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# Critical Introduction: Responsibility and Representation & Introduction to *All My Mother's Lovers*

Ilana Masad

*University of Nebraska - Lincoln*

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Critical Introduction: Responsibility and Representation

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Introduction to *All My Mother's Lovers*

by

Ilana Masad

A Thesis

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Critical Introduction: Responsibility and Representation

&

Introduction to *All My Mother's Lovers*

Ilana Masad, M.A.

University of Nebraska, 2019

Advisor: Timothy Schaffert

This critical component of the creative thesis *All My Mother's Lovers* explores the question of fiction writers' responsibility to themselves, their work, and their readers in the age of social media and easy access of readers to writers and vice versa. Using two examples of recent online controversies, this piece explores the varying ways in which readers respond to writers and writers to readers and rhetorically analyzes the responses of those in positions of power (writers, publishers) as well as the cultural contexts from within which they respond. It then draws conclusions as to the trajectory of these two controversies, finding one to be productive and the other leading to a dead end. This piece then moves to explore its author's positionality and context as well as how she arrived at her current position, attempting responsible representation, consideration of language and historical stereotypes, and a commitment to listen to and learn from potential reader criticism.

The introduction to the creative thesis *All My Mother's Lovers* briefly lists important plot points and the themes its author considered during the writing process.

Table of Contents

Critical Introduction..... 1

(A Brief) Introduction to *All My Mother's Lovers*.....24

## Critical Introduction: Responsibility and Representation

I think about responsibility a lot.

But first: context.

Context is essential, because the reality of our present-day media landscape is that no one who publishes their work in mainstream, broadly accessible, and widely read venues has the privilege of anonymity anymore. But is anonymity a privilege? This is up for debate. Once, women published under male pseudonyms in order to ensure respectability. Virginia Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own*, ventured that “Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman.” (Woolf, 59) Anonymity, it seems to me, used to be a rather dubious safety measure, one that allowed some writers to share their work but which also kept them from being able to claim it or defend it. Now, however, I notice writers complaining, either in print or on social media or in whispers, about the conflation of their biographical details—so readily available in the archive of the internet—with their literary works. Garth Greenwell, whose debut novel *What Belongs to You* clearly drew on autobiographical experiences, was asked in an interview with Interlochen Public Radio about the critical responses that pointed this out. He said: “I don’t love when critics proceed with the assumption that it is autobiography. That I think is lazy...” On the other hand, while the novel “is not autobiography in any strict sense,” Greenwell said he loved “that readers receive it in that way,” and added: “I mean, I think one thing I want to do as a writer is to give the sense of a lived experience, an experience that is drenched with reality. So I like that.” The difference Greenwell points out between the critic’s reaction and the reader’s makes sense: a critic is meant to evaluate a work on its own merit and try to understand what the work is trying to do and whether it is doing it successfully, drawing on

the critic's own knowledge of craft, cultural markers, and literary histories; a reader's experience is utterly their own, and owes the work, and thus the author, nothing, really. A critic may have a reader's response as well, but must pull back from, or at least back up, their personal opinion in order to view the work with nuance and recognize it for what it is trying to be rather than what the critic's reader-self might wish it were. A critic, then, has a responsibility that a reader doesn't.

And what is the author's responsibility? This is the question that has reverberated in me for the past few years, as I learn and unlearn, discover the systems—historical, cultural, political—that I am part of, and consider the ways in which art has the capacity to reinforce, break through, undermine, demystify, or otherwise engage with these systems. This is the question that I am trying to address here, but it is complicated by the fact that there are at least two modes of responsibility that come into play. There is the internal, deeply personal kind: what is the author's responsibility to herself? And there is an external, perceived responsibility: what does the author owe the public, what standard is she being held to, and how does the work represent and affect said public? Of course, there is an interplay between these two kinds of responsibility, perhaps now more than ever, as the public so often has access to authors and authors can so easily address the public.

Both kinds of responsibility, though, often hinge on authors' context, their lack of anonymity, their lived experience. One famous example is the polarizing Philip Roth, who is beloved and reviled in equal measure for his portrayal of extreme misogyny and neurotic Jewish stereotypes—he was considered a “self-hating Jew” by some, believed to despise women by others. When he died, Zadie Smith—not a misogynist—wrote in her loving tribute to him in *The New Yorker* that,

[f]or Roth, literature was not a tool of any description. It was the venerated thing in itself. He loved fiction and (unlike so many half or three-quarter writers) was never ashamed of it. He loved it in its irresponsibility, in its comedy, in its vulgarity, and its divine independence. He never confused it with other things made of words, like statements of social justice or personal rectitude, journalism or political speeches, all of which are vital and necessary for lives we live outside of fiction, but none of which are fiction, which is a medium that must always allow itself, as those other forms often can't, the possibility of expressing intimate and inconvenient truths.

