and Fox 2003, 5).

Although Short and Fox's book focuses on children's literature, which is very different from YA, as its readers are much younger, the proposed considerations can apply to what is happening within the YA space regarding the issue of representation: in a certain sense, although meant for older readers, the YA of today is nearly as strict when it comes to its didactic goals. Children's literature is literature which *aims* to educate first, to contribute to children's development within society by portraying different cultural experiences. The writer therefore has the responsibility "to ensure that they are providing accurate information and authentic cultural images" (Noll 2003, 194), which means not only avoiding stereotypes but also putting forward ideas, values, themes, facts members of a culture can accommodate and accept within the culture (Mo and Chen 2003, 201). This entails a certain amount of

"cultural sensitivity", meaning that the book is attentive to the concerns, values, etc., of the culture portrayed (Smolkin and Sinua 2003, 220). In this sense, generic books (e.g., where one character is black, but nothing is said about their culture) may not be enough; as Vivian Yenika-Agbaw argues, these books are often based on the erroneous "assumption that a unitary and homogeneous human nature exists" (Short and Fox 2003, 17).

In her analysis, Sims Bishop focuses on the representation of African Americans, as these were, until the third half of the twentieth century, mostly missing from "mainsmainstream American children's literature, which was generally created by White authors"; the ones represented were often stereotypical and for comic relief (of white readers), and it was also in reaction to this that they started wanting to represent themselves (Sims Bishop 2003, 26). As of 2003, non-African American writers were still the ones producing the majority of children's books about African Americans (Sims Bishop 2003, 28), and, to Sims Bishop, this goes to prove why the issue of cultural authenticity cannot be thought only as the writer's right to transcend their own identity, as this ignores a long history of misrepresentation, inequality, and lack of access (Sims Bishop 2003, 29).

If, in the past, criticism related to authenticity made a distinction between quality and good representation (Sims Bishop 2003, 26), today, good representation might be part of what makes a book "good". In this sense, Sims Bishop defines cultural authenticity in two dimensions: one related to "the cultural, physical, or social environment the authors chose to emphasize" (e.g., the ghetto as "a place of violence" or as "home") (Sims Bishop 2003, 27); another pertaining to the accuracy of "authenticating details", which have to do with factual knowledge on the represented group, namely with language (e.g., accurate depiction of black vernacular). Having said this, to help authors who wish to write a culturally authentic book (and to make sure that the book is, in fact, culturally authentic), Sims Bishop gathers several points she considers worthy of reflection and/or implementation when it comes to cultural authenticity in children's books.

Firstly, though many people-of-color (POC) authors do not want to be qualified as purely or only "other" and prefer to be referred to as "American" authors (and not as "African American" authors, for instance), Bishop alerts to the importance of including cultural elements even when writing a so-called "universal" narrative (Sims Bishop 2003, 30), as these cultural elements are rarely what detracts from the "universality" out of the story – the

culture depicted is simply not (yet) part of the main or dominant discourse. Sims Bishop thus encourages authors who are writing about a marginalized identity to read literature written by individuals of that identity and learn from how they represent themselves. This study will most likely allow them, although "there is no formula or prescription for culturally authentic African American or other parallel-culture", to better understand the different sensibilities felt and lived by the group (ibid.).

Secondly, Sims Bishop notes how, with the development of culture studies as well as a focus on contextualization, there is, today, space for various kinds of criticism, for various "valid" angles and interpretations to be placed at the forefront regarding one single literary work (Sims Bishop 2003, 31). In fact, also due to the responsibility they have, authors must understand (and this should not and does not hinder their freedom) that part of the nature of their work is to be subjected to criticism (Short and Fox 2003, 12). Some connect this to the notion of "authorial arrogance" (Harris 2003, 124), which happens when one believes one should write "without subjecting [their] work to critical scrutiny" (Short and Fox 2003, 13). Sims Bishop links this unwillingness to be scrutinized to a way of sustaining the dominant culture, of perpetuating stereotypes even in their most discrete form. In this sense, if readers today seem to be more attentive towards the representation of marginalized identities, it is because they are, indeed, marginalized identities. If no one takes much time to think why or how a black woman writes a fiction book featuring a white man as the main character[10], for instance, it is because the cis[11], straight, white man, being part of the dominant culture, already has a rather wide number of mainstream representations, including positive ones, and therefore, of possibilities of being. The black woman, for instance, has not.

Third, and related to this issue of power and internalized beliefs, Sims Bishop deems important for "writers who attempt to write across cultures within American society [to] acknowledge the difficulties inherent in the task" (Sims Bishop 2003, 31), to share their experiences, to admit their mistakes.

[10] The 2013 adult fiction novel *The Hired Man* (pub. Bloomsbury) by Aminatta Forna (born in Glasgow, UK) is an example of a black woman writing a book with a main character who is white and male. Nonetheless, as the novel tells the story of a small Croatian village in the aftermath of the Yugoslav wars, a recent and sensitive subject, it was scrutinized just the same for its depiction of Croatian history and culture (and received generally positive reviews).

[11] A cisgender individual is one that identifies with the gender which they were assigned to at birth.

Fourth, Sims Bishop finds relevant that we understand the ideological positions and motivations of the authors wanting to write about "parallel-culture" groups and see how they might reflect on the text, as "different groups (insiders and outsiders) and different members of those groups at different times create children's literature to fulfill different functions" (Sims Bishop 2003, 32). Because not every author writes about it, their intentions are not always clear – although Sims Bishop admits that, for some, inquiring about this might seem invalid, she maintains that understanding ideological positions can help better inform discussions around cultural authenticity (Sims Bishop 2003, 34).

Finally, Sims Bishop highlights the "need to recognize and acknowledge the importance of the sociopolitical and economic context in which the debate about cultural authenticity is situated", to try, above all, to better understand why things are the way they are, why there is urgency in paying serious attention to this topic, especially in children's literature and in education (Sims Bishop 2003, 35). In fact, multicultural education aims, above all, to engage students in the critical reading of books, so "discourses of power and dominance that have been written into the literature" are not sustained (Fang, Fu, and Lamme 2003, 289), making the classroom a space where students can "represent themselves or at least see themselves represented" (Dudley-Marling 2003, 315). Culturally authentic books for children and teenagers "serve [as] a source of intercultural understandings" (Short and Fox 2003, 21), providing "a ready means for gaining insights into relations of power as well as an opportunity to critique and challenge" the way social, economic, monocultural power works (Curt Dudley-Marling 2003, 306). In this sense, a multicultural education is not one which means to dictate or censor, but rather to provide tools for critical thinking, to question meanings and share different cultural perspectives, to distinguish and question dominant discourses, thus working towards a more inclusive and equal society (Short and Fox 2003, 21). If Sims Bishop's "rules" for writing culturally authentic books refer more concretely to the way books are written and produced – cultural authenticity in general (as aggregated within Short and Fox's book) proposes a way of critically thinking of narratives as what they are: cultural artefacts.

To sum up, "cultural authenticity matters because all children have the right to see themselves within a book, to find within a book the truth of their own experiences instead of stereotypes and misrepresentations", and, in turn, authors have the right to represent themselves, and to "pass on their cultural identity to children within that culture[:] as

literature is one of the significant ways that children learn about themselves and others, […] literary images should not be distorted or inauthentic" (Short and Fox 2003, 21). All in all, though complex, discussions around cultural authenticity in children (and young adult) stories, and their implementation in classrooms, really do matter, as they go in the direction of democratic values towards the construction of a society that is more just (Short and Fox 2003, 23).

However, Sims Bishop ends on the note that "as long as the sociopolitical context remains as is, these storms over cultural authenticity will continue to arise" (Sims Bishop 2003, 36). Having discussed what cultural authenticity is and why it matters in children's books, it might be important to now turn to the context we are in today, as the internet has taken over our lives, and become the platform where such debates around cultural authenticity in literature take place, where young adult literature has come to know its force – ultimately, where the very important concept of authenticity, as an ethics, has flourished.

Part II | Authenticity in literature, in the "new world"

Chapter 4 | Authenticity in the (new) public sphere

The 2010s saw a generation of people go from teenagers to young adults while living exceptionally online lives. The rise of the digital age and particularly of social media is deeply linked to how individuals engage with each other and with (worldly; individual) issues, and its proliferation largely accompanied and restructured these generations' new ways of thinking and getting involved. The modern values of tolerance and respect are not, however, only a product of globalization, which allowed for people all over the world to communicate and connect in new ways, but also a direct reaction to this open-minded generations' way of implementing the ideal of authenticity. Now, and so as not get confused, this "authenticity", although related to the idea of "cultural authenticity" discussed in the previous chapter, applies, instead, more generally, to a social ethics adopted, today, by all.

Let us, then, go back into the beginnings of today's newfound culture of tolerance and inclusivity, which takes its roots in the concept of authenticity. In its simplest definition, living an authentic life means living in conformity with oneself, more precisely, with one's true self, publicly, and beyond social conventions (Lipovetsky 2022, 23). This ideal, which has become rather consensual in Western societies, is not "natural" nor "universal", but a modern invention, "an exceptional moral *idea* in the history of civilizations" (Lipovetsky 2022, 29) (my translation[12]), something which was not always the case: if, today, the rule is "to be yourself", to obey oneself and one's own conscience and will, in the past, it was the transmission of systems, values, and traditions across generations which dictated what was or was not relevant.

Lipovetsky traces the "first era" of authenticity back to the 18th century, where Enlightenment philosophers stress Reason (and not God) as what people should follow. Unlike what is defended today, where everything is subjective, Reason is seen as universal; it is linked to the idea of sincerity, of listening to one's heart and going against the current: it is the era of "heroic authenticity". This era considered "authentic" the one who would

[12] Gilles Lipovetsky's book on the concept of authenticity, *Le Sacre de l'Authenticité*, was originally published in French by Éditions Gallimard in 2021. As of 2024, no English translation has been published. The edition referenced in this dissertation is the Portuguese translation by Inês Guerreiro, *A Sagração da Autenticidade*, published by Edições 70 in 2022, translated into English by me and cross-checked with the original version in French.

(painfully or with effort) set bravely on a path to discover and construct one's own self by straying away from the collective and experimenting new ways of seeing the world, in hopes of achieving self-realization (Lipovetsky 2022, 45-46). Next to "heroic authenticity", "bohemian authenticity" developed, referring to the bohemian artists who, in hopes of shocking and provoking the bourgeois, lived a hedonistic and even eccentric (and sometimes arduous) life at the margins of society (Lipovetsky 2022, 47-48). In this first era, authenticity was therefore anti-conformist, as it went against conventions, and the singularity of the individual was valued (Lipovetsky 2022, 49).

Now, if until this point (18th to mid-20th century), both "Reason" and "authenticity" were being theorized and thought upon under the lens and philosophy of cis-gender, white men, this would change only in the second era (1960s-70s), with "libertarian authenticity": linking authenticity to a generation, it saw young people, mainly students 18 to 25 years old, fighting for an authentic life, with student movements and collectives contesting the past in a counterculture to tradition and government ideologies. Here, authenticity means acting on one's behalf, according to what one wants, it is about happiness and pleasure (use of drugs; sexual emancipation). Authenticity stopped being an idea belonging only to an elite of artists and intellectuals and became the generational phenomenon of a rebellious youth who had common goals of political dimension, combating oppression and alienation (of which, to them, social conventions and institutions of the time were guilty) (Lipovetsky 2022, 53).

The major changes, however, came in the present. The third and new, modern era of authenticity, the one we are in now, made authenticity a consensual Western ideology, an ideal so looked for and revindicated that it has almost become a cult (Lipovetsky 2022, 9). The right to being authentic became a subjective universal right from which no one is excluded: if living an authentic life was previously seen as anti-conformist, authenticity "has since normalized and institutionalized itself" (Lipovetsky 2022, 16). From the 1970s onwards, the individual, post-elitist, for-all right to "be yourself" is claimed by the majority, assimilated and integrated in every-day life (Lipovetsky 2022, 64). As long as living in conformity with oneself does not harm anyone else (Lipovetsky 2022, 66), and despite many people (e.g., traditionalists; fundamentalists) still opposing it (as they are unaccepting), the right to authenticity imposes itself in the Western world as an indisputable, obvious rule (Lipovetsky 2022, 64). Today, personal self-realization (the culture of happiness in being oneself; of subjective improvement) overrules morality (the culture of duty towards oneself);

we live according to our own desires, in hopes of feeling good and freeing ourselves from existential discomfort (Lipovetsky 2022, 83-85). Authenticity is now directly linked not to reason, not to dignity, but to happiness.

This desire for personal acceptance, for the celebration (and protection) of one's (and, simultaneously, of others') differences can be observed by analyzing more closely the two generations who grew up online in the 2010s, and the progress made regarding human rights across the (democratic) Western world and, especially, in the U.S.

4.1 Engaged generations

Today, if Generation Z (Gen Z) actively fights for their rights in the globalized world, the (online) conversations surrounding identity and the media started with the Millennial Generation who, in the 2010s, were mostly teenagers and young adults[13]. Besides Gen Z, Millennials are "the most racially and ethnically diverse adult generation in the nation's history" (Dimock 2019). Still, the polarized climate in which they grew up was formative when it comes to shaping their priorities at the beginning of the decade. In 2010, on a sample composed of over 1,500 respondents over 18 years old, a survey[14] found that the top five priorities of American adults were the economy, jobs, terrorism, social security, and education. This can be partly explained by the subprime mortgage crisis in 2007, which then became a global financial crisis (Duignan 2019). Adding to that, the issue as well as frequency of terrorist attacks, including the 9/11 attacks, made security a strong priority for many and incentivized, in the years that followed, the rise of prejudice.

However, simultaneously, the tech-savvy, individualistic, and connected young teenagers were, at the beginning of the decade, forming ideas of their own, related to tolerance and to a better world. Despite the older generations' mounting concerns, times were changing, and especially among young people who wanted to bridge the growing societal divide. "Millennials came of age during the internet explosion" (Dimock 2019), and, later, Generation Z was born into technology, which became a center for this generation's activism. The 2010s were the decade in which those living in the U.S. took to the streets to

[13] Anyone born between 1981 and 1996 (ages 43 and 28 in 2024) is considered a Millennial, and anyone born from 1997 onward is part of Generation Z (Dimock 2019).
[14] Conducted by the Princeton Survey Research Associates International.

fight for their rights (Dreier 2020). Activism has long been a characteristic of youth culture (Carnegie 2022), and Gen Z, whose motivations are mostly moral and ethical, or stem from "personal experience", is no exception (United NCA 2024). Having grown up amidst "economic instability, escalating college expenses, and significant environmental issues", hyperconnected, through social media, to news of world-catastrophes and other societal issues, "they are not just witnesses to social unrest, but adept at using technology for advocacy", with 32% of them engaging in demonstrations or social justice work, most of which happens online (ibid.).

Technology, indeed, was and is a main precursor for societal and cultural changes. At the end of the 2010s, and looking back at U.S. history, a Pew Research Centre article from 2019 analyzed the many new developments that contributed to change in the 2010s, specifically regarding "technological advancements, demographic shifts and major changes in public opinion" (Schaeffer 2019). According to this study and as of 2019, most adults in the U.S. say they go online and use social media. For Millennials, nearly 100% say they use the internet. Social media has also become a source of news for many Americans, surpassing, in 2018 and for the first time, print newspapers as a news source (ibid.). The dissemination of technology and social media, are, were, as the next chapter will discuss, catalysts for the spread of many social movements around the world.

The 2010s were marked by many demonstrations, namely for economic reasons, but also related to human rights, mostly led by either minority or marginalized groups across the nation. Here, "minority", which can be ethnic, religious, or linguistic, refers to "any group of persons which constitutes less than half of the population in the entire territory of a State whose members share common characteristics of culture, religion or language, or a combination of any of these" (OHCHR 2023). African American, Hispanic, and Indigenous populations of the U.S., among others, fall into this category. Other discriminated or underrepresented populations then include, for instance, women, persons with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ (Barbour 2011). As light was shed by activists on and offline and across the media on these groups, to make way for more representation and their better integration in the American society, a drive of protests would populate the 2010s in the U.S. and, arguably, the Western world. In the globalized world, several issues are treated globally (Castells 2008, 81), related, among others, to the environment and (un)sustainable development, global security, and, of course, to human rights and issues of social justice (Castells 2008, 82).

Overall, throughout the 2010s, minorities and discriminated populations were demanding (and getting) their rights[15], making new sense of the nation: there was even "an upsurge of women, LGBT people, African Americans, and Latinos elected to office, including record numbers in Congress" (Dreier 2020). The 2010s really were a time of change, in discourse, in perspectives as well as in priorities – and more importantly, in public opinion. Some examples of changes in perception regarding human rights come to mind. Support for same-sex marriage, for instance, surpassed opposition during the 2010s, having 61% of support as of 2019. As of 2021, a national survey of American attitudes toward rights and responsibilities in the U.S. found that "large majorities now favor strengthening the nation's civil rights laws, despite continuing partisan division" and that recent events (the 2019 pandemic; BLM protests; etc.) "have caused Americans to think more positively toward other Americans, particularly racial minorities and people of color" (Schaeffer 2019). This goes to prove the impact of these movements, of their fights, but also, in a way, of the prevalence of the ethics of authenticity.

This uproar in human rights movements, and the visibility they gained over the last decade, had very real consequences in the United States when it comes to societal life and even peer perception. With authenticity integrating democratic values, by focusing on individualistic ethics of personal self-development, advocating for freedom and for the emancipation of various discriminated groups (countercultures) has become the norm (Lipovetsky 2022, 70). Because everyone wants to be and declare themselves different, anti-conformism is no longer a threat to society, being, instead, something accepted (Lipovetsky 2022, 67), and worth protecting.

Today, authenticity's practical implementation into everyday life makes its legitimacy nearly absolute (Lipovetsky 2022, 25). The philosophical idea of self-determination of one's identity evolved from being merely theoretical to becoming a tool for transforming "personal identity, one's relationship with others and with the collective" (Lipovetsky 2022, 27). Social movements are evidence of this, shaping the forces of globalization, building networks of

[15] In the U.S., we highlight: in 2010, the DREAM Act, to give students brought to the U.S. as young children "a path to citizenship" (Dreier 2020); in 2015, the legalization same-sex marriage in all 50 states (PBS 2023); in 2013, the creation of the Black Lives Matter movement, in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer, George Zimmerman; in 2017, following the creation of the #MeToo movement, the Women's March, which took place the day after Republican President Trump's inauguration, and was the "largest protest in U.S. history" (Dreier 2020).

action and organization to induce a global social movement for global justice (Castells 2008, 85). Personal authenticity, because of how it changes one's relation to oneself, to identity, to others, is a moral and transformative revolution, so much so that it is a "central [piece] of the culture of the modern democratic world, of the universe that offers individuals the freedom to define themselves, to govern themselves, to establish their own laws, both collective and individual" (Lipovetsky 2022, 30-31). The ideal of authenticity has infiltrated itself in all facets of life, from education to consumerist habits, being now advocated by nearly all. But before going into the challenges and advancements brought, to the literary world, by this contemporary ideal, and although having already been lightly touched upon, a very important aspect of one's involvement in modern society, precursor of social change, remains to be more deeply explored: the (new) public sphere.

4.2 The role of the public sphere

Written in the 1960s, before social media came to be part of individuals' daily lives, but at a time where technology was rapidly and steadily taking hold of modern society, Jürgen Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962)[16] focuses on the development of the bourgeois public sphere (BPS), the pre-democratic "ancestor" of our public sphere today, from the 17th to the 20th century, where "practical reason was institutionalized through norms of reasoned discourse in which arguments, not statuses or traditions, were to be decisive" (Calhoun 1992, 2).

The 17th and 18th centuries were the scenery for the transformation of the modern state, and the basis of capitalist economic activity: transformations of the economy and territory were decisive; the influence of mercantilism, the rise in circulation of print media, etc., propelled the development of this new sphere of authority. Indeed, the BPS is "the public of private individuals who join in debate of issues bearing on state authority" (Calhoun 1992, 7), or public authority; "public" therefore meant "state-related" (Habermas 1991, 18), as opposed to the people, "the private realm", a realm of freedom which must be defended against the domination of the state (Calhoun 1992, 7).

[16] Although Jürgen Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* was originally published in German in 1962, the work cited in this dissertation is its translation into English by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence, published by the MIT Press in 1991.

The family constituted the private realm, and gathering within it was a necessity. Although the family was believed to be independent of the market, it was part of it (Calhoun 1992, 11), being therefore both an agent of society and the "anticipated emancipation" from it, as family members, who were "held together by patriarchal authority", became "bound to one another by human closeness" (Habermas 1991, 55). Moreover, family was extremely important for the "critique of the [BPS] itself, for it taught that there was something essential to humanness that economic or other status could not take away" (Calhoun 1992, 11). In short, between the state and the market, thanks to the formation of the individual within the private realm of the family, new and previously undiscussed ideas were being brought to the forefront by privatized individuals, "psychologically interested in what was 'human,' in self-knowledge, and in empathy" (Habermas 1991, 50). Parallels can be drawn to the first phase of authenticity.

Interestingly, it was with the literary public sphere that the modern idea of culture as an autonomous realm started, as it helped develop the idea of subjectivity and of culture as something which could be institutionalized, thanks to the appearance of places of discussion (e.g., coffee houses; in France, *salons* in private homes) and the circulation of news (i.e., with opinion articles on said literary works) (Calhoun 1992, 12). Already then, literature was a driver for discussion and exchange of ideas, which later derived into topics of political character (and later, into the construction of nations, identities, etc.). For these exchanges to take place, several features (none completely finite) were crucial. More important than class or status differences was the idea of shared or common interests, marked by rational argument, "the sole arbiter of any issue", which "presupposed the problematization of areas that until then had not been questioned" (Habermas 1991, 36). This public established itself as inclusive in principle, with the "only" requirement being that they were propertied and educated (Calhoun 1992, 13).

Now, the early BPS was not exactly all-inclusive or diverse; their (European) members were part of a minority of "mainly educated, propertied men", which means that their ideas and arguments were to benefit mostly them and not anyone else (Calhoun 1992, 3). Moreover, anarchists and antagonists, "emancipated from domination and insulated from the interference of power", were excluded (or excluded themselves) from the public sphere (Habermas 1991, 122). Nonetheless, at least theoretically, the only "official" requirement for entering public debate was that one's arguments were supposed to rely, above all else,

on reason, in hopes of protecting the best interests of the private realm. Conceptualized in this way, the public sphere is a way of social coordination other than power (of the state) and money, which are "are non-discursive modes of coordination", as "they offer no intrinsic openings to the identification of reason and will, and they suffer from tendencies toward domination and reification" (Calhoun 1992, 6).

The BPS permitted relevant societal topics to be publicly discussed and eventually drive state action (Calhoun 1992, 9). Because this elite (the public) represents the state's (public authority) opponents, and is a protector of the private domain, the BPS was "institutionalized", "a practice of rational-critical discourse on political matters" (Calhoun 1992, 9), a rational approach to an objective order – to truth. In fact, at this time, the public opinion's goal was the construction of policies, of law (Calhoun 1992, 16), and public opinion considered itself "the only legitimate source of this law" (Habermas 1991, 54). In this sense, truth, found by critical thought, mirroring general will, could be considered apolitical (Calhoun 1992, 18).

In its more positive sense, public opinion becomes a "reasoned form of access to truth", as referring "to the views held by those who join in rational-critical debate on an issue" (Calhoun 1992, 17). The public sphere was where the conflicting private views of rational people were brought into harmony, something which was made possible due to the times' conditions (Calhoun 1992, 18), namely, the elitism constitutive of this public sphere, despite its desires of inclusion. At least theoretically, the (idea of the) bourgeois public sphere seemed perfectly democratic.

Nonetheless, in a contradictory but inevitable way, with democracy allowing for more inclusive participation in public life, it is the expansion of the quantity of discourse, at the detriment of its quality, which, to Habermas, has led both to the (imminent) evolution of the public sphere and to its (negative) degeneration since its beginnings in the 17th and 18th centuries. Now, Habermas' theory was written in the 1960s, and even though much has changed, Habermas' concerns have become somewhat realized in our modern realities, although maybe not in the exact way he might have predicted. To account for the new challenges brought up by globalization, Manuel Castells recontextualized the public sphere[17]

[17] "The New Public Sphere: Global Civil Society, Communication Networks, and Global Governance" (2008), in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science.*

by reassessing its role in a world marked by the rise of technology, globalization, and capitalism (Castells 2008, 90).

Although Castells' theory has to do with (global) governance, it gives a general and important update on how the public sphere has evolved in our digital, global, ever connected world, by demonstrating that everything is interrelated: the sociopolitical forms and processes in which our society is settled are built upon cultural materials produced by political institutions or coproduced within the public sphere by individuals, interest groups, civil society, and the state (Castells 2008, 80). The public sphere, contrarily to early ideas of what it could become, is therefore not a "neutral space for the production of meaning" (ibid.) and is essential to sociopolitical organization (Castells 2008, 78).

Today, people's opinions and needs regarding the issues that affect their lives and collective future are largely constructed and constituted around the media system, as "it is through [both mass media and horizontal networks of communication] that nonstate actors influence people's minds and foster social change" (Castells 2008, 90). It is through the internet that "citizens inform themselves, defend their opinions, share comments or videos on current topics" (Lipovetsky 2022, 202). Indeed, and paradoxically, "although the individualistic ethic of *be yourself* is consecrated, never has such a high percentage of the population been so involved, disinterestedly, in the name of others and the public good" (Lipovetsky 2022, 203) – only this restructuring is not without its challenges.

4.3 New challenges

At the same time as Gen Z is connected, thanks to the internet, to everything happening in the world, the same platforms which could be (and are, to a certain extent) used for the sharing and discussion of important, common-interest (although today, this is fairly polarized) subjects, and for the pushing forward of critical thinking, indispensable to democratic societies, which seek to take on democratic values (of inclusivity, of diversity), have become, simultaneously, instruments for the exchange of material goods and services, a modern marketplace for the sharing of "content" which multinational companies hope will make users spend more time in their platforms, engendering more profit. Indeed, both

companies and governments saw the digitally connected global state (despite pretenses to the contrary) as "an opportunity to maximize their own interests" (Castells 2008, 89).

Even with the many efforts to contradict the tensions brought up by capitalism and globalization, an increasing number of obstacles render participation in public life difficult. In an age where the public sphere has been transposed into the digital, and public discourse taken the form of online debates, if the variety and inclusion of difference seems ideal, dialogue seems to falter. Although positive in intention and reach, new advancements brought by the spread and democratization of the internet such as the access to knowledge and "high" culture have been accompanied by "a psychological facilitation of access by lowering the threshold capacity required for appreciation or participation" (Calhoun 1992, 23-24). Through mass media, serious involvement in political or critical thought decreased in the public sphere (Calhoun 1992, 24), and visual mass media, in particular, by providing a secondary realm of intimacy (which social media does today to an extreme level), took over, as the press, which encouraged critical discourse, lost its influence (Habermas 1991, 172).

In fact, the bigger threat to critical thinking may be structural and (more or less) invisible elements (e.g., articles and videos of academic or journalistic simulacre) which complexify the arena of public discourse, opacifying it – under an illusion of simulated equity. The immediacy and abundance of information make participating in public opinion an overwhelming experience, especially as social media itself (again, in the context of the capitalist model) seems to be more concerned with money-making strategies than with educating or connecting the users in hopes of their finding understanding, turning, instead, the digital space into an addictive, serotonin inducive territory dominated by ads – becoming not a scene for the sharing and discussion of ideas but a market, where things, services and even individuals (or their data) are bought and sold (Calhoun 1992, 26).

Although in recent years tools like "filter bubbles"[18] and how they manipulate information seems to be generally more well-known, there is, amongst public opinion, a tendency towards "conformity more than critical discourse" (Calhoun 1992, 20). Once considered a

[18] A filter bubble is an algorithmic bias that skews or limits the information an individual user sees on the internet. The bias is caused by the weighted algorithms that search engines, social media sites and marketers use to personalize user experience (from https://www.techtarget.com/whatis/definition/filter-bubble).

threat, a protector of the people's voice, of the private realm (enemy of the state, of the market), public opinion thus surrenders, as consumerist tendencies rise, to a preference for comfort, individualism, and conformity. In other words: "the web of public communication unraveled into acts of individuated reception, however in uniform mode" (Habermas 1991, 161); "the world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only" (Habermas 1991, 171).

Today, although the consumer's receptiveness is public, it is uncritical (Habermas 1991, 175). If the consumer society has been, in many ways, liberating, as it is through it that the conditions for the adherence to the ideal of authenticity were constructed (nothing is more individualistic than a consumers' right to singularly choose what they want to buy) (Lipovetsky 2022, 72-73), the structural challenges brought by capitalism and technology have made it more difficult for people to assert this individuality. Authenticity, in the end, has less to do with originality than with following of one's desires, even if they are the "norm", or "the same as everybody else's", meaning outside influence does not necessarily go against the perception of authenticity (Lipovetsky 2022, 245). The prevalence of the global economic order calls, however, for a careful consideration of what this individualistic consumerist freedom, subdued not to tradition or community, but to the logic of the market, really means (Lipovetsky 2022, 248).

In fact, despite the enlargement of the public sphere and the multiplication of its members, consent is easily "engineered" among consumers of mass culture (Habermas 1991, 194). In this culture of immediacy and individuality, an element of false consciousness takes over. As individuals (and their digital personas) gained importance, cynicism grew around institutions. Due to the mentality of mass-consumption, a pursuit of acclamation was prioritized over the development of "rational-critical consensus" (Calhoun 1992, 25); seeking acclamation thus becomes states and corporate actors' goal, as they attempt to instill in public opinion, through diverse forms of manipulation (namely through advertisement strategies), the "consensus" which might benefit them more (Calhoun 1992, 26). Today, the "manufacturing" of popular opinion has become more devious and more complex while giving the individual a sense of consciousness and awareness.

If publicity is an integral part of democracy as it translates into each individual's opportunity to announce "his personal inclinations, wishes, and convictions – opinions" (Habermas

1991, 219), and the internet has undoubtably translated itself into valuable platforms for such publicity, integration "is to be based on communication rather than domination", communication meaning, here, "not merely sharing what people already think or know but also a process of potential transformation in which reason is advanced by debate itself" (Calhoun 1992, 29), something which these very same platforms seem to hinder. While the new digital platforms pretend to promote and encourage a horizontal kind of communication, they have come to reflect and deepen hierarchies. Indeed, the recent structural transformations of the public sphere (brought about by capitalism, inclusivity, and the digital), made inequalities grow bigger. However, the new-found plurality of voices in the public sphere also made addressing them inevitable. Private organizations began increasingly to assume public power (Calhoun 1992, 21), and "the notion of an objective general interest was replaced [with] one of a fairly negotiated compromise among interests" (Calhoun 1992, 22). Interest groups (public and private organizations, institutions, etc.) started coming forward to demand social rights, which would then drive actions to be taken by the state (ibid.).

Paradoxically, this contributed to the lowering of critical activity and to the rising of a more passive, apolitical culture consumption (Calhoun 1992, 22-23). Non-committal group activities became more important than literary or political debate; although the former are still a form of sharing of culture, it is one much more related to consumption. If the generations of today cannot be considered (or not totally) passive, even in their consumption, their thoughts and actions seem to fall victim to the false simplification of discourse in online spaces, and to the invisible power structures which rule it. For instance, as social media has professionalized itself, new conventions form within the digital space (Lipovetsky 2022, 184). People become a brand, generating, in today's hyper individualistic world, an extreme dependence on the gaze of others (Lipovetsky 2022, 185). People seek validation from others in the form of likes, views, etc., which in turn have become indicative of an object and subject's value.

Moreover, as consumerism is a way of asserting one's individuality, people manifest their authenticity through the art of buying and consuming "authentic" products and services (e.g., ethically provided or produced) (Lipovetsky 2022, 240). In this sense, "authenticity is no longer just a moral virtue or a cultural ideal that asserts itself in radical opposition to everyday and commercial banality: it imposes itself as a requirement that affects objects,

ways of consuming" (ibid.). As people practice and value the ethics of authenticity in everyday life, they expect the companies they buy from to adhere to those same values.

Authenticity therefore becomes a marketing strategy, inciting consumers to buy books on the grounds that the company honors these values of diversity and inclusivity, but it is also a requirement, as consumers are "consum'actors": consumerist acts now go "far beyond the mere utilitarian function of consumption" (Lipovetsky 2022, 261). Consumers seek to link consumption to themselves and their convictions (ibid.), and in this sense it can be politically, ethically, and morally motivated, with consumers choosing to support or boycott a brand or company depending on what they say they stand for or on what is later disclosed about them (Lipovetsky 2022, 262). Brands which seem to have a positive impact on society, which show commitment towards societal issues, which appear to be transparent and conscious are undeniably preferred by consumers (Lipovetsky 2022, 264).

To sum up, the new public sphere is globalized, virtual, and inter-connected, inclusive, and diverse, cynical of governments and institutions, hyper-capitalistic and adept to the concept of authenticity as one's right to be oneself. The younger generations (Millennials and Gen Z) are generally tolerant, socially engaged, "chronically online" and individualistic. Being authentic is today's model of "heroic" life: it is seen as an act of bravery, as something admirable; in fact, it is often "against the heroic ideal [of performance] that the authenticity of the hyper-individualistic self is sought" (Lipovetsky 2022, 86). Nonetheless, despite its ingraining in modern societies, the ethics of authenticity sometimes relates more to the ethics of aesthetics than to the ethics of compromise (Lipovetsky 2022, 87), making, at times, the demand for authenticity a repressive, performative and frustrating requirement (Lipovetsky 2022, 88). Instead of "being themselves", individuals who expose themselves online and therefore sometimes to heavy criticism seek the approval of others and choose to become, instead, what they think others will like.

This new era of authenticity has been, as stressed by Lipovetsky, extremely transformative in society, engendering both positive and negative consequences, new challenges, and this in all areas of life. In fiction, conversations about authenticity started with young readers who, organized into online communities, began discussing identity and representation in the books they were reading: the 2010s marked the rise of book-related communities online, the (mostly) non-expert, young, book commentating niche, fighting publishing houses (and

other “powerholders”), requesting “literary justice” (more inclusivity and diversity in books), in short, seeking, even in fiction, what they deem to be the truth. In other words, performing an informal but influential kind of justice which has been, under the new ethics of authenticity, transforming society – and specifically the literary world.

Chapter 5 | The rise and impact of book communities online

5.1 The online world of books

With the democratization of the internet came an array of different platforms for individuals to connect and to share virtually anything with each other, including literature and books. The digital revolution has, for all people of every generation, opened possibilities for (online) self-representation, in a pool of constantly shared and interacted with content – an activity which has become, for some, even, a source of income (Lipovetsky 2022, 181). The digital and online "world of books" is a good example of the new public sphere at work. This space has seen, over the past decade, an exponential increase in accounts completely dedicated to books, often run by individuals who have a passion for reading and wish to share it, forming communities which have become valuable fora for dialogue across the internet and the world. This chapter therefore focuses on the main platforms where these book communities can be found, and where influential conversations around identity and representation in fiction happen.

Digital book communities are mostly active on the platforms YouTube, Instagram, Twitter[19], and, more recently, TikTok, having first become popular in the United States. Very influential amongst younger generations, YouTube's book "corner" is called BookTube, and the first "BookTube community", emerged in the 2010s (Kalpaxis 2020), being originally very small: most of the creators knew each other and created similar content (Ellis 2021). BookTubers are, as the name indicates, YouTube creators who make videos about books. The first so-called BookTubers[20] were young people – mostly white American teenagers, sometimes still in their early teens, who were reading and sharing the books marketed towards them: YA novels.

Today, BookTube content consists of all types of videos related to books and reading, such as "book tags" (in which creators answer questions about books and reading, related to their preferences), book reviews (often more based on feelings than analysis), reading vlogs (in which creators film the process of reading a book, usually taking breaks to comment on how

[19] Since July 2023, Twitter is now called "X".
[20] The first BookTuber is said to be Christine Riccio (Kapaxis 2020), or PolandBananasBOOKS, on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/@polandbananasBOOKS. As of 2024, the most successful book-creator across all social platforms is Jack Edwards, on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/@jack_edwards.

they feel about the story). But BookTube also sees their creators do other types of activities *surrounding* books, such as going to book launches and conventions (e.g., BookCon, an event in New York City which joins books and pop culture), going to premieres of book to movie adaptations and promoting a variety of products and experiences related to books and reading. Literature has thus gone from promoting critique and discussion to be included into and inspire consumerist leisure-related activities. As creators began getting larger followings, American publishers were quick to recognize their content's marketing strength and began sending them books in hopes of getting a review, or sponsoring videos in exchange for "an honest review" (one in which the creator is supposedly free to share their own feelings), making the book community a place for readers to freely, passionately share with each other but also for publishers (and other book-related businesses) to market their products.

Over the years, the publishers' presence in the book community helped it grow as much as it helped shape it, making it its reflection, of sorts (although we can argue both influence each other). An example can be found in the issue of race. In a 2019 article, writer (and avid BookTube viewer) Phyllis Feng writes that, for many years, "race was an undeniable, unacknowledged factor in determining the success of a BookTuber". In Feng's view, the lack of black creators could be due to the lack of black authors and editors in the book industry, as it is also the latter who, by collaborating with creators (sponsoring their videos; flying them to events, etc.), helps define and propel their success. In the new decade (2020s), one might say that the landscape has slightly changed in terms of the creators' diversity. One example is Asian-Canadian and queer BookTuber Cindy Pham[21], who as of 2024 has garnered over half a million subscribers (a substantial number for the BookTube niche). She remains, however, an exception among her peers.