Sandra Newman, on the other hand, wrote for the *Huffington Post* that, while “on a scale from zero to Norman Mailer, Roth is only a five,” his misogyny

should be taken seriously *because* it's still only a five; because it's still possible for it to be defended, even to pass unremarked. For many 21st-century Americans, it's still not misogyny at all but the normal psychology of the male. Yet it often involves something darker than an adolescent sniggering about boobs.

To be completely honest, I wish I could abandon myself fully to Smith's way of thinking, that I could believe that fiction is a thing unto itself, a pure—whatever that means—art form that can be divorced from “statements of social justice or personal rectitude, journalism or political speeches.” But I tend, instead, to fall on the side of Newman's analysis, which doesn't dilute what Smith loves about Roth, but does complicate it. Newman freely admits that Roth's work is full of “remarkable beauty, intelligence and powerfully evoked emotion” while also pointing out that the “misogyny in his works is one of the ways Roth most truly portrayed the American soul,” whether or not he did so deliberately, and that it should be talked about rather than treated as a dirty secret.

Roth, it appears, cared little for the idea of a writer's responsibility towards anyone or anything but the work itself. That is a fair position, one many authors still hold. It is also a position that critics and readers alike are trying to complicate, with reams of think-pieces, reader reviews, critical articles, and social media conversations emerging in recent years that wrestle

with the author's responsibility. Such conversations and complications can be incredibly productive, creating necessary examinations of existing power structures outside the realm of fiction. The discussion around Philip Roth's work is an example of this for a few reasons. First, he became extremely successful, an American literary giant, so the balance of power fell on the side of his work, his persona, and his publishers. Second, his death, which brought up the resurgence of these conversations in the public squares of the internet, means that there is no longer any danger of intimidating or silencing or "canceling" the man behind the work—not that he was ever a writer to be intimidated or silenced in his lifetime anyway. Third, Roth's vast oeuvre, years-long career, and pre-social-media existence means that there is a history of his polarizing effect; time has allowed us to conceive of nuanced opinions, like Newman's, that don't flatten the work while also fairly criticizing it.

But these public conversations around responsibility also get tricky, and can quickly become counterproductive, occasionally bringing about the opposite of their intended effect, using the very systems and power structures readers criticize to silence, intimidate, or "cancel" the author. I'd like to tease apart a couple recent examples that demonstrate this complexity—and the reason that context is so important—before turning to my views of my own responsibility, how I have attempted to understand it, reckon with it, and fulfill it to the best of my abilities in my novel.

In January of 2019, the galleys of author Amélie Wen Zhao's debut novel, *Blood Heir*, were being read by bloggers, critics, and other early readers. Little hard evidence remains of how the kerfuffle began, but what is known is this: the fantasy novel, which loosely retells the story of Anastasia in an Imperial Russia-inspired land and includes themes of human trafficking and indentured servitude, was criticized in a Goodreads review and several tweets of insensitively

depicting a slave auction scene in which one character, whose skin was darker than the main character's, died. The takeaway was that the book was racist, specifically anti-Black, and Zhao soon released a letter announcing her cancellation of the book, addressing the book community at large: "I want to start by saying that I have the utmost respect for your voices, and I am listening," she began. She continued to explain that, as a woman who was born in Paris, raised in Beijing, and emigrated to the US at eighteen, she was drawing not only on her multicultural upbringing for her characterizations, but also specifically on the history of human trafficking and indentured servitude that still occurs in many industries across Asia, and in her home country of China. Zhao ended with an apology for bringing harm to her readers.

Her announcement was met with both respect and consternation in social media and a rash of think-pieces. Some believed that she had done the right thing, listened to her community and responded accordingly. Others saw this as unnecessary silencing of one woman of color by another community of color. Still others, myself included, saw it as more complicated. To be clear, I have not read Zhao's book. I read the scene in question, which was posted in images on social media, but without having seen the original descriptions of these characters or their emotional arcs or relationship, I had no way of judging this isolated moment. I trusted that the readers who were criticizing the work were doing so in good faith, but did not necessarily trust that those amplifying the critiques were, because social media is conducive to contextless, momentary engagement with a topic that is quickly forgotten by the person retweeting, sharing, liking, and so on.