All in all, it is fair to say that readers take inspiration from their favorite creators on what books to buy, as they make book discussions fun and add to the hype and excitement surrounding this century-old activity. On social media, and within the ethics of authenticity, what prevails is the expression of one's feelings or emotions, especially through video and image formats (easier to get through, they relate to today's idea of immediate gratification), and airs of pretentiousness and academia are disliked or even condemned (Lipovetsky 2022,

[21] Cindy Pham on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/@withcindy.

182-183). Many users are not, in fact, looking for "academic" reviews, which could be provided by literature scholars or students, but more for feelings of excitement or "good" reasons for reading a book, i.e., related to certain tropes, or how much of a page-turner/how entertaining a story is, rather than what one can take away from it in terms of knowledge.

Platforms like BookTube have allowed, for the first time, young readers to discuss and promote well-loved books in an innovative, less academic/institutional way. In the 2010s, fantasy YA like the *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007) and the *Six of Crows* duology (2015-2016) were at the forefront, as well as so-called "realistic fiction novels" (stories which seem like they could take place in our world) such as *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012) and *Eleanor & Park* (2012). These novels, all bestsellers, were largely quoted and discussed by creators and young people online all throughout the 2010s.

In 2020, the appearance of the Chinese app TikTok, largely used by Gen Z, made way for the creation of another extremely influential online book community: BookTok. Much like on YouTube, BookTok content revolves around book reviews, merchandise, and events, only the videos are generally shorter and sometimes go viral without their creator necessarily gaining much traction – contrarily to BookTubers, whose longer content usually allows for the creator to stand out. On BookTok, it is easier for a creator to not show their face or be somewhat anonymous, while exerting, nonetheless, a large influence (e.g., by having a video go viral). This means that an opinion on a book may circulate massively and get a lot of interaction from users (i.e., comment; likes) without users knowing (or even caring about) who wrote the review, and even less whether they are academically qualified.

Moreover, the online platform Goodreads is a fundamental agora for the book community as it is where many debates are first originated. In fact, as the "world's largest site for readers and book recommendations", Goodreads is one of the few social media platforms completely dedicated to books. In it, users can rate the books they are reading out of five stars, and then write their comment/review in a dedicated space, which other users can like/comment on. There are also other utilities such as creating digital shelves or participating in the yearly reading challenge, but the reviewing aspect is definitely Goodreads' main trait. There are no influencers on Goodreads such as we have been describing until now, but many influencers coming from BookTube, for instance, own an account, and because of their following their reviews are also generally found at the top. Reading reviews on this platform is, for many

readers, a determining factor before buying a book or making the decision of reading it. Even so, anyone can leave a review, meaning (almost) anyone can have influence when it comes to books, regardless of their background or following.

Summing up, although, at the beginning, young readers, especially the ones who grew up with the internet, were compelled to talk about books online with the primary objective of connecting with those sharing the same interests, some accounts have proved themselves to be extremely influential: they have become sources of income, partnering up with publishers and book-related companies and services, but also becoming a voice for common concerns. Nowadays, readers online are no longer just speaking to friends, as communities have grown with and around them, professionalizing themselves. Some of the more successful accounts[22] influencing people to buy books or covering "book-world" issues can be considered "digital book influencers", personalities of reference when one wishes to find out more about books. They are "people with above average influence on their audience"; experts of a particular niche, their expertise generally gained informally, through their online activity (Geyser 2022). With a varied skill set related to technology and communication, they do not necessarily have a formal background on literature, and generally speak in English. The prevalence and wide spreading of the English language makes for the massive circulation of English language books (Books+Publishing 2022), as well as for a larger success for English language creators[23]. All of this contributes and has contributed to the rise and popularity of certain genres, such as YA.

5.2 The rise and transformation of YA through online book communities

If today, there are many different online creators recommending many types of books, not just YA, the initial community members, mostly composed of teenagers, who first started

[22] One example of an account which promotes discussions surrounding book "scandals" is American creator Jess Owen's channel on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/@JessOwens, in her series titled "Book CommuniTEA". However, other kinds of book influencers are also non-book-related personalities with a large internet following (e.g., famous models and actors).

[23] The prevalence of the English language matters firstly, because it explains (among other things) the wide circulation of English language books, for instance, but also because it automatically privileges a certain vocabulary and context to discuss topics (such as the representation of marginalized identities) transversal to all literature, but ultimately, to a certain extent, particular to each country, language, (national) canon (as it is historical and contextual). This could be something worth exploring in a deeper way. In this dissertation, the takeaway remains this: yes, the American experience is varied, but it still relates to a particular context.

gaining popularity, were very focused on YA. Young readers found elements in YA which they were not finding in other books, such as in adult fiction. These were not only books in which they were at the center, but in which the main character, or, at least, other adjacent characters, could be admittedly more diverse. *Divergent* (2011-2013) was a woman dominated franchise. *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012) featured disabled characters. *The Mortal Instruments* (2007-2014) had LGBTQ+ and POC representation, and so did *Simon vs. the Homosapiens Agenda* (2015), and, later, the acclaimed 2017 novel *The Hate U Give* (2017). Those are only a few examples. It is the online conversations and trends surrounding these books that have contributed to the rise of YA and helped define what it is. Steve Neale, for instance, (though with a focus on the film industry), emphasizes the role of institutional discourses surrounding genre, such as the publicity and marketing, as well as press and the "'word of mouth' discourses of everyday life" (Neale 1990, 49), and YA is a genre whose "institutional discourse" takes a lot of inspiration from the communities which are reading it and expressing themselves online[24].

Although novels are made up of words, the primarily visual quality of social media apps (i.e., videos and pictures) have made the aesthetics of a novel – as a physical, "showcaseable" and aesthetically pleasing object, as well as the media created around them (e.g., fanart; book trailers), increasingly more important. These narrative images help form expectation and help define, along with the media pieces themselves (Neale 1990, 49), the YA genre. The young adult literature of today is therefore characterized not only by its stories and themes but also by its aesthetics, thus appealing to the new generation of "chronically online" teenagers, to whom visuals matter.

Moreover, Neale argues that the identification of industrial/journalistic terms is of extreme importance when defining genres, and it is the responsibility of to the critic to re-define them based on the corpus he analyses, reconstituting it (Neale 1990, 50). Young adult, due to its didactic (and commercial) qualities, has, arguably, as its main critics, its young readers. YA authors, more than those of other genres, do not only simply subject themselves to criticism,

[24] Publishers take inspiration from online discourse surrounding books to market them, for example, by attempting to describe them according to the popular tropes they might contain (even when the books themselves were not written with those tropes in mind).

but also listen to and sometimes act based on the responses of their readership. They are the ones who, in collaboration with YA authors, help define what young adult literature is.

Even though the issue of representation in literature goes far beyond what is said and done on the internet, nowadays these book communities are often the first ones to point out issues. Despite YA's diversity trait, its main characters have been mostly straight and white, from the *Hunger Games* (a YA dystopian) to *Fangirl* by Rainbow Rowell (2013) (a contemporary YA novel). Just as, throughout the 2010s, there has been considerable change in Western societies when it comes to how we think of minorities, for instance, YA literature has also evolved. Only more recently have there been more YA series and novels with a POC, LGBTQ+ or disabled main characters, coinciding with a time in which diversity and authenticity in media have become something to look for, and therefore also a selling point. YA authors, readers themselves, are often not only aware of these challenges but they are also at their center, either as the people being supported or criticized.

Many discussions which start with a YouTube video or a Goodreads review, in which users are commenting under one user's video/review, are often taken to Twitter, where they become more of a dialogue in which everyone is replying to one another, with each answer (or "Tweet") having the same form and, potentially, (symbolic) weight. Although these discussions can seem like an interesting way of exchanging ideas about a certain book or release, they are also limited in form. However, they can bear real consequences. The force and speed through which opinions and ideas circulate, how sometimes decisive or incitive they are – how they demand, through their joined voices, for action to be taken, make for movements no publisher can ignore. An example of the influence and force of such online debates is the one that led to the cancelation of Kosoko Jackson's début YA novel *A Place for Wolves*. The novel was meant to be released in March 2019, but in February of that year, Jackson withdrew the publication after receiving large amounts of backlash on Twitter, first sparked by a review on Goodreads which had requested an ARC[25]. The reviewer accused the book of mishandling the Kosovan war, in which the story takes place. Jackson ended up

[25] An ARC is an "Advanced Reader Copy". Before a book comes out, reviewers (not necessarily ones with a large following or formal qualifications) can request a copy to the publisher in exchange for an honest review. This is a way of building excitement around a book before its release.

issuing a (digital) apology addressed to readers and the book was never released. We will return to this incident in Chapters 6 and 9.

To sum up, social media has made for a new way of giving or asserting value (through likes, followers and posts; the algorithm), for a new way for users to make money, and for companies to either profit from selling their users' data (Lipovetsky 2022, 188-189) or, such as publishers do with books, to market and advertise their products. Moreover, the economic power of publishing houses, together with algorithms, filter bubbles and other constraining digital tools and systems have the power of limiting or directing interactions as well as the content one may come across with, influencing individual choices by presenting what is most popular (Lipovetsky 2022, 189). Although there is still a wide variety of content ("there is something for everyone"), it is important to be aware of the invisible power structures which condition, filter, and constrain it.

The success of young adult literature is undoubtably linked to globalization and digitalization, and to Anglo-American market dominance. The most well-known online book creators are of either American, British or Canadian nationality, and completely master the language. New creators who wish to grow a following often opt to speak in English instead of in their native language[26]. This does not mean that the ones who decide to communicate in the latter are unable to gain success, only that it is inevitably limited. In general, the tradition of Bookstagram and BookTube (and now BookTok, although it is a Chinese platform) is American. American publishers were therefore quicker to think of digital influencers as part of their marketing strategies, something more unusual in other countries. For other publishers in other countries, maintaining a more engaging social media presence can still feel very foreign indeed. And yet, it seems like with the acceleration of the internet and social media in the globalized world, not even a small market like the Portuguese is exempt from the influence of the American model, and of the American genre of young adult literature, with its preoccupations with diversity and inclusivity.

[26] Dutch BookTuber Leonie, from the channel The Book Leo, is an example of a very popular non-native English-speaking creator: https://www.youtube.com/@TheBookLeo.

5.3 The cross-borders impact of YA: a Portuguese example

In 2023, then nineteen-year-old Rodrigo Manhita integrated the team of Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial (PRHGE)[27], in Portugal, as an editor and creative director, with the aim to inspire young people in Portugal to read more diverse and queer stories, as well as books written by national authors (Neves 2024). As an editor at PRHGE, his work consists of reading and editing texts, but not only, as he explains that part of his job is analyzing trends and making research on social media, to understand what people are talking about and what they want to read, and to follow YA's fast-changing trends and ever-evolving readership (ibid.).

Manhita believes that publishing houses have a certain amount of responsibility when it comes to the books they publish and tries to not to look at books in terms of profit. He notes the need to publish books which are not mainstream, as well as to bring forward cultures other than the Anglo-Saxon, but he recognizes how a publishing house is also a business "in which you need to deliver financial results so that the rest can happen" (Manhita 2024 in *Público*) (my translation). In this sense, instead of attempting to counter the North American and British book markets, Manhita claims the objective is to rather attempt to keep up with them, by, for instance, having new releases come out at the same time as in the original publications' country (Neves 2024).

Like many of his generation, Manhita credits social media for bringing together young people and books, for allowing users to share this activity with others in a spontaneous and informal way, which also helps look at books in a different (less institutional) manner. With this in mind, in 2024 and following the popularity of YA books, he created a new PRHGE imprint, the first YA imprint in Portugal: Secret Society, which has the goal of connecting with and catering to young people (Penguin Livros 2024) and considers itself an innovative and diverse brand. A few of the authors set to be published by the imprint in 2024 are popular YA American authors Tahereh Mafi and Adam Silvera, among others, but also Portuguese authors A. R. Ruano and Bruno Leão. These choices show some dedication in the inclusion of diverse voices (Adam Silvera is queer and Tahereh Mafi is of Iranian descent). Additionally, another distinguishable aspect of this imprint's publications is the "different"

[27] Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial is the Portuguese and Spanish language division of the international publishing group Penguin Random House.

design, which includes, among other particularities, a butterfly printed on the spine (the imprint's symbol). Furthermore, trigger warnings are included to alert for sensitive content. The very existence of such an imprint in a small European country like Portugal is indicative of the force of online book communities and how they have helped popularize YA in North America and across the Western world.

Now, Secret Society can be seen as a transformative initiative. Although promoting teenage-oriented and diverse stories is a classic motivation for YA, Manhita goes a step further by including national authors. From a market (and societal) standpoint this is an interesting move, as the already-interested YA readers may be more prone to discover stories written in Portuguese by having them be sold under the imprint's stamp, which promises to deliver a kind of story which the readers are almost sure to like. Moreover, such an imprint is highly demonstrative not only of the impact of book communities and of YA literature outside of the U.S., but, more importantly, it showcases the younger generations' desire of seeing books which are not only catered to them but are also diverse and written by diverse authors.

However, Secret Society is still, (even in the title), at its basis, of Anglo-Saxon inspiration. Moreover, YA literature follows a very specific model, which changes according to (social media) trends which often start in the U.S., or with American books, arguably always more widely promoted (thanks to the size of the book market as well as the language) than others from other countries. Furthermore, it may be safe to say that the Portuguese books selected may comply, to some extent, to some YA conventions. Indeed, no matter how innovative YA literature might be, we may ask ourselves if this American genre is the one which should be offered to teenage readers as an example of an "authentic" book.

Furthermore, this might be an example of an institution's subscription to popular values; the publishing houses' motivations could seem to be, as Habermas predicted, more of a way for finding or manufacturing consensus amongst public opinion (readers), quickly and profitably, instead of resorting to more thought-through, sometimes risky because they are daring, new selections. Of course, this would neglect other important factors, such as the publishing house's need for profit. Furthermore, it would also disregard the positive social and cultural impacts listening to the public opinion can have. Many aspects are at play when thinking of the issue of representation, as it is also a matter of articulating interests and intentions in a polarized space. The next chapter will therefore attempt to analyze the way

public opinion, in the era of authenticity, has transformed the issue of cultural authenticity in fiction throughout the 2010s, and, later, Chapter 7 will dive into how the main powerholders, the publishing houses, have appropriated it.

Chapter 6 | The paradoxical demand for authenticity in literature

6.1 A case of "misrepresentation": *Eleanor & Park*

As discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, younger generations have grown up valuing authenticity, as in the right to be oneself. They value diversity, tolerance, and showing respect for other cultures and identities, and they expect others (including brands and companies) to subscribe to those same values and to act accordingly. Moreover, readers expect and seek to see themselves and others represented in the stories they read. More aware of inequalities, they go online to vocalize their concerns and protest what they find to be unjust or harmful, such as cases of misrepresentation in books. Let us, then, go back to the early 2010s, and to a book which, despite its popularity among young readers at the time of release, was later heavily criticized for the misrepresentation of the marginalized cultures it depicts, contributing to the rise of a new understanding of authenticity, slightly different from the one discussed in Chapter 3, which privileges, above all, publicly joining "diverse" authors and their "diverse" stories.

Eleanor & Park, a young adult novel by American author Rainbow Rowell, was first published in 2012 in the United States, instantly becoming a national and then international bestseller, and winning numerous awards. Set over one school year in the town of Omaha (Nebraska, USA) in 1986, the novel depicts the encounter between sixteen-year-old teenagers Eleanor Douglas and Park Sheridan, as they navigate the challenges of life at home and at school and fall in love in the all-or-nothing way teenagers often do, intensely and for the first time.

The story is written entirely in third person but alternates between Eleanor and Park's points of view, which gives an insight on each individual character as well as an external view of the other. The novel is constructed around each characters' individual struggles but mostly around the love story. In general, *Eleanor & Park* is a good example of the typical YA novel: centered around teenage characters, written in simple English and relatively non-explicit (when it comes to sexual/violent content), it covers heavy themes such as domestic abuse, child abuse, bullying, racism, discrimination, and body image, among other topics. Contrarily to many YA books, however, it does contain strong language (e.g., swearing; sexual connotations) and was for that reason banned (or "challenged", as Rowell writes in her website) in certain schools in the U.S. In the book, strong language is mainly used by the

adults, specifically Eleanor's stepdad Richie and Park's father, and by the teenage bullies. The main characters themselves rather attempt throughout the story to reject what is ultimately another form of violence, finding comfort in each other. *Eleanor & Park* is, before all else, a contemporary *romance* novel. But the swearing is not the reason the book has become so controversial.

Since its publication, the book has decreased in popularity on grounds of the misrepresentation of its diverse characters. To assess the different criticisms which have been levelled at the book, as well as how it relates to the broader conversation surrounding "authenticity" in fiction, the next section was based on a close-reading and analysis of the novel crossed with other (community[28], rather than academic) sources and opinions.

Discussion

Eleanor and Park are, like many real-life teenagers, unpopular at school. Eleanor is the new girl, as described by Park, she is "big and awkward", with an unconventional style (Rowell 2013, 7). She is mocked for her hair and clothes, as well as for her body, her biggest insecurity, and gets nicknamed "big red" (Rowell 2013, 104). Eleanor meets Park on the first day of school, on the school bus, and they end up sitting together every day. Park is half Korean from his mother's side and, just like Eleanor, he has a hard time at school. His classmates are racist, and their bullying comes mostly in the form of gratuitous, offensive, and ignorant comments.

> "What the fuck does Sheridan know about kung-fu?" Mikey said.
> "Are you retarded? Steve said. "His mom's Chinese."
> Mikey looked at Park carefully. Park smiled and narrowed his eyes. "Yeah, I guess I see it", Mikey said. "I always thought you were Mexican."
> "Shit, Mikey", Steve said, "you're such a fucking racist."
> "She's not Chinese," Tina said. "She's Korean."
> "Who is?" Steve asked.
> "Park's mom." (Rowell 2013, 6-7)

[28] Here, what is meant with "community sources" are the informal reviews, in video or written format, which are posted by the readers (teenagers and young adults, not necessarily academically qualified) on the internet, and which contributed to the debate and controversy surrounding *Eleanor & Park*.

Park's classmates make assumptions based on his race – such as the fact that he should know a lot about martial arts (which he does, but only because his father is passionate about them), and, at the beginning of the novel, Park deals with his bullies by being passive. Even though he seems aware that what his counterparts are doing is wrong, he aims to protect the little respect from his colleagues he still has, and when he sees Eleanor getting bullied, he is not only passive but annoyed (Rowell 2013, 92). On her end, Eleanor also does not have the best first impression of Park, as she constantly refers to him as the "weird Asian Kid", the "stupid Asian kid", and only later as the "beautiful, stupid Asian kid", with "honey-beautiful skin" (Rowell 2013, 257).

> Weird Asian kid.
> She was pretty sure he was Asian. It was hard to tell. He had green eyes. And skin the color of sunshine through honey.
> Maybe he was Filipino. Was that in Asia? Probably. Asia's out-of-control huge.
> Eleanor had only one Asian person in her life – Paul, who was in her math class at her old school. Paul was Chinese. His parents had moved to Omaha to get away from the Chinese government. […] Paul was the one who had taught Eleanor to say "Asian" and not "oriental".
> "Oriental's for food", he'd said.
> "Whatever, La Choy[29] Boy," she'd said back. (Rowell 2013, 53)

Eleanor herself displays, as seen in the passage above, rather discriminatory behavior. Park is generally described by her in a very stereotypical and othering way, as she constantly points out Park's race through exhaustive, commonplace metaphors. When Park smiles, his eyes get "sort of wide". Sometimes Eleanor wonders if the shape of his eyes affects how he sees things. She seems to be, at least on this last point, self-aware: "that was probably the most racist question of all time" (Rowell 2013, 65). But all throughout the novel, the exoticization (as in Park's "exotic" portrayal) persists: "When he was really happy, his eyes disappeared into his cheeks" (Rowell 2013, 206); "Park didn't look pretty [with eyeliner on]. He looked dangerous. Like Ming the Merciless[30]" (2013, 218)"; "The eyeliner did make [Park's] eyes pop. It also made him look even less white (2013, 222)". These remarks feed

[29] La Choy (since 1922) is an American brand which sells canned and pre-packaged American Chinese foods.
[30] Ming The Merciless, an evil emperor, is a fictional character and villain from the American comic strip *Flash Gordon*, in which he first appeared in 1934. The character has been associated with the "Yellow Peril", a term which referred to the people of Asia as a threat to the West (BGSU 2013).

on well-known stereotypes about Asian individuals, and no other perspective in the book is proposed to counter-it – not even Park's.

Park's American father Jamie met Mindy (born Min-Dae) while he was stationed as a veteran in Korea, and Mindy immigrated to America after their marriage. Once in Omaha, they had Park and his younger brother Josh. Though the relationship between the parents seems positive, the biracial family's depiction falls largely into stereotypes. Mindy, for instance, an immigrant Asian woman, is the neighborhoods' beautician (a stereotypically Asian occupation). According to Eleanor, she looks "exactly like a doll"; Eleanor recalls the Dainty China Country in the renowned 1900 work *The Wizard of Oz*, which she thought, as a child, was a country full of Chinese people: "But they were actually ceramic, or they'd turn ceramic, if you'd tried to sneak one back to Kansas. Eleanor imagined Park's dad […] tucking his Dainty China person into his flak jacket and sneaking her out of Korea" (Rowell 2013, 129) – a reminder of the racist "China doll" categorization of Asian women in the U.S. (Lee 2018). Moreover, although she tries to integrate the American neighborhood she lives in (which explains the name change), Mindy keeps her Korean accent. Despite Park's apparent certainty that she really cannot help it, "sometimes Park thought she kept the accent on purpose, because his dad liked it" (Rowell 2013, 25). This is yet another form of exotification of Mindy, of an Asian woman, this time seen (though indirectly) through the white father's perception and, in a sense, desire.

The identity struggle is Park's most present struggle. In fact, in the novel, being Korean is Park's "problem", as he constantly wishes he would look more like his white father. He compares himself to his brother, Josh, who is described as resembling the father's (proudly) Irish side of the family: "All the women in his family were tiny, and all the men were huge. Only Park's DNA had missed the memo. Maybe the Korean genes scrambled everything" (Rowell 2013, 120). Now, this struggle could have been interesting to explore in a young adult novel; Rowell could have, through her characters, allowed for recognition, and help give new insights for the eventual de-construction of stereotypes. Instead, Park finds consolation for his struggle only in his relationship with Eleanor who, unfortunately, is completely ignorant, and their conversations about race are never conclusive, beyond the fact that they might make Park feel a little bit better.

An example of one of these conversations happens near the end of the novel, when Eleanor and Park have an important conversation about Park feeling insecure about his looks. As a reader, we have followed Park's thoughts and know about these concerns, but this is the first time Eleanor is hearing about them. Park tells her he is insecure about his looks, and compares Asian boys to Asian girls, who white guys deem to be "exotic"[31] (Rowell 2013, 276). Park challenges Eleanor to think of one attractive Asian guy she knows of, but she cannot think of one, and so she says (maybe out of frustration):

> "I don't know what any of that has to do with me […]".
> "It has everything to do with me," he answered.
> "No, […] it doesn't… I don't even know what it means that you're Korean."
> "Beyond the obvious?" […]
> "When I look at you," she said, leaning into him, "I don't know if I'm thinking you're cute because you're Korean, but I don't think it's in spite of it. I just know that I think you're cute […]." (Rowell 2013, 276)

Although this passage tries to be complimentary towards Park, it does not necessarily de-exoticize him (Eleanor "does not know anything"), and it does not make up for the fact that he embodies "many common East Asian stereotypes. He does taekwondo, excels in math, struggles in English, and is often described as small and feminine-looking" (Jung 2020), something he struggles with, so much so that at some point in the story he even questions his sexual orientation. Moreover, "Park's internalized racism focuses on his femininity […]. In Western media, East Asian men are consistently stereotyped as feminine"; "his white-passing brother, on the other hand, is athletic and 'big'" (Jung 2020). In fact, Park's "mixed-race identity" seems to be "often reduced down to a plot device for the white protagonist to fetishize and project upon" (Cheung 2018). In her now archived "angry girl review", reader Wendy Xu goes as far as to compare Park's characterization to Edward Cullen's from the *Twilight*[32] series: "I would have felt better if Rainbow Rowell had written Park as a vampire or a werewolf or some other inhuman creature, the stuff of teen girl YA fantasy" (2014). Besides the fact that stereotypical fantastical creatures are unlikely to harm anyone, when viewed in this way, we may ask ourselves: Through whose eyes are we seeing Park? Are we

[31] Park thinks this is advantageous. The fact that he does is not necessarily problematic, only it is, once again, one more information on the Korean American experience inconsistently thrown into the story "just because".
[32] The *Twilight* series (2008-2012) by Stephanie Meyer tells the supernatural love story between seventeen-year-old teenager Bella and an immortal vampire named Edward Cullen.

ever truly in his head? Or do his point of view, and his struggles, even, exist mostly to respond to a teenage girl's fantastical wish?...

Even if he shares half the title, Park becomes, in this novel, "the other" in the story, as he is constantly othered and exoticized not only by his colleagues but also by the one who supposedly understands him best, Eleanor (whose unconventionality ends up being welcomed by Park), without his identity ever being properly fleshed out. Now, as he so says, Park does not know anything about being Korean (Rowell 2013, 77). In a way, this fact is plausible, as his mother's efforts of integrating the country where she immigrated to could limit how much of her culture she might have passed on to her children. But none of this is explicit in the book, and when Park expresses his worries to Eleanor, she responds: "'Well, I don't know what it means to be Danish and Scottish,' she said. 'Does it matter?'" (Rowell 2013, 277). Although it might not matter for Americans of Danish and Scottish descent, it certainly does for Korean Americans, as their history of oppression and discrimination in the U.S. differs greatly from theirs.

Moreover, and to emphasize what seems to be a general lack of research or care, besides misrepresenting Asians, some claim the book is anti-black. One example is Eleanor's description of the school: "Most of the kids here were black, but most of the kids in honors classes were white. They got bussed from west Omaha. And the white kids from the Flats, dishonor students, get bussed in from the other direction." (Rowell 2013, 31). This (societal, cultural, economic) issue in the school exists here to set the scene but is never explored. Moreover, Eleanor's "friends", DeNice and Beebi, two black girls whom little is known about, are secondary characters who exist for little else than to keep Eleanor company and make her feel better, and the lines they deliver are, again, nothing short of stereotypical: "'Those girls are trifling,' DeNice said. 'They're so insignificant, God can hardly see them.' / "'Hmm-hmm,' the other girl agreed" (Rowell 2013, 55). Although it is set in the 1980s, which could explain some of these choices, the book itself was written in 2015 in a genre which is expected to be didactic, and parts of it could have been re-written in a more culturally sensitive way, by, for instance, taking the time to better research the different perspectives of the marginalized characters represented, avoiding, in this way, the inclusion of harmful stereotypes.

But even other points in the novel seem to be quite underdeveloped, such as issues relating to gender identity and sexual orientation. Both Jamie and Mindy believe in traditional gender roles and punish deviations, e.g., when Park decides to experiment with makeup, his father gets angry at him (Rowell 2013, 229). Park's gender/sexual identity struggle represents a big theme, but one which is never tactfully touched upon. Overall, it was the othering and exoticization of East Asian people and stereotypical depiction of black characters which contributed to the book's downfall, despite its compliance, at least in form and themes (teenage main characters; simple English; fast-paced reading), to the young adult genre.

To give Rainbow Rowell some (or any) credit, it is fair to assume that there may be some "truth" (or experience) to her work. Eleanor's struggle with her body image seems to be fairly portrayed with comparisons to her "statuesque" mother and self-derogatory comments translating the adolescent desire to hide oneself (Rowell 2013, 18). Moreover, as the story is set in 1986 in Omaha (Nebraska, USA), where there was a lot of racism and division (Fletcher 2012), there were indeed sharper disparities between the white population and African Americans in terms of education and class. People are born within a certain ideology, and, in Eleanor's case, with the references to *The Wizard of Oz* and *Flash Gordon*, we can see how representation itself has shaped how she sees the world. The fact that she sees other cultures in a certain light is due exactly to everything (or lack thereof) she has been exposed to while growing up. Racist and discriminatory comments were, unfortunately, commonplace in schools, and still are now (Green 2023). For a long time, they were not punished nor considered inherently bad. Moreover, although many people do, not everyone has harmful intentions, as discrimination is often informed by ignorance and vice-versa (Bouiss 2023). It is plausible that Eleanor, not knowing much about Asia, ends up believing stereotypes; her openness to learn could be a nod to the possibility of evolving each individual may have.

However, the issue is this book does not show any of this effectively, nor add anything to the conversation, as it perpetuates the same stereotypes it references at the same time as it claims to understand the discriminated characters. In short: the representations of marginalized identities in *Eleanor & Park* lack cultural authenticity because they are harmful and ignorant. In general, Rainbow Rowell just comes across as out of touch. As with this metaphor Eleanor uses to describe her family's situation: "It was crazy. *Diary of Anne Frank* crazy" (Rowell

2013, 26). Although we may be able to forgive fifteen-year-old Eleanor for thinking in this way, we might have a harder time forgiving Rainbow Rowell for making that choice.

Now, although Park and Eleanor have, in the book, their own individual struggles, their story is above all a love story. However, as Sims Bishop emphasizes, when it comes to marginalized identities, the author must pay attention even to the smallest details. If the aggregating book by Short and Fox on cultural authenticity (in children's literature) was released in 2003, and discussed mainly amongst scholars, the conversation was popularized by public opinion especially in the 2010s, as book communities were gaining popularity and YA was starting to affirm itself to be, at its core, an inclusive and diverse genre.

In 2015, due to the book's success, it was announced that *Eleanor & Park* would be made into a movie. However, nothing else was said about the fact until 2020, when the news was again revived, but then the novel was already deep into controversy. About the possibility of a film, BookTuber Cari says: "I can only hope that they either downplay the whole obsession with Park being half Korean and just tell the romance story. Or – get a Korean American screenwriter to fix it" (2020). For this issue of misrepresentation, the reviewers mentioned in this chapter propose one common solution:

> It's important to begin by recognizing the potential problems with writing authentic characters with identities removed from the author. Rainbow Rowell is a white American woman who grew up in Omaha, the predominantly white city in which the story takes place. (Cheung 2018)

> Even if you don't see the depiction of Park's character as problematic or harmful, or even if you relate to his character and struggles, why does Rainbow Rowell, a white lady from middle America, think she is the one who has to tell this story? Why does she get to make a buttload of money off this book while Asian-American writers and other marginalized writers still struggle to get their foot through the door? (Jung 2020)

Indeed, just as in the earlier public sphere, reviewers seem to come forward with an idea of "truth" in mind, and with a distinct goal of discussing and sharing this truth, something which, they hope, their main opponents (the authors, the publishing houses) will adopt: this truth is cultural authenticity in a book legitimated by the identity of the writer. They propose the following: that stories which relate to one identity are better told by someone *of* that identity sharing their authentic story. When it comes to cultural authenticity, this relates to Sims Bishop's points, on one hand of the insider as the informant, and, on the other, of the

importance of the author's intentions. However, what can be understood from Cheung and Jung's comments is that the authenticity of a story, which translates into how well it represents a certain identity, can be more effectively (or solely?) achieved through a writer of that identity – through a writer's own voice. But is such a scenario truly the solution?

6.2 #OwnVoices, a viable answer?

To answer both the issue of marginalized/diverse author promotion as well as the one of representation, the #OwnVoices movement (started in 2015) was born, first online as a hashtag, and then materialized onto panel titles and book covers. A part of Asian American authors Ellen Oh and Malinda Lo's diversity campaign We Need Diverse Books (WNDB), the term was coined by YA author Corinne Duyvis, and refers to children and young adult books about characters from underrepresented or marginalized groups with which the author shares the same identity, meaning that the writing is inspired by the author's own experiences and written from their own perspective. Certain books were then marketed with the hashtag #OwnVoices, so that people could find them more easily. The hashtag therefore meant that readers not only could (supposedly) be sure of the story's authenticity, but also support the author and their "own voice". Subsequently, books which were not necessarily marketed as #OwnVoices started getting marked as such, to facilitate their circulation but also to provide recognition.

One very famous #OwnVoices example is Angie Thomas' YA debut novel *The Hate U Give* (2018). In it, sixteen-year-old Starr Carter witnesses the fatal shooting of her unarmed childhood best friend at the hands of a police officer, and consequently ends up being wrapped up into a national trial. The novel tackles topics such as racial injustice, youth, Black American culture, and the Black Lives Matter movement, and was highly acclaimed for what was deemed a fair and accurate depiction of the "contemporary black experience in America" (Wheatle 2017). Thomas, a black woman, got inspiration from her own experience as well as her knowledge of the community to write the story. The novel has known immense success, selling 100,000 copies in the first month only, and has been adapted to an equally acclaimed movie of the same name. The impact it had on its audience, especially its younger audience, was deemed positive, as it provided its readers with new perspectives and knowledge on BLM and beyond, but also allowed for what can be considered fair

representation. *The Hate U Give* is an example, among several, of #OwnVoices at work. The book's commercial success and general reception in society most probably empowered other diverse individuals to get to writing, or, at least, encouraged some publishers to pick up diverse authors and works.

In fact, despite *The Hate U Give*'s relevant topic and subsequent success, Michael Strother, a former editor at Simon & Schuster, said he had to fight for its publication (one of his colleagues even asked: "Do we need Angie Thomas if we have Jason Reynolds?") (So and Wezerek 2020). Situations like these only reaffirmed the urgency of #OwnVoices' call for the promotion of marginalized authors, and not just stories with marginalized characters in them. Even with the (Gen Z or other) readers' outspoken desire of reading them, which should have given publishers some (at least, commercial) reassurance, many obstacles and misconceptions remain. Novels such as *Eleanor & Park* and *The Hate U Give* reinforced the idea of the "authentic" young adult novel – the first because of how poorly the author represented the discriminated groups she did not herself identify with, and the latter for the exact opposite, and the #OwnVoices idea of authenticity which links the identity of the author to the story they are telling grew stronger. With this definition, the author's identity, their marginalized voice, becomes a legitimacy tool in ensuring factful, tactful and fair representation, countering misrepresentations by non-marginalized and "outsider" individuals.

Now, as, in this era of authenticity, everyone hopes to exert their own individuality and grow into their singular selves, there is a rise in identity claims (sexual orientation; religion; race; gender; etc.) of which the list keeps growing. Consequently, our times are "marked by the emergence of 'identity politics', by the growing empire of identity ideology, by the multiplication of struggles for recognition, led by ethnocultural minorities, by sexual and gender identities" (Lipovetsky 2022, 135). As people have become more aware of the workings of identity and are more sensitive in relation to this subject, even the most apparently "transgressive" figures or individuals[33] are accepted and admired, as people recognize their (and everyone's) right to be themselves (Lipovetsky 2022, 159-160). But even within this dynamic of hyper individualization, of discovery and public disclosure of

[33] E.g., transgender; transidentitary; gender neutral; intersexual; intergender individuals. By rejecting pre-established societal norms, the genderqueer identity has opened possibilities for individual expression (Lipovetsky 2022, 163).

one's individual identity, people are still very much rooted within the collective (i.e., to communities), and what motivates minority groups is, according to Lipovetsky, their refusal of the discriminatory offensives of which they are victims, as well as the will to combat the symbolic violence of the hegemonic cultures which humiliate and depreciate the self (2022, 136).

In this sense, today, "solutions" such as material reparations and obtention of rights are not enough: through the *recognition* of their differences, minority groups are looking for the "symbolic reparation of the psychical and identity violence they have suffered", to, in turn, be able to finally feel good about themselves and build their self-worth through and not in spite of their identity (Lipovetsky 2022, 136-137). If identity is "personalizing", it is "because it is revendicated by the subject: identity appropriation has become a way of affirming one's authentic self" (Lipovetsky 2022, 138). This appropriation is individually and intimately thought through by each person, who freely chooses to subjectively reappropriate their cultural origin (related to collective memory) or their place in a certain community (religious; related to tradition; etc.) (Lipovetsky 2022, 138-139). #OwnVoices seems to be very much a reflection of these desires: through the telling of their "own story", authors assert and publicly claim a certain identity, in this case and supposedly, their own identity, which in turn belongs to a certain community and is seen to be representative of the said community (think, for example, of *The Hate U Give*).

Only this communitarian aspect has a danger to it, as the concept of authenticity may be misused by certain cultural communities under the guise of personal expression, helping in this way protect oppressing practices under a regime of repressive terror (Lipovetsky 2022, 143). Moreover, pressure from peers may hinder one's possibility to be oneself, and it is, to Lipovetsky, imperative to protect each individual above all else (above the potentially repressive force of a said community), so the individualistic approach to authenticity, protective of one's personal freedom over any other, and, therefore, of collective freedom, is not lost (Lipovetsky 2022, 144).

Although such a misuse of the concept of authenticity (which reinforces inequalities) does not necessarily apply to the world of books in this way, there is, nonetheless, a regime of punishment and cancelation, and therefore, a hindering of freedom, a widening of the distance between people and their experiences, forcing them to conform to the wishes of a

certain ("their") community. Being oneself is therefore reduced, here, to the idea of "identifying with one's group of origin, revendicating one's belonging to a community, to a group, to a gender, to a race, to a particular culture" (Lipovetsky 2022, 146-147). However, such a focus results less in these minoritarian groups' emancipation than in dogmatist, ideological discourse which incites a new kind of cultural terrorism (Lipovetsky 2022, 144). This is when the status of victim transforms "itself into pride of identity, the victim ideal replaced the ideal of the heroic invention of the self", turning the revindication of rights into hatred of the other (say, of the "colonizer", of the other race, etc.) (Lipovetsky 2022, 146). #OwnVoices has come, unfortunately, to reflect these aspects as well. In fact, despite the movement's positive impacts and not long after its "formalization", several issues arose, as readers and authors started reflecting deeper on the ethics of demanding "authentic books" and "authentic authors". This is the concept of authenticity taken to the extreme: that "we must represent and express only what we are, what suits our [identity]" (Lipovetsky 2022, 150). When it comes to one's "own voice", no identity is spared (e.g., with issues surrounding race; sexual minorities; gender; etc.), and the consequence is a climate of censorship and self-censorship (*woke* and *cancel culture*[34]) (Lipovetsky 2022, 149).