Regardless of intention, however, on the part of either the author or her critics, I was worried about the event because of what author Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie called the danger of the single story in her famous 2009 TedTalk. "The consequence of the single story is this,"

she said in her opening. “It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar.” The single story being emphasized in this event was the American story, horrific as it is. It was odd, seeing what amounted to an imperialist argument being bandied about in the name of accurate representation. There is no doubt that the United States as a nation has never reckoned with its history of slavery, that there is a continued effort to erase it rather than confront it, diminish it rather than honor the lives of the millions of enslaved people who were so dehumanized. It is also true, however, that many Americans, regardless of historical context, tend to see the United States as the center of the world, its narrative one of utmost importance, its history the only one worth examining.

Lest it seem that I’m diminishing the criticism itself: The intellectual and emotional response that readers had and the criticism they provided is absolutely valid, for they were reacting from within their own context and their own painful history, one that lives on in many ways into modernity in the form of mass incarceration, economic inequality, and other systemic oppressions. But it is also true that Zhao’s point of view was different, her context different, and her relationship to her topic different—and it, too, was valid.

When I tried to point this out to an editor at a major publishing house at a recent conference, she referenced the specific colorism that was occurring within the work, the dark-skinned character dying for her light-skinned friend. Colorism, while most familiar to us in the United States as a form of oppression that specifically relates to race, is not unique to our country, and has a long history in China as well. I don’t know, of course, whether Zhao was purposefully pointing out or unconsciously reinforcing this colorism in her work, but it is clear

that her relationship to skin tone is based in a different context than the white supremacy and racial constructs of the US.

The same editor also told me that Zhao was disliked by other authors in her circle, that she had been mean or belittling of others, and that she originally responded to the accusation of anti-Black racism by saying that the character obviously wasn't Black, because she "has blue eyes," an obviously ignorant and bizarre statement. I repeat this hearsay only because what it illuminated for me was that quite apart from criticism I saw online against Zhao, there were also interpersonal rivalries and publishing-insider politics occurring behind the scenes which could well have supported and given institutional legitimacy to the online criticism, and this made me wary. I wonder, still, whether the criticism against Zhao would have been taken as seriously if she was considered by all a lovely, kind, supportive literary citizen.

Recently, in April of 2019, Zhao announced that her book will be published after all, after a several month delay and some deep editorial work that helps contextualize the themes of human trafficking. Surprisingly, despite how such backlash tends to tank this number, her Goodreads rating is currently at 4.21 stars.

In this case, it seems to me that regardless of any gossip about her personality, Zhao took her dual responsibility as a writer—to herself and her readers—seriously. Cynics might say—and do, among my whisper networks—that pulling the book originally was a performative act, one that kept her in Young Adult Twitter's good graces until the storm blew over. We'll never know for sure. But this is what I see: a writer who took both her own cultural context and the one that she was releasing her work into seriously; a writer who decided that she was responsible to her readers as well as to her own work; a writer who chose not to be outwardly, publicly defensive, but rather to apologize and take time to reflect and learn; and, ultimately, a writer who did learn

from her mistake, worked on her craft, and attempted to clarify her artistic project to both herself and her readers. She showed that it is possible to make mistakes, learn from them, and work hard to rectify them, even after harsh and extremely public criticism.

While both logical and bad-faith criticism of how such conversations occur on social media abound—criticisms that are, ironically, often subjected to long bouts of online outrage themselves—this is an instance where, uncomfortable as it might have been for all involved, the outcome seems to be a positive, an example for how writers and readers can communicate.

The second recent example that had me considering the murky, complicated questions of responsibility has been less positive. In February of 2019, the publishing industry database Publishers Marketplace released an announcement that E. J. Levy's next book, *The Cape Doctor*, had been bought by Little, Brown, and described it as “the true story of Dr. James Miranda Barry (1795–1865), a flamboyant, brilliant, nineteenth-century physician who rose to prominence in South Africa.” *The Cape Doctor* promised to explore Dr. Barry's rise in rank as well as the accusations that he was carrying on “a scandalous ‘homosexual’ romance with Lord Charles Somerset only to be discovered on his deathbed to have been a woman all along.”