One example is a popular "diverse" book which came out in 2015, right at the movement's start: Becky Albertalli's YA novel *Simon vs. The Homosapiens Agenda*. Similarly to *The Hate U Give*, the book gained a lot of traction, was a bestseller and earned its own big screen adaptation in 2018 along with a spin-off series which premiered in 2020. It tells the story of Simon, a gay teenager who is struggling to come to terms with his sexual orientation. Albertalli's novel was generally acclaimed for the handling of its delicate topic, but some were quick to point out that she was, indeed, a woman writing about a queer teenage boy, and described the book (and then the movie) as another cis-straight love story disguised as queer, made to be "glossy and digestible enough to change the minds of some ignorant people" (Atkinson 2020). For many reviewers and members of the LGBTQ+ community, the story was shallow, due, among other factors, to Albertalli's outsider view of the gay experience. After the same criticism arose about another of her novels, *Leah on the Offbeat*, where the main character Leah is a bisexual teenage girl, the author finally came out as

[34] According to Dishmon, "cancel culture refers to social media communities' desire to hold organizations, individuals, and artistic works accountable for their questionable or unpopular opinions". In book communities, it can be translated into acts such as "assailing unpublished novels with one-star reviews and bad publicity in order to deprive the target of profit or platform" (2021).

bisexual and a member of the LGBTQ+ community, and claimed that her novels were, in fact, #OwnVoices (Albertalli 2020). While some declared that the criticism of Albertalli's novel forced her to come out, and therefore deemed the movement unfair or at least ethically questionable, others started to reflect on whether stories are really better told only by people who are more obviously expected to be able to tell them. In short, Albertalli's coming out did not make critics (some LGBTQ+) change their mind on whether *Simon vs. The Homosapiens Agenda* did, in fact, represent the gay community "authentically" (Atkinson 2020).

Another example is one we mentioned in Chapter 5 of this dissertation: Kosoko Jackson's debut YA novel *A Place for Wolves*, which tells the love story between two American boys during the Kosovo war. The novel was described in a blurb as a story of "family strength" and "young love" in "a war setting". Moreover, the book was sold with the "own voices" hashtag: Jackson is black and queer, identities he shares with the main characters of the story. The controversy started with a long Goodreads review by user Tamera Cook[35], who had access to an ARC. Cook criticizes the book for unfairly representing Muslims and the conflict, providing, instead, the point of view of "privileged Westerners" (Cook 2019): in their view, the main characters' subjective suffering undermines the genocide victims' suffering, something "unacceptable" due to the setting being not of fantasy, but "a real life genocide". According to Cook, this choice of "setting" is unjustified and only serves to respond to the author's lazy aspiration of placing the characters in a situation of distress. Furthermore, one of her main criticisms is that the villain of the story is revealed to be the well-educated Muslim Professor Beqiri, a "coldblooded terrorist whose only purpose seems to be to murder and torture and commit harm" (ibid.), only at the same time it was Albanian Muslims who were being ethnically persecuted during the war. Even though other readers who had requested ARCs wrote positively about the romance aspect of the story, Cook's review had a "snowball effect" on Twitter, ending, in February of 2019, one month before it was set to be published, with the withdrawal of the book's publication, by Jackson himself, who issued a public apology, addressed to the "Book Community", for "making a disservice to History".

[35] The review was published on February 22nd, 2019, and can be found on Kosoko Jackson's *A Place for Wolves* Goodreads page: https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/2725140484.

Due to several incidents like these, conversations surrounding YA literature have become, since the 2010s, closely related with "callout-and-cancel culture" (Waldman 2019). However, cancel culture might not only be a direct reaction to a book, but "a symptom of a larger societal problem" (Dishmon 2021).

6.3 The disappearance of the Other

In *The Terror of the Same* (2018), Byung-Chul Han alerts to what he calls the disappearance of the Other. As discussed in Part II, representation in the media is extremely important for the integration of all individuals who are part of a society, as it is through representation that their identities are recognized and made to signify. The classificatory nature of systems within culture means that they hold a symbolic order (Hall 1997, 236), and binary oppositions play a crucial role in the construction of these classifications, as they serve to establish a clear difference between things and disclose how they should be. Still, some things do not fit into any category, and this is what this "order" fears: "What unsettles culture is 'matter out of place' – the breaking of our unwritten rules and codes" (ibid). These "symbolic rules" are what punishes and restricts (Hall 1997, 237). Anything or anyone which fails to fall within this order is viewed as a threat and potentially excluded. The Other is therefore the one who is part of underrepresented groups and discriminated minorities (in the nation or internationally), which for centuries or decades have been invisible or misrepresented in popular (or any) media, despite being very much present constituents of society (Fürsich 2010, 113). In this sense, the goal is to showcase and include the Other, to make them seen, to integrate them in the "normal" order by having them be part of the dominant regime of representation.

In this context, representation such as the one in #OwnVoices, besides providing knowledge and allowing for recognition, also has the goal of attempting to render the strange ordinary – or rather what is falsely considered strange (such as the experience and existence of marginalized communities) ordinary, in what we can argue is a quest not only for inclusion but also "truth". These objectives are part of a specific agenda which seeks to showcase the Other in a particularly positive, inclusive way. Only this otherness may have different roles in our societies – and conditioning it may lead to further negative consequences. If, as seen

with Hall and Sims Bishop, representation does not mean a uniformization of any kind – on the contrary, as it strives for the acknowledgement of each other's differences in their diversity and complexity, today's climate of globalization and hyper capitalism in Western countries has produced a counter-movement to this, as they have allowed for a certain uniformization of the self, which could lead (and has led, to a certain extent) to the disappearance of the Other. In his book *The Expulsion of the Other* (2018), Byung-Chul Han examines the different aspects of this disappearance as well as what socio-historical consequences such a disappearance could involve.

Centered around today's digitally ruled world, Han argues that "social media" (the "ruler" of our lives), supposedly a bridge-gaping tool for people across the world, actually "constitutes an absolute zero grade of the social" (Han 2018, 3), as this total interconnection and communication "through the digital means does not facilitate encounters with Others" (ibid.), ensuring, instead, encounters with mostly like-minded people, therefore not widening horizons but narrowing one's perception of the world (as seen in Chapter 4). This gives one the illusion of a plurality of voices coming together, while making the individual a quantifiable, interchangeable commodity. It is through tools like these, and within the digital age, that the Other is, according to Han, expulsed. In Han's theory, what he calls the "universal Sameness of the Self" is formulated by neoliberal capitalism, whereas the "Selfsame" is guided by an inner orientation to its own potentiality (Han 2018, 2). The Selfsame is what one should be striving for, yet the universal Same is what is promoted in our societies through different forms of homogenization, at the detriment of the Other – resulting in their expulsion, a phenomenon that, according to Han, has several levels.

One aspect is the expulsion of migrants and refugees, and some minorities. Han sees the centralized surveillance regimes, represented by the Panopticon (see Foucault 1975), now replaced by an exclusionary "banopticon" (2018, 12), which operates through the violent enforcements of closed borders, preventing the Other from entering the territory of the Self (Lankala 2018). This seems like the most rigid and concrete way of achieving this universal sameness, yet other ways, less obvious to the individual, seem to be even more effective as they provide people with a kind of semblance of "individuality" or "uniqueness". What seems inclusive is sometimes only so on the surface, and what appears to be disputable is, in fact, allowed to exist only under the same set of hard-lined rules. Overall, Han concludes, appearance is preferred over matter. The digital age (or "capitalism's digital incarnation")

has created a world increasingly more visual (Fürsich 2010, 116), in which everyone only *seems* to have a place or a voice. As digital tools select and restrict the amount of information one gets, voices get discarded and dismissed, and are replaced by a pretended openness and authenticity.

To Han, the visual aspect of the digital has translated into an obsession with health and happiness (Han 2018, 4) and, in general, with positivity. The "authentic self" (supposedly portrayed by individuals on social media, for instance) strives for positivity, therefore becoming authentic no more. It is a commodity within set perimeters, maybe seemingly different, but ultimately the same: what Han calls the "same Other" (Han 2018, 21). In a way, a simulacrum of diversity, which only pretends to contest the dominant system of representation, and simultaneously only manages, at most, to melt into it.

Yet the Other, Han argues, is essential for the creation of the self. Like Han, Emanuel Levinas highlights the Other's "exteriority", which, particular to the encounter with the Other's face, is crucial because it makes one realize "the existence of standards [and responsibilities] outside of [oneself]" (May-Hobbs 2023). Without the Other, we cannot know of these standards and responsibilities, nor develop a sense of self – same with cultures, as they define themselves by the encounter with other cultures.

Moreover, Levinas argues that this encounter with the Other, which to him means the encounter with the *face* of another human, is the foundational experience of ethical responsibility (May-Hobbs 2023)[36]. Since, according to Levinas, each of us is a subject bound by subjecthood ("I"), we cannot convey to the Other the knowledge we have of ourselves, nor the obligation which follows. In short: although we have an obligation towards the Other when we are facing them, as the "I" integrates subjecthood, in the same way the Other will never know us like we know ourselves, we ourselves will never fully understand or predict who the Other is or how to fulfil them (or our obligation towards them) (ibid.).

Today, however, the expulsion of the Other seems to happen even within efforts of integration – or within efforts to create an understanding on the identity of the Other, maybe due to a lack of comprehension of who the Other is or should be, or rather, due to this

[36] The "I", with which this encounter starts, is, to Levinas, totally responsible for the Other they encounter (an obligation for which Levinas, by linking it to the face, offers a theological explanation: one's relation to the Other is of prayer) (May-Hobbs 2023).

horizontalization of knowledge, which rejects anything complex – and identity, for instance, is not homogeneous nor clear-cut. Nonetheless, one very important point has been stressed in the last decades: the obligation we have towards the Other, the most basic obligation of all – to respect the Other as a human being; to tolerate, accept, and integrate them in our societies. This point (i.e., a will to respect each other's differences), arguably part of a Gen Zer's *savoir* (see Part II of this dissertation), as well as the digital age, play a role in what has led to the simplification of diversity, and consequently, to the expulsion of the Other.

Let us tackle this issue in more concrete terms. Referring to the last section, something in which these points converge and make this level of expulsion particularly evident is when it comes to the representation of the Other in the media. As seen with Foucault, discursive formations dictate what is and what is not acceptable, expulsing and punishing whatever or whoever deviates. One example of how order is set through discourse is, of course, stereotyping. We have previously delved into the effects of stereotyping through the example of race and gender and introduced the different counter-strategies (some more useful than others) delineated by Hall. From this discussion, some common conclusions were highlighted, such as the complexity of identity and the lack of definite answers.

Now, we have introduced the digital world as a curated (to the user) visual space in which everyone strives to be "authentic" (i.e., positive), in which voices seem multiple and diverse and yet conform and *seek* to conform (and are rewarded for conforming) – a space flooded with select information resembling freedom (of knowledge, of being). Such a space hardly allows for nuance. The counter-strategy of positivity, for instance, a somewhat productive but flawed way of attempting to shift the narrative by promoting inclusivity in a "positive" way, is an example of this semblance of freedom. In fiction, it may translate itself into a preference for stories in which the (diverse) characters are empowered and proud of their identity(ies). However, when speaking of the representation of individuals, of human beings, a uniformization (which this "positivity", by selecting a type of story only, entails) may not necessarily be making the changes it should – not in content, and not in form. This applies even to narratives far from containing harmful stereotypes such as the ones described in the last chapters, but in which a uniformization not only ignores the complexities which make up our realities, but it also restricts one's identity(ies) to another so-called single story – instead of allowing for a multitude to exist. As individuals go online to proclaim their place

and individuality, they end up becoming subjected instead to these limited forms of being, dictated by capitalism's drive for positivity.

In this sense, the Other is important not in its "positive" or "easily integrable" form, but as something truly "Other": "The negativity of the Other provides form and measure for the Selfsame, without it, the Same proliferates" (Han 2018, 2). Without the Other, "the world is peopled by clones, yet each paradoxically wants to be different from the others" (Han 2018, 8). Moreover, if the Other is not permitted to be, truly, "other", than the obligations we may have towards them are lost. Han goes as far as to say that what is ultimately a removal from our "authentic" selves (defined by Han, authenticity "means to be free of pre-formed expressive and behavioral patterns dictated from the outside" [2018, 19]) is that which causes depression – the "pathological sign of our times". In this sense, the "destructive pressure" one may feel "comes not from the Other but from within" (Han 2018, 1).

Only, today's positive and capitalistic-driven society advocates for one kind of "otherness" – which in the end becomes another form of "sameness" – and Han alerts to how this search for authenticity "leads to a constant comparison with others", and "thus the authenticity of otherness consolidates social conformity: it only permits system-compatible differences, namely diversity" (2018, 20). While attempting to show difference and portray it in the most "authentic" manner, #OwnVoices ended up creating another limiting system, in some ways similar to the one it was trying to fight against, as not every kind of otherness, in the end, was prioritized nor tolerated by people (and readers) within and outside the community represented. By setting a pattern for otherness, #OwnVoices was destroying the Other, therefore destroying the self. True otherness (an Other which is not a Same Other) allows for the formation of the Selfsame, the self which inhabits the soul, and therefore "[…] the expulsion of the Other results in a process of self-destruction" (Han 2018, 24).

This does not mean that there should not be a project of integration, especially in education, for individuals who have been, for any amount of time, othered, nor that efforts which include "positive" narratives should be dismantled for the sole reason that they do not represent a finite solution. But there is some urgency in thinking more deeply about these subjects, in promoting the complex discussions this complex theme deserves. In the end, within the movement – communities were still being excluded, stories gatekept, experiences deemed invalid. Instead of attempting to understand what went wrong in the depiction of the

marginalized culture (paying attention to stereotypes, research, and questions of power), the criticism and appreciation (and subsequent judgement) extends itself to the author, to their identity. The identity of the writer becomes their work, and something to be disclosed, (de-)legitimating the story sometimes even before the book comes out.

Furthermore, as the consecration of authenticity is now the basis for rising requirements and worries about individual protection, criticism is avoided to minimize one's suffering and, simultaneously, emphasis is placed by vulnerable individuals who feel entitled to protection (within their collective identities, communities) to focus especially on the times they have been wronged (Lipovetsky 2022, 145). Fiction writers now expect to be criticized by all: by their own community, by the community they are writing about, by other authors, readers and various identity "watchdogs" (Lipovetsky 2022, 151). Mindful of the consequences their words can bear, they might become afraid of the possibility of their own ignorance (or incapacity to imagine themselves in the place of the Other), which can result in feeling that one is not capable of empathizing with another, that, because one is of a certain identity and not another, they will never be able to understand the other, or be understood themselves, meaning, in turn, that this or that identity is too difficult to be understood, and that what a member of this or that community says must be true – and for *all* members. However, as seen with Hall, Short and Fox, and Sims Bishop, this is never exactly the case.

To sum up, the paradox of authenticity is therefore that its transformative capacity operates in two different ways in society, each with different consequences. The first, brought about by the requirement of being true to oneself, places importance on the respect for the subjectivity of the self, allowing for individual identities to flourish and for collective emancipation, for the fight against oppression and discrimination, creating new laws for the protection of personal rights. The second is the very fact that authenticity is a requirement, therefore bringing about new obligations (becoming, therefore, performative) and, taken to the extreme, new forms of repression. By making authenticity about the author's communitarian identity – by placing criteria on what might and might not be authentic (by preferring "positivity", for instance, by requiring "proof" of one's identity), authenticity not only contradicts itself, but it also becomes oppressive, a form of censorship instilling fear even among the voices it aims to protect.

Now, although the movement was "formally" ended in 2021 by We Need Diverse Books in a statement on their platform[37], on grounds that "the term […] has been misused to gate-keep identities and invade authors' privacy" (Lapointe 2022), #OwnVoices continued being popular among readers and online book communities. As Gen Z's world has been advertised to them as diverse, it is only natural that they grew up to expect nothing less. The implications this has had have differed, however, from the assumingly good intentioned teenagers' and young adults' will of reading about their own world – of imagining the world as they hope it will be, as they believe it should be, and therefore of discussing these topics out of a will for inclusivity and respect (Divecha 2017). In fact, as we will be discussing in Part III, the transformation of cultural authenticity in books into an outsider/insider problem, feared by Short and Fox at the beginning of the century, has become somewhat real, only its "culprits" might not exactly be the readers and authors advocating for authenticity. As we discussed in Part II of this dissertation, authenticity has become such a requirement that all, well-intentioned or not, must at least pretend to preach it. We must therefore now place the focus on the "powerholders" we have until now only brushed up on: the publishing houses.

[37] https://diversebooks.org/why-we-need-diverse-books-is-no-longer-using-the-term-ownvoices/.

Part III | Reframing the issue of authenticity in fiction

Chapter 7 | Authenticity, commodified

7.1 A widespread impact

If YA readers were often first to point out issues surrounding authenticity in fiction, and YA publishers, the first to be attentive to them, this concern quickly stopped being exclusive to young adult literature. As young readers got older and became adult fiction readers, their expectations did not shift, as they look to see the same (diverse) themes they encountered in young adult novels (which many adults, however, also read) in other genres (Riccio and Polis 2022). This change in expectations affects publishing houses which have been meaning to answer this demand by, at least on the surface, being more mindful of what they publish, or, in a more negative sense, by attempting as quickly as possible to abide to the crowd – sometimes by trying to find ways to go around the "problem", so as to avoid being canceled.

Initially an Anglo-Saxon "requirement", with YA's success in the West, with the globalization of book markets and the prevalence of the English language, "authenticity" as a criterion in publishing is affecting other Western countries, other authors, and novels, both directly and indirectly in the West. An example of "authenticity" as a criterion in fiction affecting a non-Anglo-Saxon book's circulation is the case of Portuguese writer Afonso Reis Cabral and his novel *Pão de Açúcar*[38] (2019). The story centers around a true crime which occurred in Porto in 2006, in which Gisberta, a Brazilian transgender woman, was found dead after being repeatedly assaulted and raped by a group of teenagers. Reis Cabral covers heavy themes by going back to an incident which profoundly shocked the country and, from fact, creating fiction.

In 2023, Reis Cabral attempted to have *Pão de Açúcar* (along with another one of his novels) published and translated in the United States. However, it was refused by the (undisclosed) American publisher on the grounds of "concerns about a cis person writing about a trans person", a "high-sensitive subject" in the U.S.[39] Now, even though, at this time, trans

[38] "Pão de Açúcar" was the name of a supermarket chain. The particular store referred to in the title was to be constructed in Porto (Portugal) but was never finished. The site became the home of many homeless people and drug addicts such as Gisberta.