Soon after the announcement, backlash began on Twitter, gently at first, with people respectfully challenging Levy about the language of this announcement, its use of the quotes around the word “homosexual” and its conclusion that Dr. Barry was “a woman all along,” pointing out that Dr. Barry, during the decades he identified as such, had used male pronouns, called himself a gentleman, and was purported to have asked to be buried immediately upon his death in the clothes he died in. Dr. Barry is considered by many trans scholars and laypeople alike to be an unmistakable example of a 19<sup>th</sup> century trans man, though the term is, of course, anachronistic. In her responses to the concerned and sometimes angry tweets, Levy repeatedly

used she/her pronouns in discussing Dr. Barry, and was rather dismissive, tweeting: “1 thing’s certain: Barry opposed policing of gender, so I’d hope for the same in her admirers; the evidence is open to interpretation,” Levy wrote, as well as, “As a queer woman & lgbtq activist, I’m aware, yes, of controversy surrounding Barry, in death as in life. The body is Rorschach,” as well as, “In death, as in life, Dr. Barry engenders controversy, but one thing is clear: she refused facile gender categories. So do I, in my novel.”

There is a lot to unpack here, but context is once again key. First, it’s important to note that Levy is no stranger to controversy herself, or to online backlash and attempts at unwelcome categorization. Having identified as a lesbian for many years, in 2014 Levy penned an article for *Salon* in which she detailed how she’d met and fallen in love with a man she would end up marrying, and that this didn’t change her identity as a lesbian. She described how neither his friends nor hers really understood this, and how people kept trying to label her something else: straight, bi, anything but a lesbian. Readers and commenters on the piece did the same, predictably, without the benefit of actually being intimately familiar with the writer. She doesn’t mention this anywhere in her responses to the criticism of *The Cape Doctor*, but the parallel seems clear, as in both instances she appears to be complicating the relationship between labels, lived experience, and easy taxonomy.

Another bit of context: while neither Levy nor Little, Brown spoke of this in their defense of the book (which, unlike Zhao’s, wasn’t pulled or delayed), publishing-insider sources told me that one of the readers in Levy’s agent’s office is trans, and the book hadn’t raised concerns for them; additionally, a couple trans sensitivity readers were involved in editing the book prior to it being sold to Little, Brown. These readers cannot, of course, represent a complex and diverse group of people—no single reader can do so—but it’s interesting to note that there was,

apparently, some attempt behind the scenes at making sure that Levy's representation of Dr. Barry was respectful of our contemporary understanding(s) of gender.

And yet—and yet. I am left uneasy, like many who voiced their concerns—or downright fury—about Levy's and her publisher's language usage, the novel's purported trajectory (“she was a woman all along”), and the subsequent dismissal of these concerns. There is a contentious history of lesbian writers and activists belittling or denying the reality of trans people, one that many lesbians are trying to reckon with and correct so as to heal rather than broaden a chasm within the LGBTQIA2S+ community. For instance, after an ownership change of the popular website *AfterEllen*, once considered an inclusive space for all queer women, the editorial vision shifted and the site began to spout anti-trans and trans-exclusionary rhetoric; subsequently, a joint statement was issued by a group of editors of other websites geared towards queer women that expressed solidarity with the trans community and condemned “writers and editors who seek to foster division and hate within the LGBTQI community with trans misogynistic content, and who believe ‘lesbian’ is an identity for them alone to define.” (*The Advocate*). Surely Levy is aware of this historic—and, unfortunately, occasionally ongoing—conflict, and yet she did nothing to assuage the concerns of her trans audience, who may well have been very interested in the nuances she claims to be bringing out of Dr. Barry's story. Instead, she brushed them aside, as if their concerns were not valid, as if they don't have the long and troubled history of being erased, attacked, condemned to psychiatric wards, and other forms of targeted harm.

In Little, Brown's eventual statement, publisher Reagan Arthur began with what reads as a hastily jotted attempt at defining what fiction is allowed to do: “As publishers, we support the freedom of writers to imagine every kind of life and situation, including ones based on historical

people and events. E.J. Levy has written a novel that it is [*sic*] based on a real person, Dr. James Barry. It is a work of imagination, not a biography or a representation of fact.” She goes on:

Over the last week, we have listened carefully to members of the transgender community and their allies. We will work with E.J. Levy to publish her novel with sensitivity to the issues that have been raised, including the use of the proper pronouns to describe Dr. Barry’s embodiment. These are important issues that we take seriously, and we look forward to continuing this conversation as we bring *The Cape Doctor* into the world.

The first part of Arthur’s statement is somewhat odd—historical fiction is, indeed, fiction, and no one disputes this. The criticism was never that Levy wasn’t allowed to invent the thoughts, feelings, or scenes she invented. Take the prevalence of novels about the Tudor dynasty, for example—many of them contradict one another, drawing on more or less, better or shoddier research, indulging in outlandish theories or not as they choose. But no one is out there complaining that poor Anne Boleyn has been maligned by Philippa Gregory, author of *The Other Boleyn Girl*, in which she presents the theory that Anne was sleeping with her brother as a titillating detail. Why? Again, because of context: first, readers understand that historical research is by necessity supplemented by invention in order to create a fiction; second, Anne Boleyn doesn’t need anyone’s protection in death—almost every narrative presents her as a woman ahead of her time, nakedly ambitious, wielding her connections and privileges to acquire power. Dr. James Barry is not nearly as well-known, and is clearly more complex in terms of the vast and quick changes that have occurred over the last few decades as theories and realities of gender—its expression, its use as an identity, its biology, its language—have been developed and rethought.

Arthur’s statement is attempting to do both things at once: to tell readers that Levy can do whatever she wants because she’s a writer, and to reassure readers that Little, Brown is listening. But are they? Is the mere changing of pronouns—without the deeper understanding of what that

means—a placating band-aid? Levy has yet to issue any apology, acknowledgment, or statement herself.

In this situation, Levy seems to have decided that her responsibility is to the work as she has conceived of it. She has publicly dismissed the concerns of potential readers, opting for vague, defensive language. She’s a human being, of course, and who knows how she feels about her tweets now. Who knows whether the novel is as sensitive and complexly explored as she and her publishers think it is or not. Perhaps *The Cape Doctor* will be gorgeous, riveting, and deeply nuanced. Regardless of the final product, Levy’s rhetoric has created a barrier to her work for a subset of the population who may not give her the benefit of the doubt at this point.

Now that I’ve presented these two cases, I must also qualify my own analysis of them: I am aware that in analyzing individuals, I am implying that their individual responsibility and power is perhaps rather larger than it really is. After all, both these authors are part of a broader and complex corporate publishing system that, more and more, relegates responsibility to its authors and plays naïve at the outbreak of any outrage. This has become institutionally entrenched as the so-called morality clause has been added into almost all publishing contracts at the Big Five publishing houses since the acquisition and later cancellation of far-right figure Milo Yiannopoulos’s book. The clause, generally, stipulates that if an author is discovered to have done or does something during the lead-up to a book’s publication that could have severe consequences on the book’s sales, the publisher has the right to cancel the book and, in some cases, demand the advance be returned. The Levy case is one that seemed to be exactly what this morality clause is for, according to agents who’ve needed to learn how to negotiate these clauses in the recent year or two. And yet the book has been defended and is moving forward—why?

Because those criticizing the book or see a further erasure of history in it are a statistically insignificant group that Little, Brown is able to dismiss just like Levy has, and by doing so, the publisher's institutional power is the one legitimizing Levy's work and maintaining a status quo of the current power structure.

Still, both of these instances have helped me clarify some of my own sense of responsibility as I move towards the publication of my novel, *All My Mother's Lovers*. The novel is focused around Maggie, a queer woman in her late twenties, and her mother, Iris, who has just died at age 63. It includes—as most fiction does at one point or another—people who are not like me, its author. Maggie is perhaps the nearest to my identity, though she is by no means an autobiographical character, and other than her, the novel includes an extremely diverse cast of characters in terms of sexuality, age, race, and socioeconomic status, none of whom is a point-of-view character. Context matters here, too, of course: I am American by birth but not by upbringing, my experience in this country since I moved here for college mirroring certain immigrant experiences, including a semi-conscious attempt to assimilate in certain ways and distance myself from other aspects of my identity, specifically my Jewish heritage and Israeli cultural context. I am queer, but didn't have a very difficult coming out process. I am nonbinary, but not widely out about it yet, fearful of attracting the kind of skeptical comments I've witnessed countless times—and that I once quietly held myself—about the identity. I am mentally ill but highly functioning. I am also visibly White while not being visibly Jewish—something I only learned upon moving here, as my understanding had always been that there wasn't any “look” a Jewish person could have, whereas Americans, Jews included, have a series of stereotypes about their looks. All of this is to say that few of the characters in my novel have much direct overlap with my lived experience, rendering them all, in a sense, Other to me.