[39] Afonso Reis Cabral's post on Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=3463975247225383&id=100008388248701&ref=embed_post.

individuals are still very misunderstood, *Pão de Açúcar* is a work of literature meant for an adult audience. It holds no pedagogical purpose and is, although based on a real occurrence, a work of fiction.

Pão de Açúcar is not narrated by the trans character it focuses on, and is mostly composed of chapters told by Rafael Tiago, "Rafa", one of the teenagers who attacked Gisberta, and other chapters narrated in third person recounting Gisberta's story. The book starts with a prologue "antes" ("before") and ends with an epilogue "depois" ("after"), two short sections in which the narrator is the (fictional?) author of the story (it may or may not be Afonso Reis Cabral, as we never get to know his name). None of the characters are named after real people but were inspired by the teenagers involved in the true crime.

Due to socio-economic circumstances, the teenagers live in the Oficina S. João, a charitable religious institution referred to as "a Oficina" ("the Workshop"), where they go to school and work. All around twelve years old, the main characters are morally grey Rafa, sensitive artist Samuel, and Nelson, the one who gives in to the "bad guys" like Fábio, who, at sixteen years old, is the eldest of the group. Generally, all the boys are homophobic, transphobic, sexist, misogynistic, rude, self-hating and violent. Besides Samuel, they seem to lack basic empathy for the world around them. Nevertheless, they are very afraid of the world, of the unknown. As every other teenager, they have admiration for their peers (in Rafa's case, mostly for Fábio) and seek to impress them so they can belong. Maybe due to their age, they are impressionable and impulsive and absorb ideas as truths, despite somehow believing that they are rebelling.

Even though there is no first-person point of view for Gisberta, the novel finds ways to share her story which do not entirely depend on Rafa's perception, by using a third person voice and going back to her childhood and life prior to meeting the teenagers. Gisberta falls victim to the teenagers' ignorance and violence, and, ultimately, to the system they are born into and to which they end up becoming complicit. All characters are complex and three-dimensional, and Gisberta is no exception, as her identity is plural and layered. Gisberta is a Brazilian immigrant living in Porto (Portugal). She is a performer, a prostitute, a drug addict. She is a transgender woman. A beloved daughter and a good friend, she is skilled with children and a good storyteller; she is also tired, poor, miserable, and very sick, as she is HIV

positive; by the end of the novel she is vanquished, desolate; she is a survivor (until she is no more); by others she is cared for, desired, sexualized, violented, assaulted, and bullied.

Now, in terms of representation, there are a few points we can make. This story is not a "happy" story, nor one which portrays anyone in a particularly positive light. As the story relies heavily on Rafa's subjective (transphobic, sexist, childish, etc.) perception, one may argue that the novel does not exactly showcase transgender individuals positively nor propose possibilities of being. If anything, and remembering Adichie, it tries not entirely to complete or counter stereotypes but to at least show what could be on the other side of ignorance, of hatred, transmitting some understanding on what it can mean to be transgender in today's society.

Moreover, by reading the prologue, one may argue that the novel does, through the narrator's perspective, early on, take a (political, social) stand on the story it is depicting (rather than on the true crime suffered by Gisberta). Indeed, in the prologue, before Rafa takes over the first chapter, the narrator (a nameless writer) describes Rafa's desire, now as a grown adult, of leaving the workshop he has always worked at, but "of course", he writes, "he'll never leave, and that is more than he deserves" (Reis Cabral 2019, 13) (my translation). The epilogue only reinforces this assumption, as this writer-narrator reflects upon Gisberta's murder, the news that followed, the political and social measures taken, the different consequences (and lack thereof) suffered by different people, as well as on the strenuous environment which worked to allow this situation to happen (Reis Cabral 2019, 255).

But let us ignore, for a moment, these observations, which stem from having read the book as a text which exists (nearly, since the story was based on true events) only as itself, and consider, for a moment, Sims Bishop's point regarding the disclosure of the author's intentions – which, as this story had been heavily mediatized before Reis Cabral decided to write it, may be a question that comes to mind. Now, his motivations are actually known, as he stated in an interview that the true story of Gisberta was to him so unbelievable that no facts could explain it, and so he set out to explore it through fiction (Matos Silva and Matias 2018). But are Reis Cabral's motivations for writing this story "enough" for those who consider that writing about such a sensitive theme should only be done by who can "truly understand it", i.e., in this case, by a transgender individual?

Implicit in the American editor's search for a transgender sensitivity reader was the worry that the book might possibly contain an "inauthentic" and offensive story, eventually better told by individuals who share the marginalized character's identity. We can say, then, that the book was barred by the publisher on concerns of misrepresentation – which, in this day and age, as various examples have shown, could have easily led to the possible cancelation of the book, of the author, of the publishing house. With this in mind, we may have to rethink: who or what does the concept of "authenticity" really benefit? Who does it end up helping (or harming)?

7.2 The appropriation of "authenticity" by publishers and other consequences

On the 31st of August 2020, young adult and middle grade author Michelle Shusterman published a video on her AuthorTube channel[40] titled *Why Literary Agents Reject Query Letters (12 Mistakes to AVOID!)*, in which she encourages (among other tips) aspiring writers to ask themselves, especially if they are writing a character with a marginalized identity that they themselves do not share, "Why am I really doing this?" and "Am I really the best person to tell this story?" (Shusterman 2020). Three years later, in 2023 and in response to the advice given in the video, a viewer and aspiring author emailed Shusterman inquiring the following: "What is an author supposed to do if the answer [to those questions] is 'no'?". This viewer was themselves writing a story in which the main character is a transgender woman – while she is a cisgender woman. "I'm probably not the best person to tell this story", she writes, "but it's a story that has merit and I am the one writing it, [so] am I supposed to find someone else to write it? Or is the implication that the story should just be shelved if it can't be told by a person from that identity?"

In the email, the viewer argues that, although she has been working with trans healthcare at her workplace and that the writing of the story is being done with four transgender sensitivity

[40] Within and in parallel to the BookTube niche introduced in Part I, AuthorTube is the community of writers and authors on YouTube who make videos about their writing process and advise other authors on their journeys.

readers[41], she might need to disclose more about her own identity in the query letter[42] (to a literary agent) if she wishes to publish the book. Yes – she is from a "marginalized" identity (a bisexual woman), but not from the "most marginalized" like her character (a transgender woman). She worries that, if she does not refer to her identity, something she says she does not feel comfortable with, the agents will assume that she is transgender. Or will they ask about it?

This email marks the starting point for Shusterman's video *Publishers weaponized #ownvoices. So what's next?*, in which she reflects on the issues surrounding the #OwnVoices movement by basing herself on the comments and messages left by the viewers. Despite the fact that writers (aspiring or not, and in the U.S. in particular) seem to be concerned with these issues because they mean well – towards the communities, towards the readers, what Shusterman highlights in her video is exactly the writers' current relationship to the publishing industry, as editors and publishers have a much more market-based approach and seek to avoid issues which could evolve into the (societal, cultural) cancelation of books and authors (and, eventually, of the company itself). And one of the main consequences of #OwnVoices, whose popularity was sparked as much by readers from marginalized communities as from non-marginalized ones, was its appropriation by publishers. One may argue that Angie Thomas' marginalized identity (and public fight for the rise of marginalized voices) was an integral part of the novel's marketing campaign, using #OwnVoice as a trend (Raughley 2021) – and making fiction and author inseparable from each other – as one legitimizes the other in a way that could never be achieved by the writing itself or the contents of the story, not even by the pertinence of the theme. Of course, there is no way of knowing how much Thomas' identity (and the stamp of "authenticity" it provided) was involved in the book's success (as it was deemed well-written) but it was indeed a part of its promotion.

In the case of *Pão de Açúcar*, the editor brought up two different aspects in his rejection email: the contents of the novel (the story itself) and the quality of the writing. Although he

[41] A sensitivity reader is someone who reads for offensive content, misrepresentation, stereotypes, bias, lack of understanding. They create a report for an author/publisher outlining the problems that they find in a work and offer solutions in how to fix them. They will often come from the specific nation or community that the author is writing about and include academic as well as personal experience in their reading (University of Alberta Library 2024).

[42] Query letters are used by writers to pitch book ideas to agents and publishers (Writer's Digest Shop 2024).

claims that the "writer is clearly very talented", he rejects the book not only based on a colleague's concerns that Afonso Reis Cabral is, in fact, a cisgender man writing about a trans woman, but also based on his failed attempt to "find a Portuguese-speaking LGBTQ person to write a sensitivity report". Which may lead one to conclude at least two things, the second of which Shusterman also mentions: 1) the American editor found *Pão de Açúcar* to be a good novel; 2) the American editor did not trust their own judgement (nor made further efforts) to understand if the author's research on the matter was well done, and to verify that the theme, in general, was not mishandled, preferring, instead, to leave it at the author's identity and at his incapacity to place responsibility on someone else.

It is unlikely that Reis Cabral resorted to sensitivity readers in the conception of this novel, but, as it is written in his acknowledgements, his research seems to have involved, at least on paper, an effort to understand the trans community's point of view[43]. Would the American publisher have made other choices if Reis Cabral had resorted to sensitivity readers? If Reis Cabral was, himself, transgender? Sensitivity readers, however, may not be the ultimate solution for this crisis. The final point raised by Shusterman is exactly the publishing houses' willingness to place responsibility on the sensitivity reader to legitimize not only the author and their book, but also the publishing house's choice of getting it published in the first place. This could allow for the same marginalized communities, which are supposed to be protected in these spaces where their voices are scarce, to be put at the service of editors who seemingly cannot make up their own mind, but who would also rather place legitimacy on a member of the community (whose view may be, like any other, limited) then attempt to understand, for instance, how the writer made their research, what angle they are writing the story from, etc.

Now, fair representation entails a certain amount of "cultural sensitivity", meaning that the book is attentive to the concerns, values, etc., of the culture portrayed (Smolkin and Sinua 2003, 220). This is a rather different idea than what we associate sensitivity readers with today (namely relating to the amount of offense one member of the represented community might take). This shift might signify a change in perspective or understanding of the current

[43] In his acknowledgements for *Pão de Açúcar*, Afonso Reis Cabral thanks Rute Bianca, Gisberta's friend and a transgender woman, without whom "this book would have been lame" (my translation).

ideas of sensitivity and authenticity, maybe due to the radicalization and imposition (seen as a given) of the value and importance of authenticity.

Despite all its controversies, "#OwnVoices did not spring from the ground unprompted one day, it is the result of decades and decades of exclusion. And even today with the rise of [all these movements] there are still examples of books being othered […]" (Shusterman 2023). But will this wave of "authentic", "diverse" novels be a solution to these decades of exclusion? Or is it only a different type of exclusion? Shusterman: "Publishers see one story from a certain identity and take it as 'that identity book'" (2020). Is this tokenism not othering? Are we, in the end, not just ticking a box, or crossing an item in a list?

In general, and this applies to all kinds of companies, aware of marketing and advertisement tactics, consumers are distrustful of big brands, of their manipulation and lack of transparency and commitment, of their empty promises and insufficient efforts. Consequently, consumers now rely much more heavily "on the recommendations of their peers on the Internet than in the speeches of brands and experts" (Lipovetsky 2022, 386). The consumers' distancing from brands translates itself into certain new brand behaviors: "expression and sharing of disappointments, satisfactions, and indignations on digital networks by consumers, [...] support for the boycott, virulence of young people towards companies who are intolerant towards issues of gender, sexuality or skin color, preference for location and 'compromised' brands [...]" (Lipovetsky 2022, 386-387).

Publishers are now aware that if they do not take the right "precautions", a book risks getting cancelled before it even comes out. Authenticity as such is a selling point, a neoliberal production strategy, creating commodifiable differences (Han 2018, 21). To show humility, to transmit a will to learn and to "do good" is, today, almost a requirement for a brand's survival, and so many brands, and publishers are proof of this, resort to public opinion (often through digital online channels) to make decisions (what is known as "participatory marketing") (Lipovetsky 2022, 388). YA's growing popularity made it, in the 2010s, a profitable and sought-after genre. As the media in general were being asked to welcome and showcase diversity, YA books were starting to become synonymous with "diverse books". This can be observed simply by looking at the "best YA books of all time" selected by *Time* at the beginning of the decade (2015). In comparison, the 2021 updated list is much more diverse.

Although amidst prejudice, American publishers understood the cultural phenomenon these books were a part of inserted and pushed for their promotion and release. As authenticity is a trend, making authenticity a requirement for a company's survival, publishers find in marginalized authors an opportunity to become a "multicultural" publisher and therefore expect them to be "representative of their racial [or other] identity and [are] not allowed to assume multiple perspectives, while white authors are allowed to do so because they are seen as the norm" (Short and Fox 2003, 12).The publishing houses' strategy of placing responsibility on authors and so-called sensitivity readers (which would come in to legitimize, authenticate, shield), however, contributes to making way for a kind of profitable censorship. One may argue that it allows yet again for the perpetuation of the single story – a single story per identity, as publishers look for a specific story to represent one identity instead of admitting the array of different stories which marginalized writers might come up with – regardless of whether they choose to represent their own identity or not, which is also something they may sometimes feel forced to do (Shusterman 2023). This raises yet another question: how comfortable does one have to be in their own identity to be able to confidently represent it?

In her article *Let Marginalized Authors and Their Characters Fail*, young adult author Crystal Maldonaldo writes about the struggles and responsibilities of writing about her "Latinidad" as a half-white Latina who grew up in a mixed household in the United States and worries she will not do her heritage justice (Maldonaldo 2021). Because the opportunities are fewer for marginalized authors, the pressure to represent them "fairly" is even bigger – only there may not be a single "fair" way of representing them. Moreover, Vivian Yenika-Agbaw (2003) shares examples of books where insiders (African American authors) accidentally perpetuate stereotypes or misconceptions of their own culture (West-African culture), exactly due to the fact they may be removed from it by, for instance, having lived their whole lives in the U.S. Meaning that there is, in fact, a possibility for a member of a certain community to misrepresent their own identity – they would have to do almost the same work an outsider would: to broaden their perspective, to find ways to look outside themselves and transcend their own, subjective internalized perceptions of the world.

Now, Fürsich finds three causes for the persistence of traditional representation in the media: (1) the ubiquity, saturation and repetitiveness of the mass media; (2) the difficulty of profit-driven commercial media industries that aim at large mainstream audiences to initiate more

complex representations (to undermine problematic ones); (3) the close alignment of the media to the elites in society, which may spark disinterest in a change of the status quo (Fürsich 2010, 117). If we look at the publishing industry as a "commercial media industry", we can identify these three causes, which have long partaken in the reproduction of harmful representations and have been produced by a mainly white-dominated industry (if we think of the white population, due to its socio-economic advantages, as "elite"). YA, instead of "traditional representations", allowed for new ways of representing and therefore new representations, only these have become repetitive and simplistic. Big publishers and publishing houses, still very white-dominated, place responsibility on the authors and on third-parties, often members of marginalized communities which in turn end up being limited in their creation (and therefore, representations) due both to the editors' fear of cancelation and to the "trendification" of diversity. Allowing for more marginalized identities into the publishing industry should therefore be a concrete goal, one which we can argue ultimately goes beyond the publishing industry's capabilities, as the industry alone cannot come up with or provide solutions for what is ultimately a systemic socio-economic, historical, cultural issue (Fürsich 2010, 129).

Nonetheless, despite the structural, societal nature of inequality, there are, indeed and as we have been mentioning, steps the publishing industry can take to work towards this goal. Moreover, the importance of any kind of representation when there was none, or the benefits of opposing the narrative which had been, and in some cases still is, in place, should not be devalued, even if it does not represent a durable solution (Fürsich 2010, 116). But this can only mark the start of a long journey, one that has been under construction for decades and known many obstacles.

The media are now understood to be significant cultural forces (Fürsich 2010, 115), and the rise and relevance of online book communities, for instance, proves it – as the changes they have brought collectively to the publishing industry, through the pressure they exert on editors, authors, and publishing houses, have made them a force to be reckoned with. With no other obvious motivation than creating positive change for the representation of Others, and exempt, unlike other media channels or newspapers, from monetary incentives, they make for important stirrers of public debate and fierce fighters for social justice. However, their drive may sometimes be to destroy instead of construct, and their approach too didactic, which could have, on some levels, the opposite of the pretended effect. But before moving

on into a more concrete discussion on the future of authenticity in fiction today, we must describe what we have, in a way, implicitly been discussing since the beginning. If Short and Fox deemed the question surrounding cultural authenticity in books a complex one in 2003, as we later discussed in Chapter 4 regarding today's context, the debate has not de-complexified itself, yet, critical thinking, or the most important part of these debates, seems to be lacking.

Chapter 8 | A critical thinking crisis

8.1 Anti-intellectualism

Having described, in Part II, the context of the "new" public sphere, as well as the rise and role of online book communities, it is important for us to make a few points regarding the state of criticism of books and literature online, and, in this sense, we will now turn our attention to the way books are assessed. This approximation is, naturally, closely related to the market, as the "new" public sphere operates in a network (the internet) which, despite being democratic to a certain extent, is so especially in appearance, being, in reality, strongly dominated by invisible frontiers and capitalistic motivations.

Now, it is true that the number of users on the internet alone makes it a varied and diversified space. Thanks to the online book communities' influence, reading in general has become more accessible, and there is a joy in sharing reading experiences with others, especially since the beginning of the 2020s (during and after the pandemic), coinciding with the rise of the TikTok app. For one, we must bear in mind that social media apps have transformed publishing, and the most recent online book niche, BookTok, exemplifies this phenomenon well. In 2024, BookTok, its most frequent users being Gen Z, is credited with having changed the book industry, as the content and "hype" circulating around books has real impact on sales. Many authors, particularly within the romance genre, have achieved great success thanks to the publicity circulating about their books on the app (Plese 2022). Indeed, as of 2023, there have been "substantial investments in the romantasy[44] genre" and in "steamy romances". But beyond effectively demonstrating the marketable power of these online interactions, this example is also revealing of the readers' current preference for entertainment. In fact, TikTok is an app made up mostly of short videos, it is a visual app – which may cause users to focus more on the identity of "being a reader" than on reading, and on the display of one's purchases, meaning, on consumption (Huzinga 2023). The sharing of what one *owns* (e.g., how many books) becomes more important than anything else (e.g., contents of the book; possible takeaways from reading).

BookTok books, promoted through the digital algorithm by never-before-seen hyper-accelerated marketing, are "digestible and sensational", sometimes "hyper-sexual", often

[44] A genre in which the genres of romance and fantasy overlap.

with a manufactured quality, due to how fast they are produced and how much they submit to trends and popular tropes (Huizinga 2023) – becoming a commodity. The word-of-mouth quality of social media, which has helped popularize reading (and certain books, certain genres), takes (mostly) the form of aesthetic and often rather superficial videos, so much that some deem BookTok (and other online book communities, although this one in particular), to be *anti-intellectual*. In fact, this new way of sharing books shows that "[…] reading doesn't need to be, and perhaps even shouldn't be, a critical or intellectual experience", as it is considered, above all, a hobby (Fabre 2023).

Anti-Intellectualism can be defined as "the shunning or conscious elimination of consuming media with a purpose and/or in search of meaning" (Fabre 2023). If reading for entertainment is acceptable, BookTok is tainted by algorithms (repetitive recommendations; prevalence of the English language; etc.) which make it more difficult to have agency on choosing what content to come across and focus on. The "literary horizon", meant to be broad and infinite, seems to have become, in these platforms, small and unexciting (ibid.). The force of the algorithm and the limited books it promotes are how publishers understand and find ideas for what people want, and so they invest on the kinds of literature which circulate on these apps, creating a kind of vicious cycle. Popular BookTok books such as best-seller romance novels, not exactly known for their literary value, as they are meant to be mass produced and have mass appeal, are seen as precursors for the further publication of cheap, mind-numbing novels (ibid.). Indeed, many books circulating on TikTok are formulaic (based on tropes; repetitive plot; etc.), and mostly made for entertainment. Moreover, besides (and related to) the focus on visual aesthetics and the showcase of consumption, there is a culture of speed reading, privileged over the habit of spending time with a book.

But reading, however, may as well be, as is "the consumption of all art", an exercise in critical analysis (Fabre 2023). Only there seems to be, today, a lack of critical engagement with media/art, only because it requires an effort which the simplistic platforms we are used to spend time on do not require of us anymore. Again, the commodification of content online is dangerous, as it is essential to have complex conversations also by engaging critically with what we read, watch, and hear (Stibbard 2022). To maintain a certain degree of media literacy, it is important to critically engage with texts. In its more radical form, anti-intellectualism is a "a social attitude that undermines academic authority and the pursuit of

knowledge" (Plese 2022). Popular ways of thinking dominated by the ideas such as "read what you like" and "let people enjoy things" see almost a shunning in critically engaging with texts. We can link this to Lipovetsky's idea that the ethics of authenticity is now also an ethics of taking personal individual pleasure, of aiming for happiness, and not anti-conformism. Related to this, another interesting point is how anti-intellectualism values labor over education, because labor has to do with producing things we can consume (see Feijó and Tamen 2017; Althusser 2014), and those who value higher education as more than a means for a useful, tangible, maybe material outcome (e.g., getting a job) are seen as elitist/classist (Stibbard 2022). This is also based, of course, on the very real difficulties of access large portions of the populations suffer; within the capitalistic system, it makes sense that one would want to get a degree which can grant them a job and financial independence (and today, many university degrees advertise their employability index) – but this also goes to show how critical thinking has lost importance even in higher education.

Taking in account the various complex and often opaque processes through which information circulates today, it may be, despite any contrary thoughts, more important than ever to critically engage with the media we come across online: "books can be used as a tool to help us practice 'reading between the lines' and discerning what information we wish to accept as being valid. By engaging in a broader range of literature, we can open ourselves up to new perspectives and understand different conceptualizations of the world as it is" (Plese 2022). In Kundera's words: "The novel's spirit is the spirit of complexity. Every novel says to the reader: 'Things are not as simple as you think'" (Kundera 2005, 18).

8.2 The case of the past

All throughout this dissertation, we have been stressing the importance of context in discussions surrounding cultural authenticity, surrounding art. An example of that which we can call today's "critical thinking crisis" is what is happening to the way we treat history and the past. The literature of the past, for instance, might lack a lot of what a younger reader might want to read about now – especially when it comes to the canon in place, and one modern phenomenon is exactly the discourse around the idea that we should dismantle or rethink the classics and the literary canon (Boakye 2023).

In her well-known essay *Against Interpretation* (1964), Susan Sontag writes about how, nowadays, a work of art (far from being only "mimesis" or imitation of reality, as proposed by the Greeks), has become its content – "art, by definition, says something" (Sontag 1964, 2). As the content of the work of art (or what it says) is not always obvious (e.g., in abstract painting, in absurdist fiction), it therefore needs to be defended through its interpretation, which in turn is a translation of what the work means, using history to justify the proposed explanation (Sontag 1964, 3). This is how ancient texts are retranslated to answer modern demands (ibid.).

We can apply this to Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). Considering today's knowledge regarding minority representations (or lack thereof), one might pinpoint the racism prevalent in the novel and call it "a colonialist narrative in Gothic form" (Raw 2016). Combined with what we now know about the author and his beliefs, and from the perspective of the ideology of integrating diversity, this may convey a rather negative view on Wilde's work – as a perpetuator of a series of nowadays old and discriminatory ideas. From this angle, Wilde could seem rather dismissible. However, from a gender studies point of view, a queer studies point of view, from a philosophical standpoint, the narrative may look different. Moreover, all these points (including the "negative" ones) may be even more relevant when the work is read and understood in its context ("History"), and the existence of a "colonial narrative", for instance, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* may not diminish the work's importance but could be – with the knowledge we have today, one more point to examine, and to analyze in a new critical way.

In fact, according to Sontag, the "clear meaning of the text" is therefore lost when confronted to "the demands of (later) readers" (Sontag 1996, 3). On the one hand, the different interpretations seem to attempt to salvage a text by almost rewriting it and rendering it relevant again, in an interpretation that equals itself truth, as the interpreter claims to have found the true meaning of the text, instead of altering it through its "translation" (ibid.). But what is, then, this "truth"? If no one is "right", no perspective should tower over another. Several interpretations can be highlighted at a certain time, for a certain purpose, or can exist side by side as considerations and analysis. One might read *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and see themselves in the vanity of the character, in his fear of death. Another might be incapable of separating the story from the context in which it was written and yet another of looking

at it through anything else than their 21st century eyes. Nonetheless, we can argue that the text's endurance in time (even away from its promotion by academics and scholars) seems to show that nowadays, still, we can take something out of this 19th century work.

On the other hand, however, interpretations have a destructive quality (Sontag 1964, 4). As they do claim to uncover the truth, to detain it, they excavate and destroy to find a "true" sense which might not even exist in the work of art in this way, and which reduces it to that interpretation only. To sum up, if interpretation is "the modern way of understanding something" (Sontag 1964, 5), when done in a destructive way, it impoverishes the work by, firstly, restricting it to "meanings", and secondly, by reducing the number of possible meanings in search for truth. If one were to interpret *The Picture of Dorian Gray*'s "true meaning" as a "colonialist narrative" and vouch for its cancelation (as harmful narratives such as the ones perpetuated by colonialism are condemned), the work would be reduced to an ideology which it is hard to say it ever meant to promote.

An example outside of literature but which ultimately expresses a rejection of older ideologies (such as whiteness and colonialism) and the destructive quality of interpretations, is the incident described by Simon During in his 2021 article "Whiteness and the Humanities". The article reflects on the question "are the humanities conveying white supremacism?" and relates it to the canceling of departments of Humanities in several American universities (e.g., in Chicago's English Department, due to its long history "of providing aesthetic rationalizations for colonization, exploitation, extraction and anti-blackness"). According to During, the classics themselves are not instigators, per se, of white supremacism, as the concept of race has changed over time. The classics as we know them were invented in the 1800s. Suppressing the entire field (instead of allowing for critical discussions to be held), however, does not seem to present any kind of solution, for any issue, but, first and foremost, because it makes (at times simply erroneous) presuppositions: Ancient Greece and Rome were not "white", they existed before the concept of "Europe", or "European" (defined in the 19th century) came to be. Classical aestheticism was rather projected and appropriated in Art History to become what we know today, especially echoed by marble statues (white only due to the passage of time).

Understanding why the classics were made to seem so "white" seems to give us more answers than suppressing a field whose origin can be found before any of the 19th century

definitions of race and society as we know them were even set. Nonetheless, it is true that the first European canons appeared in a particular context in the 19th century (conceptualized by upper classes largely dominated by educated white men). By choosing what was "best", endowed with certain (white-centric, class driven) ideologies and a will to perpetuate them (Boakye 2023). It seems fair that, as times have changed, there is a will to change the canon as well – namely as a way of showing that one does not subscribe to those ideologies it promotes.

But instead of going against the idea of a canon, Jeffrey Boakye proposes that the canon "lives in us, in our hearts and minds, with all the various lived experiences that different educators can embody" – meaning that without needing to be completely dismantled or destroyed, the canon can be seen as a project in perpetual motion, as a reflection of the times and individuals' priorities. Rethinking the canon would stem from education and a recognition of society's systemic oppressions rather than from a complete disregard of History, which, although it can be rewritten to encompass more perspectives, can be hardly eliminated, as our present is a direct consequence of our past – and understanding it can only benefit our future.

If we look for "authenticity" (in a way which presupposes the fair representation of marginalized individuals) in all Western literature, we will be disappointed. However, this does not mean that we cannot find any other value in these novels – and that the canon cannot be rethought to provide answers to the new ideas and values our modern societies choose to reflect. Having looked at the new ways publishing has categorized diversity, ways which, in the end, promote a different kind of single story, as well as how the past is judged as limited, one of Kundera's sentences particularly resonates: "[…] chasing after the future is the worst conformism of all, a craven flattery of the mighty. For the future is always mightier than the present. It will pass judgement on us, of course. And without any competence" (Kundera 2005, 20).

This does not mean that works of the past (and present) should not be analyzed, interpreted, and passed on blindly, without bringing forward aspects which were not contested before. The goal of multicultural education, towards the creation of an ever-more democratic society, is exactly the promotion and cultivation of critical thinking – and the incredible awareness that these works of fiction, in their context or outside it, attached or not to

meanings (Sontag 1964, 6), still may have something valuable to teach us, and that this dimension, this so-called universal importance should be allowed to exist and be recognized, without the imposition of any ideologies, which themselves limit possibilities of interpretation, of expression – ultimately, of being.

Despite the need we may feel to re-construct our identities in a way which feels "natural" to us, as in conformity with ourselves and our conscience, and not society, and cut ties with what might have negatively influenced our journey to self-discovery, "none of us create[s] the world we inhabit from scratch; none of us crafts our values and commitments save in dialogue with the past" (Appiah 2018, 67). Understanding the past is essential, if not unavoidable when wanting to construct or re-construct our present, as radically rejecting the past would have (and seems to be having) rather opposite or unwanted consequences.

If the #OwnVoices cause (rather than the movement) remains valid in its objectives, which have not yet been fulfilled, the way authenticity was presented by the movement in its more radical form seems to have had an opposite effect (than the one first delineated) not only in the integration of the marginalized communities it was trying to protect but also in the fact that it ended up limiting what they could create, reducing to a set, unmovable identity the stories they could make their own. Moreover, the cancelation of the classics eliminates eventual learning opportunities one could get from reading older texts; their drastic re-interpretation reduces them to something impoverishing, does not allow for the existence of misunderstandings, mistakes, ideologies, nor for the proof of progress. There should be an openness from academics to discuss the canon, to find new ways of interpreting it, just as there should be, from the readers, a freer, more empathetic (though not uncritical) understanding of fiction. Finally, we will, in the last Chapter, go into a broader reflection on how we could, having the today's context in mind, re-center the debates surrounding authenticity in literature, and, especially, on the issue of the author, and author intent.

Chapter 9 | The place of the author

9.1 On the author and author intent

In his essay *The Death of the Author*[45], Barthes states how the author being considered as the creator God of their work, having a central role in literature, is a modern phenomenon. Barthes disagrees with this concept, as he argues that the act of writing is "the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin" (Barthes 1977, 142). To Barthes, writing is a neutral space where all identity is lost, "starting with the very identity of the body writing": it is with the author's death that the writing begins (ibid.). The focus given to the Author by popular culture – to their life, to their beliefs, and relating this to the author's work – is, for Barthes, wrong, as, to him, "only language acts" (Barthes 1977, 143). He argues linguistics have a rounded function: it exists within itself, it is contained in itself, and so there is no need to attempt to complete it (ibid.), as the Author represents the book's past (he exists and creates it), but, ultimately, with the book's creation, the Author ceases to be, becoming, instead, what Barthes calls a scriptor: although he is, as the writer, credited to having produced the work, he does not provide its explanation – which is to be, instead, discussed and determined by the reader (Barthes 1977, 147). In fact, not even the Author works "alone" in their creation, as "the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture" (Barthes 1977, 144); "the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred" (Barthes 1977, 147).

Attributing an Author to the text is, therefore, for Barthes, a way of limiting it (or its interpretations), of explaining it and therefore closing its meanings (Barthes 1977, 147). Literature (or writing) refuses, in this way "an ultimate meaning to the text [and to the world as text]", becoming an anti-theological activity, the modern and revolutionary activity of refusing to determine or fix meaning (refusing God, reason, science, law) (ibid.). With the death of the author, Barthes draws attention on the reader as having a constitutive role in literature (and not the author): "to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (Barthes 1977, 148).

[45] Barthes' essay *The Death of the Author* was originally published in English, and then in French, in 1967.The version cited in this dissertation is the 1977 English translation by Stephen Heath.

In the 1969 essay titled *What is an author?* (written in response to Barthes'), Foucault attempts to define the author's function within discourse (and in his own writings), rather than to focus solely on the figure of the author, the individual behind the book who generally holds primacy when discussing literature, philosophy, etc. (Foucault 1998, 205-206[46]). In his essay, Foucault is interested in how the author's place in culture comes to be, and in the fact that its place is, indeed, a cultural construction (Foucault 1998, 207), subjected to subjective and complex processes (ibid.). In fact, in society, the author's name has several functions; it is a means of classification; it establishes different forms of relationships among texts (Foucault 1988, 210), existing in different ways within discourse (in a scientific text, for instance, the content is usually more valued than its author, something which does not happen for literary texts) (Foucault 1998, 211).

To Foucault, the discourse surrounding the author matters: the critics, are somewhat (also) the author's creators, as the knowledge produced around the author and the texts contributes to how they are perceived. At the same time, by placing the focus on the author, the critic conveys (as seen with Barthes) the idea of the existence of a "final meaning" in a work, inevitably limiting it: in this sense, the author "serves to neutralize the contradictions that may emerge in a series of texts" (Foucault 1998, 215), therefore containing its possible dangers.

Foucault, however, contrarily to Barthes, does place importance on the role of the author, on what the "fictionalization" of the author, in a way, might generate (both positively and negatively): "the author of a novel is only the author of his own text; [provided] that he acquires some 'importance'" in the literary world, his influence might be significant (Foucault 1998, 217). According to Foucault, the task of criticism is therefore not to link an author and his work or to reconstitute the author's beliefs and experiences through his work – it is, instead, one of analyzing its structure, content and form (Foucault 1998, 207). Today, however, we may argue that the author is very much alive.

According to Lipovetsky, being an artist "is no longer about executing a work according to recognized aesthetic rules, reproducing models, imitating the masters, it is about being creative and original, expressing your singular and unique 'self'" (Lipovetsky 2022, 226).

[46] Although Foucault's essay was originally published in 1969, the version here cited is an English translation by Josué V. Harari published in 1998.

The artist is expected to create works which stem from his own background – in the end, works that represent him, somehow, or his singularity.

Intimate narratives are preferred; people create their own self-portrait, their own autobiography – supposedly founded in the idea of truth (Lipovetsky 2022, 171). They want to share their "authentic stories" and they want to hear (or read) about others' "authentic stories". The idea of painting oneself, of telling the truth about oneself is now widespread: writing workshops, for instance, have multiplied and gained popularity, with the main motivation of the participants being writing from oneself, from an intimate space (ibid.). Furthermore, "the culture of authenticity leads to the refusal of the distinction between art and life" (Lipovetsky 2022, 174). Being "authentic" has become a way for one to market oneself (Lipovetsky 2022, 177); spectators (and readers) have become "consumers of authenticity" (Lipovetsky 2022, 175), nothing can stray away from "sincerity", from (although made-up, performed, marketed) "reality".

Moreover, today, the identity of the author, especially if they come from a marginalized community, matters in a symbolic, political, ideological sense: due to the scarcity of certain voices, the ones which manage to pull through become an example for the others, and so the cycle continues. This is not necessarily negative: until we get to a point where all have a fair chance at representing themselves, the presence of individuals of marginalized identities in spaces where they were scarce will all always be something to acknowledge and even celebrate. But let us further analyze the role of the author by going back to Sims Bishop's point about clarifying the author's intentions, related to the issue of genre which ties into the debates we have been describing, as well as to the points argued by Barthes and Foucault.

9.2 Author responsibility and genre

Firstly, everyone is born within an ideology, which consists of the often-unconscious rules and beliefs that shape people's values and perceptions and are tied "to the maintenance and reproduction of social power" (Eagleton 1983, 13). Since fiction typically aims to transmit something, all writing is inherently ideological, though some ideologies may be more obviously embedded in a certain work. While fiction can transcend ideology and welcome multiple interpretations (cultural, historical, and ever-changing), it remains deeply

intertwined with ideology. Additionally, besides fiction, genres shape knowledge and contribute to the perpetuation of (mis-)representations. With simple definitions aimed at accommodating exceptions, genres evolve, change, and overlap (Neale 1990, 57), hence Neale's emphasis on "historicizing generic definitions" (1990, 58), as the genres' variation puts in interaction "the level of expectation, the level of the generic corpus, and the level of the 'rules' or 'norms' that govern both" (Neale 1990, 56). Each new work adds to the existing genre repertoire, excluding and including items.

Young adult literature, for instance, as a lens into the world and as an educational tool, shapes knowledge in a particular manner. However, YA suffers from constraints which stem from genre conventions (e.g., its pedagogical dimension) motivated by commercial pressures and harsh reader expectations, which restrict the genre's potential for transgression and evolution. Although not all YA novels are formulaic, today, standards for fair representation are strict, influencing the whole of literature. In a sense, YA, motivated by the ethics of authenticity, has been transformative when it comes to the representation of marginalized communities, and positively so. But as it seeks to be "true" rather than plausible, YA simultaneously sets unrealistic expectations which are ultimately counterproductive and unsustainable. If the novel is an antigenre, the YA novel has become imprisoned by its genre, and the revolution quickly stumbled upon where the economic strategy began. The demands of the market made diversity quantifiable, marketable, trendy. The promotion of "a priori cultures" (Magder 2004, 384), "a priori identities", is what the "trendification" of identity results in. Being a kind of transition genre into world of the (often) more complex literature in terms of language, themes, or both, and although it aims to be both a didactic and disruptive genre, YA has fallen into moralistic pretentions and commercial motivations.

Although YA is succeeding, on the one hand, in adding to the narratives that already exist, on the other, there seem to be too many constraining factors which simplify or distract from structural problems which are both hindering YA from fulfilling its function as well as placing limits to expression. Applicable to the media as well as to the publishing industry, Fürsich finds that the production practices (for instance, in publishing, the lack of diversity in editorial teams) and economic pressure (e.g., the need to follow trends), both linked to the historical, socio-economic, cultural context of each country, are factors which may hinder progress regarding good representation of Others (2010, 116).