I'm aware, however, that regardless of what I might say about my lived experience—as a Jewish person descended from Holocaust survivors, as a transnational American who grew up in a tiny country that is the subject of so much debate, fetishization, and othering around the world, as nonbinary—the most visible way to read me is as a White woman, a demographic that has not, historically, been the most conscious of the need for intersectional thought and action. Being read this way accords me plenty of privilege, much like Levy. But rather than rest comfortably on it, I have long felt the keen need to use it responsibly. Part of that, for me, means making sure that I not only represent the plurality of this country when I write about it, but that I do so carefully.

I thought a lot about how to portray the supporting cast of my book, as carefully as I considered my main characters. The way these characters came to me originally was not, I must say, very deliberate. As my main characters developed through journal entries and writing-to-discover sessions, my supporting cast began to emerge from the gloaming as well. Their complexity developed slowly as I wrote background scenes and exploratory conversations with my main characters. By the time I was writing the book itself, I knew them intimately. But translating them from my imagination to the pages of the novel is where the real work happens. After all, I can say that I know my characters deeply, that they are not just plot devices but complete human beings, but if I'm not presenting them that way, if I'm not conveying this fullness and humanity to a reader, then it doesn't really matter how well I think I know them in my mind.

In considering how to do this in my work, I thought about language use, context, and stereotypes I wanted to avoid and, occasionally, consciously work against. I also considered the ways in which I've heard people talk about their relationships to their own identities—sincerely,

self-seriously, mockingly, uncomfortably—and the ways in which the experience of marginalization itself so often depends on context. For example, my Jewish friends and I crack plenty of jokes about Jews and Jewish stereotypes, playing into them at times; if a Christian (specifically, someone we didn't know well or trust) tried to banter with us in this way, we would likely feel uncomfortable, stereotyped rather than in charge of our narrative. This relationship occurs across certain identities as well, exemplified by how I and almost every Muslim friend I've ever had have spoken about the ways we are so often pitted against one another in various narratives whereas we tend to share far more than we don't, some of our rituals and cultural context and even language relating to one another.

Similarly, I considered the ways in which Maggie, as a White millennial gay woman, thinks of her own identity and privilege, and how Iris, her mother, of the Boomer generation, would not have this particular self-consciousness of identity. There still exists relatively little fiction that shows the way liberal or progressive White millennials are trying to reckon with their privilege—whether performatively, sincerely, or a mix of both—but as this is a phenomenon that is common among many who fit this demographic, I thought it worth depicting, especially in generational comparison to the Boomer generation. In doing so, I also considered the way people of other demographics would react to Iris and Maggie.

To that end, I read. I already read a lot, of course, and all told, I read far more women and writers of color than I do men or White writers (I counted—among the 41 books I've read this year, only four were by men; among the same 41, only 15 were by White writes, and of those, two were assigned to me by editors). I learn from other writers both through osmosis and through my deliberate work as a critic who thinks about craft. But in thinking about this particular sense of responsibility, I also read texts that specifically relate to how writers, White writers especially,

portray race in their work. The reason I focused on race is because, as a White person who grew up in a very small country that was presented to me, in my bubbled existence, as majority White, majority Jewish. The general attitude I grew up in was that race was something that happened somewhere else. Upon moving to and beginning to study in the United States, I had to fill the many, many gaps in my very limited knowledge about this country and its violent history. I learned, in a sense, what it meant to be White in a White supremacist nation—and as I mentioned before, I felt the responsibility keenly. I would benefit from many aspects of the systemic inequality in the US whether I chose to or not. What I could choose, however, was to be continually aware of that fact, and how I could use my position for good.

So I read, and considered representation, accuracy, and othering on both a macro and micro level. On the macro scale, Toni Morrison's *The Origin of Others* was a uniquely helpful text in its exploration of how Morrison both fought against and harnessed the notion of othering in her work. Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffreda's "On Whiteness and the Racial Imaginary," an introduction to an anthology by the same name, introduced a whole host of questions for me to consider, especially the fact that White writers tend to speak about imagination in terms of "rights":

to say, as a white writer, that I have a right to write about whoever I want, including writing from the point of view of characters of color—that I have a right of access and that my creativity and artistry is harmed if I am told I cannot do so—is to make a mistake. It is to begin the conversation in the wrong place. It is the wrong place because, for one, it mistakes critical response for prohibition (we've all heard the inflationary rhetoric of scandalized whiteness). But it is also a mistake because our imaginations are creatures as limited as we ourselves are.

Another question raised by White British author A. J. Hartley, writing on his publisher's blog, is what he calls the Jurassic Park conundrum of White writers writing point-of-view characters of color: "Your scientists were so preoccupied with whether or not they could, that they didn't stop

to think if they should.” While this doesn’t apply to this book specifically, which features only White POV characters, I have a now-abandoned novel which includes six points of view, including a Black woman adopted by White parents and her daughter. That book has gone through many permutations, as have those characters, but I have decided to put the work aside for now, precisely because of questions like the kind Rankine and Loffreda raise when they suggest that the writer ask herself “not: can I write from another’s point of view? But instead: to ask why and what for, not just if and how. What is the charisma of what I feel estranged from, and why might I wish to enter and inhabit it.” They suggest that we writers speak “not in terms of prohibition and rights, but desire [and to] ask what we think we know, and how we might undermine our own sense of authority.”

On the micro level, I considered blogs like Writing With Color, which largely addresses representations of varying identities in fantastical genres that draw on real life power dynamics but which also includes many detailed articles about language use. It was a few years ago that I first encountered a few articles from the blog that dealt with descriptions of skin tone, and it was then that I’d decided never to describe skin color—especially that of brown and Black characters—using food analogies. This is one small way in which I can avoid linguistic clues of fetishization. I also considered K. Tempest Bradford’s piece “Representation Matters: A Literary Call to Arms” whose final section looks at some common stereotypical ways in which characters of color appear in works of fiction. She identifies four things to avoid: the perpetual victim (“Avoid only including marginalized characters who are victims or only exist to be victimized.”); characters in isolation (“The majority of characters don’t spring fully-formed from the head of Zeus. That person had to come from somewhere. They have People. A family, a community...”); villains and saints (“Another trope to avoid is only including marginalized characters as

villains... Not that all minority/marginalized characters must be the ultimate paragons of good—that's also a problem.”); and the dead-people-problem (“Avoid killing all the people who represent marginalized or minority identities in your work of fiction”). I had already, to be fair, avoided all these in this book, which came as somewhat of a relief to me—my instincts, it seemed, were leading me well.

In considering these macro and micro issues, I also considered the fact that my responsibility to the work and my responsibility to potential readers seem to align. To my mind, in order for any character to be fully formed on the page, they must avoid stereotypes—or, if they are to fit into any of them, there must be a clear reason and a broader scope for the character outside the single stereotype that might prove true. In my responsibility to my readers, I also want to avoid stereotypes, to avoid the harm that my words could induce either in perpetuating them broadly or in triggering an emotional response from a specific reader. My craft as a writer and my responsibility to my readers work, in the end, on a similar level. Brandon Taylor writes it best in his essay “There is No Secret to Writing About People Who Do Not Look Like You”:

There can be no story without empathy. Our stories begin because we are able to enter the lives of other people... When a story does harm by presenting a limited view of a group of people, then the author's craft has failed them in some crucial way. It isn't that every character belonging to every marginalized group must be perfect and without conflict. It isn't that an author must present an example every kind of person. Rather, it's because you present only one side to that person's life, a side that has often been fabricated and perpetuated by the larger public. It's because your character doesn't ring true, has none of the mess that makes a person real on the page.

I have done my best. That doesn't mean I haven't gotten things wrong. And that means I may receive criticism for them. I am aware that my gut-level emotional responses to particular

criticisms tend to fall into what Robin DiAngelo has called White Fragility. In Katy Waldman's review of DiAngelo's book by the same name, she writes:

Unused to unpleasantness (more than unused to it—racial hierarchies tell white people that they are entitled to peace and deference), they lack the “racial stamina” to engage in difficult conversations. This leads them to respond to “racial triggers”—the show “Dear White People,” the term “wypipo”—with “emotions such as anger, fear and guilt,” DiAngelo writes, “and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and withdrawal from the stress-inducing situation.”

I have likely engaged with all of these emotions and behaviors at one point or another, though I have been trying to dismantle or move past such internalized reactions. And while I might not be able to control the instinctive recoil, I can control what I do with it as I become more aware of it. And if I do receive criticism for my portrayal of members of marginalized or othered communities, I will listen to them, and I will do my best to learn from them.