Moreover, as discussed in Chapters 4 and 8, the invisible threats connected to technology and globalization in our capitalistic societies minimize critical thinking and difficult discussions surrounding cultural authenticity. This is where education comes in, providing tools for the critical analysis of texts, and in a way which, as we now know literature to be deeply connected to knowledge construction, makes one aware of the power-structures ingrained within texts, historicizing and contextualizing the text, without taking away possibilities for interpretation or reducing the text to one single ideology. In short, more efforts need to be made on a structural level, such as fighting discrimination and the lack of diversity inside publishing houses, for instance.

But let us return to Sims Bishop's "criteria" for cultural authenticity. Bearing in mind the history of misrepresentation and injustice faced by marginalized communities, asking for cultural authenticity (and therefore, fair representation) especially in children and adolescent literature can never be a form of censorship – quite the opposite. As children's, middle grade, and young adult literature have a pedagogical dimension, it should be part of the author's responsibility to represent authentically the culture they are depicting, just as the dominant culture was and has been fairly represented, so as not to perpetuate harmful discourses and allow for more recognition, especially at such formative ages. Moreover, advocating for cultural authenticity in literature does not equate with excluding texts which might exude discriminatory or "outdated" discourse – as the concept of cultural authenticity is related to multicultural education, it is about finding ways to critically discuss texts in a constructive but non-restrictive manner. What might be considered censorship, however, is impeding or dismissing works due to the author not sharing the same identity(ies) as the one(s) depicted in their book.

Now, another argument easily dismissed by those who advocate for cultural authenticity in fiction is connected to considering misrepresentation a fault of the writer's ability. Although somewhat controversial, when we examine the accelerated, superficial, capitalistic-driven modes of producing literature today, this might be a (reasonably) valid point – especially if we consider that the writer is also an observer[47] and should therefore not be solely limited to their own understanding of things. An author (in the Western world) and in this decade

[47] "A writer is someone who pays attention to the world — a writer is a professional observer", Susan Sontag in a lecture at 92Y, on April 16th, 1992 (Popova 2017).

(2020s), for instance, should know (or learn) how to mindfully treat the topics it introduces and, as Sims Bishop puts it, make it seem like the author "knows what's going on". If a character is ignorant, he must have been written as such, and not be so because the author did not know what they were writing about. To give an example, *Eleanor & Park* seems to be (among other factors) a product of a lack of research on Korean American culture. Even if Rowell not being the most knowledgeable on certain subjects is not a problem, the fact that she attempted to write a YA novel which supposedly featured the marginalized characters' perspective without getting more deeply educated on the topic is.

Nonetheless, as stressed in Chapter 3, not everything can be limited to the writer's ability, as that would dismiss the challenges surrounding fairly representing cultures and identities outside (or not) one's own, especially marginalized ones. Moreover, a lot can be said about the responsibility of editors and publishers who, aware of the representational and knowledge-producing power of books, and of their own (economic, social) power, should be attentive to misrepresentations. In the end, publishing *Eleanor & Park* was the decision of a team of professionals.

Ultimately, the bigger challenge will always be the one faced by the writers from identities which are marginalized, as they are seeking entry points into the industry and asking for the right to represent themselves – a right which is largely taken for granted by the dominant identity(ies), or even – to simply write, write freely, without constraint and expectation, without needing to conform to anything except their own creative motivations. White (cis, straight) authors should not feel threatened by the rise of diverse voices, and especially not by its current trendification, which fails to even benefit those diverse voices. Despite the more hostile climate fiction writers are in today, due to the excessive scrutiny and career-ending incidents, the dominant identities which have always had a voice still do. In this sense, the demand for cultural authenticity in novels should not be seen as a menace but rather as the rightful desire of marginalized authors, like all authors, to represent themselves, to see themselves represented, and to enter spaces which were before inaccessible to them.

Now, at the same time, fiction should not be made to be only political: it must be allowed arbitrary meanings, it must be allowed the collaborative process that is at its nature: books which are not necessarily "positive" when it comes to diversity should not, in the same way, be seen as a threat to the general dominant-narrative changing agenda. To put it simply,

fiction, literature, should never be imposed an agenda, as it would hinder our possibility to be creative, to practice critical thinking: or the way to collective freedom.

However, at least for now, or until structural changes are made, these debates seem to be here to stay, and the responsibility of fairly representing other cultures is now transversal to anyone who decides to write outside of their identity or depict a given culture, especially a marginalized one – and failing to do so comes with strict expectations of accountability. Although Kosoko Jackson, for instance, attempted to justify the choice of villain (who belongs, in the story, to the persecuted identity) by saying that "there are multiple sides to every story" (Cook 2019), nowadays, and relating to a simply written romance-centered YA novel, this justification is insufficient. The contemporaneity of the occurrence makes placing the story in such a setting a delicate endeavor, especially when the focus is not on the exploration of this occurrence (or on anything else that could justify such a choice) and, instead, on a "cute love story". And this, we can argue, should have been part of the editor's job to foresee, only they could have been focusing more on the "own voices" side of the story (which goes to prove the paradoxical nature of these discussions).

Nonetheless, cancelation may not be the only outcome of such debates. Amélie Wen Zhao's début novel *Blood Heir*, of which the release was rescheduled due to her descriptions of slavery, accused of being racially insensitive towards African Americans, knew a different, more productive end: although Zhao claimed that the descriptions were inspired on the history of slavery of her own culture (Zhao is Chinese), she took in account people's views and revised the book. The revised version was released in November 2019, and positively received[48].

Although we should be able to trust editors to spot potential problems in novels, the publishing landscape does not seem prepared, yet, to accommodate such expectations, as the demand for cultural authenticity has been spreading faster than structural changes ever will – starting with the lack of representation in publishing houses (due to economic and social barriers), but also with the speed of publishing, driven by profit. Moreover, although some

[48] "With its gauzy romance unscrolling over a scrim of historical trauma", *A Place for Wolves* "could prove too problematic to salvage" (Waldman 2019). As Waldman points out, "ironically", Jackson worked as a sensitivity reader for the Big Five, and participated, right before his own début was cancelled, in delaying the publication of Zhao's novel.

kind of dialogue has been attempted (e.g., despite its faults, with the contribution of sensitivity readers), the issues of representation in YA and in literature reflect societal circumstances which precede the publishing industry and call for structural changes in which "solutions" such as sensitivity readers might be a first step, but an unsustainable and insufficient one. Moreover, sensitivity readers, writers, editors, readers, are not devoid of ideology and social pressure. While productive to a certain extent, insider/outsider debates are inherently limiting. In a more positive sense, however, all these efforts at establishing a dialogue are also a first step in the long process of deconstructing the dominant discourse, and should not be stopped, only critically rethought – which is, also due to the everything we have been describing, challenging in itself.

Nevertheless, there is more than one positive aspect to YA and to the communities which were created around it. Firstly, YA provides stories which are both didactic and exciting, and sought out by the readers. Knowing what a book might bring is also part of the pleasure of reading (Neale 1990, 48), and the fact that YA's fast paced stories manage to compete with ever-more present screens is a feat in itself. In fact, YA is credited with encouraging habits of reading amongst young people, which were then hyper-popularized by online book communities. Moreover, there is a will to take young adult literature and its goals of fair representation seriously, especially as some of the "trends" popularized by the genre, such as making stereotyping something "outmoded" (Waldman 2019), are quite positive. Only, like all trends, they are also oversimplified: although taking YA seriously is indispensable, since it has been, truly, and even more throughout the last decade, a transformative genre, one can argue that YA should be, above all else, taken as what it is.

Still, in regard to the conversations held online, Waldman raises a good point: "a group of unpaid readers – one with an undeniable personal investment in the [YA] community – seems to be doing much of the work of critique that is usually first the task of agents and editors, and then that of booksellers and critics" (2019). Waldman asks herself what the difference may be between "a marketplace of ideas" and a "Twitter mob", criticized for being just that, an online mob, but, at the same time, fulfilling the role of what a productive, respectful "marketplace of ideas" could be. Indeed, although first heavily criticized for her mistakes, Zhao was later applauded for acknowledging them and doing something about it. In this sense, the online book community (in particular, of YA authors and readers who are

very engaged in these discussions) can also be seen as a supportive community in which everyone fails and learns, a collective project of self-awareness and growth, which goes in line with Sims Bishop's proposal of sharing the writing process with one's peers and recognizing one's mistakes.

Now, circling back to the author's intentions, we can make a few points. Due to the challenges of writing diverse stories in fiction, conversations surrounding how the author made their research and what they pretend to do with the story (e.g., what inspired them; what angle they are writing from) could be encouraged to help editors discuss issues of representation in a book. If they are unsure, they could have someone they deem more knowledgeable read the manuscript, ideally, without placing full responsibility on that individual based on their identity. Moreover, although it makes sense that, if the writer happens to be writing outside of their own identity, the editor may want to be more aware of their research process (as seen with Sims Bishop, it is always important to gather insider perspectives when writing about a given community), attempting to directly link the author's identity to the story they are writing may not only be unfair but also unproductive.

If, in Sims Bishop's understanding, knowing the ideology of the writer might better inform discussions surrounding authenticity in fiction, this should not be equated to reducing discussions surrounding authenticity to insider/outsider debates. And this is exactly what happened with the publication attempt of Afonso Reis Cabral's *Pão de Açúcar* in the U.S.: the editor pointed out his gender identity, different from his marginalized character's, first. Now, the reasons for not publishing it could have been that he did not think his publishing house's audience was appropriate. But it seems that it was, instead, fear. If ideology might be more obviously splattered onto books which have a more simplistic message, searching for "ideology" in fiction, in literature, can be tricky, as the complexity of language and form, and the number of interpretations which can stem from them, does not make anything (like in life, as the modern novel seeks to be "realistic"), very clear, or singular in meaning.

Pão de Açúcar, for instance, does not allow one to come to absolute certainty about any "ideology", as the novel's objective seems to be both the exploration of various characters' feelings and the repressive context they are in, but also the sharing of Gisberta's story, and her side as a character who was oppressed. Ultimately, when reading the book, one might argue that it does seem like Reis Cabral did his research, while, simultaneously, other people

accuse it of forgiving the teenage culprits. The fact is that there is no ideology profoundly splattered into the pages (despite it being based on a true story), and that may exactly be what might make it literature – no explicit agenda, no (obvious, curated, nursed) will to teach the reader anything (at least not in a closed sense). And yet, exactly because we are talking about literature: this can all be contested.

Now, in Portugal, there are not yet many stories which feature transgender characters or written by transgender individuals. Due to Reis Cabral's already mediatic presence, the book (which earned the Saramago Prize in 2019) reached many readers. The hope is that this story does not forever remain the only Portuguese story out there about or featuring transgender individuals. But this does not mean that this one should not exist (even though, again, this can be discussed).

Ultimately, the conversation surrounding author identity and responsibility in fiction writing is an ongoing conversation, happening right at this moment. The era of authenticity we are now in is an era of constant change, of "unstable authenticity", in which "conversions and adhesions are not very solid or lasting": this new phase therefore has to do with movement and mobility (Lipovetsky 2022, 217), both when it comes to identity and belonging, and to the numerous forms of one's involvement with the world, which has become "less rigorous and more punctual" (Lipovetsky 2022, 199).

However, this does not mean that we should not continue spreading awareness on marginalized individuals, and on their history of misrepresentation. Exactly due to the knowledge we have on the scarcity of certain voices in society, excluded from dominant discourse, we must act by, sometimes, placing emphasis on the identity of the author. Only this emphasis should not be the end or the only solution.

Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation, we have explored how, in fiction, the concept of authenticity has been used by readers, authors and publishers to indicate fair representation. In this sense, we have found two main "types" of authenticity which interlink and contribute to this debate.

The first is cultural authenticity in fiction, as defined by Rudine Sims Bishop, which refers to the fact that an individual from the represented community or identity (an "insider") feels that the writer "knows what's going on". Cultural authenticity in fiction not only means allowing for more voices to be fairly heard, acknowledging the history of oppression as well as the socio-cultural, economic context in which power relations (ultimately, all relations) are formed, it also aims, above all, to promote critical thinking. In this sense, rethinking how literature is taught and perceived, and not only constructed, matters. It is not about excluding: the emphasis is on the plurality of perspectives, of representations.

The second type of authenticity, defined by Gilles Lipovetsky, is philosophical: it refers to the modern ideal of being oneself and being true to oneself (to one's desires, needs, etc.), something nowadays expected and praised by nearly everyone (in the Western world). However, although extremely positive as a protector of individual freedom, the concept of authenticity is sometimes used (and transformed) to make individuals bend to a community's rules. If the ethics of authenticity commends subjectivity and difference, it is also at the basis of a new kind of unfair censorship contradictory to the idea of collective liberation it supposedly means to support.

The definition of authenticity promoted by the #OwnVoices movement which links the identity of the writer to the story they are writing, therefore "legitimating" it, making the identity of the writer a mark of cultural authenticity (i.e., of fair representation), is an example of this. This definition dismisses important factors, such as that cultural authenticity cannot be resumed to an outsider/insider distinction. The focus is rather on allowing for more insider representations, or well-researched representations of diverse identities. Either way, the cultural authenticity of a story will always be contextual and, to a certain extent, subjective and debatable.

Moreover, literature is art, and beyond the representation of "an identity", it is its content and form which allows, in its possibility to transcend its meanings, for a myriad of interpretations. Literature will not be subjected to any truths; it will accommodate many

truths and none at the same time. Literature is free and signifies freedom, and, therefore, if it is allowed, it will side with who dares to yield it. Literature is transformative: it will anger, inspire, dissuade, teach. Only to do so it cannot be reduced to one thing, just as human beings cannot be reduced to one thing. More importantly: literature will make us think. In its stillness, it will leave us restless, and it will, at least, make us think. Fiction implies the exploration of things which do not exist, of possibilities, of what ifs which will not necessarily illustrate today's (or even tomorrow's) society: that, in itself, is an act of freedom.

Now, considering literature art should not prevent anyone from acknowledging the unfair hierarchies which make up our societies – divisions in class, in opportunities, the different space each of us occupies. Intersectionality is to have its place in these discussions, and efforts must actively be made to acknowledge power relations, or who the dominant narrative has or not been benefitting. If, for fair representation to happen, action must be taken especially on a structural level, to critically analyze, discuss, and eventually denounce texts which may be harmful is essential. Additionally, when it comes to children's and young adult literature, which aim to educate, the focus will always be more didactical. In many ways, YA is an interesting project, and a movement with the size and impact of #OwnVoices holds something of value in its attempt to contribute to structural change, and reduce inequality based on the identity of the author. Only its appropriation by publishers and other internet watchdogs prevented it from being an irreproachable incentive, despite its positives, to marginalized writers, becoming, instead, an "easy", marketable, and, paradoxically, discriminatory soundbite.

More pedagogical genres like YA tend to deviate from the (anti-genre) novel as Eagleton or Kundera define it: they tend, almost as a rule, to bend to the readers' desires. However, these books, which aim to be vessels for inclusivity and democratic values, should not have to bow down to ever-more restricting rules. The YA novel is still a novel, and one at the important crossroads between childhood and adulthood. It can be criticized and de-simplified. This also depends on the readers, connected through social media and the vast web, who attempt to navigate the structural systems which constrain them while pretending to free them. However, fiction books should not be victim to the (false) simplification of discourse. Fiction should never be required to be only straightforward (as life rarely is). Firstly, because fiction,

as art, can be abstract and challenging and transcend ideology, secondly, because reading implies the reader's role as the interpreter, as the co-maker of the story (and his interpretation does not signify truth), thirdly, because, as a form of freedom of expression, of exploration of possibilities of being, fiction, like other art-forms, might make us uncomfortable, might shock and require from us more time, more attention, more thought – than what we are ultimately used to nowadays, therefore going against the current in terms of how we are required to think: quickly and superficially.

In this sense, although a transformative ethics which aims to protect individual and therefore collective freedom, as Lipovetsky emphasizes in the last chapter of his book, authenticity is not our savior. Even if it is extremely important, it is also distracting. Despite the positive changes it has brought and will hopefully continue bringing, the ethics of authenticity is subjected to the challenges of the new public sphere: the pleasure-oriented, individualistic consumer society which now influences decision-making everywhere, both directly and invisibly. Anyone who is limited to seeing one side is ultimately blind to another. The question is therefore not about who is wrong or right but rather: "Why is this happening? What is hindering discussion?"

Context is essential in our understanding of our own selves, and of the Other. While the understanding we have of the Other will never be total, it would be dangerous to assume that some kind of understanding is intrinsically impossible. Moreover, allowing for more stories to exist should never feel like a threat. A threat happens when different sides appropriate different things and make them representative of a whole (or: the single story). By "sides", we mean those who do not allow for nuance and do not accept the pluralities of identity or experiences, placing emphasis instead only on the stories which serve to prove or justify their own point (in their view, the only relevant). Being mindful of the histories of oppression and power relations which have ultimately shaped our societies should never undermine the possibility to criticize in a constructive, self-aware way.

This said, it is important to note that the #OwnVoices movement as it started never meant to radically link the author to the story it was telling, but rather to doubly promote diverse stories as well as (their) diverse authors. What followed was how the movement was appropriated and rethought by individuals with either more radical forms of thinking or whose judgement was clouded by the immediacy of information and the simplistic structure

of the new public sphere. Although the turning point at which we find ourselves, in terms of evolution and efforts of integration, must be acknowledged, the complexity of life (which has never left us) cannot be forgotten simply because it is more "comfortable".

The relevance of the issue of representation is evident in children's literature because these initial moments of learning are crucial. But it should not mean to prevent or prohibit, but to contextualize and foster critical thinking. If Sims Bishop's proposal "to disclose the author's ideology" seems difficult to resolve, there is no reason why conversations related to the story's angle, the inspiration, the intention could not be interesting for the editor, for example, prior to publishing a book, but in a way that takes interest in the author's vision and not in their identity. Now, if until marginalized identities gain their rightful place in the dominant narrative, the identity of the author will have to matter, at least to a certain extent, this needs to be analyzed in a way which is not merely facilitative or market motivated.

Centuries, decades of oppression and inequality will not be resolved in a few years. Constructive jargon for the adequate discussion of different issues (in different Western countries, in different languages and amidst different power structures) cannot be created in the most effective way without some patience, without some effort to look at each situation, to detach ourselves from what, although widespread and impactful, remains unquestioned. Now, emphasis on discussion does not mean that everything should be accepted. It also does not mean inertia: for things to move forward, we must sometimes do with what we have. Moreover, the rise of far-right movements in the West proves that there is still a lot to be done in terms of representation, of fighting for rights, for a place in society. This is what it comes to: education, dialogue between individuals, a sense of community that is truly inclusive (not gatekept), a reevaluation of consumer society and a reappropriation and aware use of the digital tools which, instead of dividing us, could help us connect. All of this, while letting fiction do what it does best: show us who we are, and then show us something else. This is all, of course, much too ambitious: as with anything, it is easier said than done. But it might be worth a thought.

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