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A Brief Introduction to *All My Mother's Lovers*

*All My Mother's Lovers* is a literary fiction novel written in a close third-person perspective using two alternating points of view. One is Maggie's, a 27-year-old queer White and half-Jewish woman living in St. Louis; the other is her mother's, 63-year-old (at the time we meet her) Iris, a White Jewish woman and the daughter of Holocaust survivors, who has just died. The timeline moves forward during Maggie's perspective and messily backwards in Iris's.

The novel opens with Maggie learning of Iris's death. She flies home to Oxnard, CA, where she grew up, to find her father, Peter, a White man and ex-Catholic, completely unable to handle the death of his wife. Maggie and her brother Ariel help to organize the funeral. During these first days after Iris's death, Maggie discovers letters her mother left to be sent out upon the event of her death. They are addressed to men Maggie has never heard of, and after the funeral, she decides to take a road trip and hand-deliver them in order to discover who they were.

What Maggie discovers is that her mother has been having affairs with some of these men. She is appalled and judgmental, as she'd always perceived Iris and Peter's marriage to be basically perfect. In grieving her mother, she is also grieving her mother's inability to understand and accept Maggie's sexuality, which Iris was skeptical, dismissive, and seemingly willfully ignorant about. This particular point comes to a head for Maggie when she discovers that Iris had an intense romantic connection with a trans man in Las Vegas. While not equating his gender and her sexuality, she is confused about her mother being able to accept someone under the queer umbrella so wholeheartedly.

At the end of the novel, Maggie discovers that her father, Peter, has always known about Iris's affairs—they aren't, in fact, affairs. Peter, largely asexual (what current language would consider grey asexual, but this isn't a term he's familiar with), and Iris found connection, love,

and security with one another partially because of his sexuality. Iris, having come out of a years-long abusive marriage when she met Peter, found his love of her mind and her spirit above his love of sex or her body comforting, a place of safety. Over the years, they discussed Iris's desire to explore her sexuality more fully, and once she and Peter had their first child, Maggie, Iris began to do so outside the home, with Peter's blessing.

This is a very brief summary of the novel's trajectory and I offer it this way in order to (also briefly) share the themes I had in mind while writing it. First, I have been thinking of generational divides and differences, specifically between the boomer and millennial generations, as these tend to be wildly overstated and even fetishized by current culture and media. Do I find it troubling that my mother—a woman who raised me to care about the world around me and who, along with my father, took me to my first demonstrations and protests in Israel as a toddler, a woman who, at age 14, began working for the 18-year-old vote as part of the anti-Vietnam War movement—can enjoy the antics of Bill Maher, who continues to joke about trans identities and dismiss millennials as lazy? Yes, I find it troubling. And also, I know that my mother and I share far more than we don't, agree on far more than we don't, and that she is and has been willing to learn from mine and my brother's generation over the years. To be clear, Iris is not my mother and I am not Maggie, by any stretch of the imagination, but I used my personal experience in contemplating this generational gap to consider the characters' relationships.

Another theme I wanted to explore was women's sexuality. The book opens with a brief sex scene between Maggie and her girlfriend, Lucia, but the second sex scene in the book is between Iris, at 63, and her erstwhile lover Harold, who is in his eighties. Representations of women's sexuality tend to be reserved for youthful straight women, and I wanted to explore these seemingly "deviant" sexualities as normal, robust, and joyful spaces.

Grief, of course, plays a huge part in this work, and is something that I have a lot of firsthand experience with. I wanted to look at its messiness, its ups-and-downs, the shock and surrealness alongside the moments of deeply embodied understanding that you will never touch, hear, smell the dead loved one again.

Queerness is explored here as well, but I intentionally wanted to write a character whose coming out had nothing to do with the narrative. Coming out continues to be a very difficult and real process for many people, but it is a narrative that many queer stories tend to focus on, and I wanted to avoid that focus in order to present a gay woman in her late twenties who is entirely at peace with her sexuality—the sticking point is not how she feels about it, but how she feels about her mother’s feelings about it.

*All My Mother’s Lovers* is, as a whole, a story also about assumptions, and about how children—adult or otherwise—perceive their parents. It’s a story about growing up and understanding that one’s parents are human beings who had lives and histories and loves and heartbreak and hardship and joy before their children ever came along. It is a story about family, chosen and born into, and about women living and loving as freely as they can.