

# Writing What You Know, Not Just What You Are: LGBTQ+ & POC Representation in 21st Century Literary Fiction

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## Introduction

- Queer representation is rising in young-adult fiction, beach reads, and visual media
- Tokenism remains prevalent in 21st-century literary fiction as the bar for representation raises and forces continue to push against narratives that do not guarantee profit
- Publishing is a political game of power
  - Dominated by cisgender, heterosexual, white men
  - Representational norms take the form of minority characters on cishet, white journeys

Through this research, I sought to determine how the authentic representation of LGBTQ+ POC communities and individuals should be defined, what constitutes a successful work centered in this representation, and how transpositional, intersectional representation can be achieved through specific approaches in 21st-century literary fiction by writers both within and outside of the LGBTQ+, POC communities.

## Methodology & Key Terms

- Literature review on "Writing the Other"
- Queer Representative Novels:
  - *Memorial* by Bryan Washington
  - *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong
  - *Kafka on the Shore* by Haruki Murakami
- Queer Theoretical Texts:
  - "Queer Feelings" by Sarah Ahmed
  - "Mourning and Melancholia" by Sigmund Freud
- Positionality: the sociopolitical context that impacts one's identity and influences one's outlook and biases with respect to race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability
- Transpositional: referring to works about specific intersections of identity that are not written by an author with that identity
- Authenticity: this is a complex, nuanced term that can never be fully defined; however, the bare minimum for authentic representation in literature is works that do not rely on stereotype and seek to do no harm.

## Key Questions

The following questions are prevalent within the current academic conversations surrounding transpositional writing:

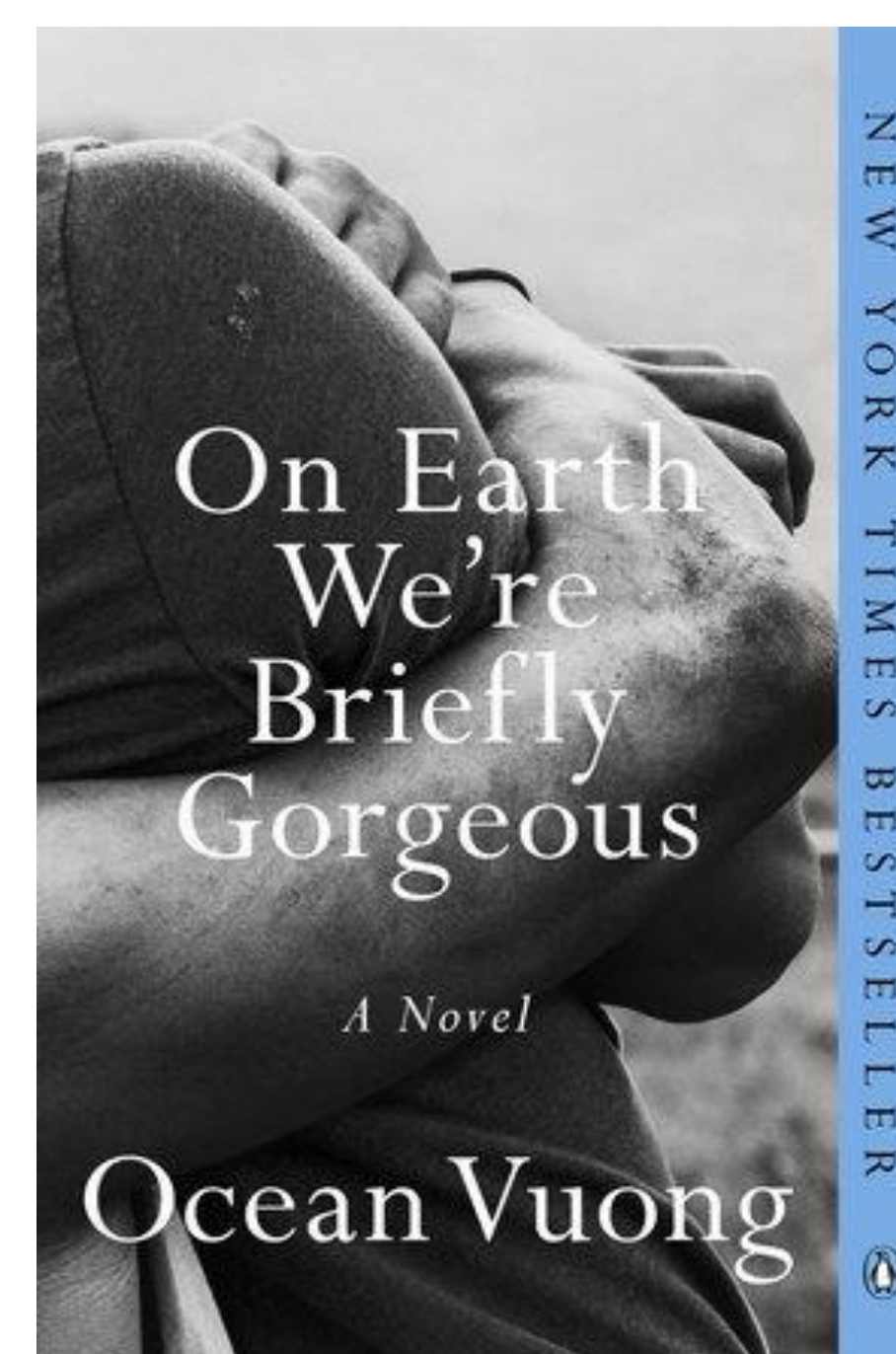
- What is a writer's duty to those they represent?
- Who has the right to tell a story?
- How can something be truly authentic?
- What are the real-world effects of fictional stories?



A Black, gay writer representing a Japanese-American, gay character

## Key Findings

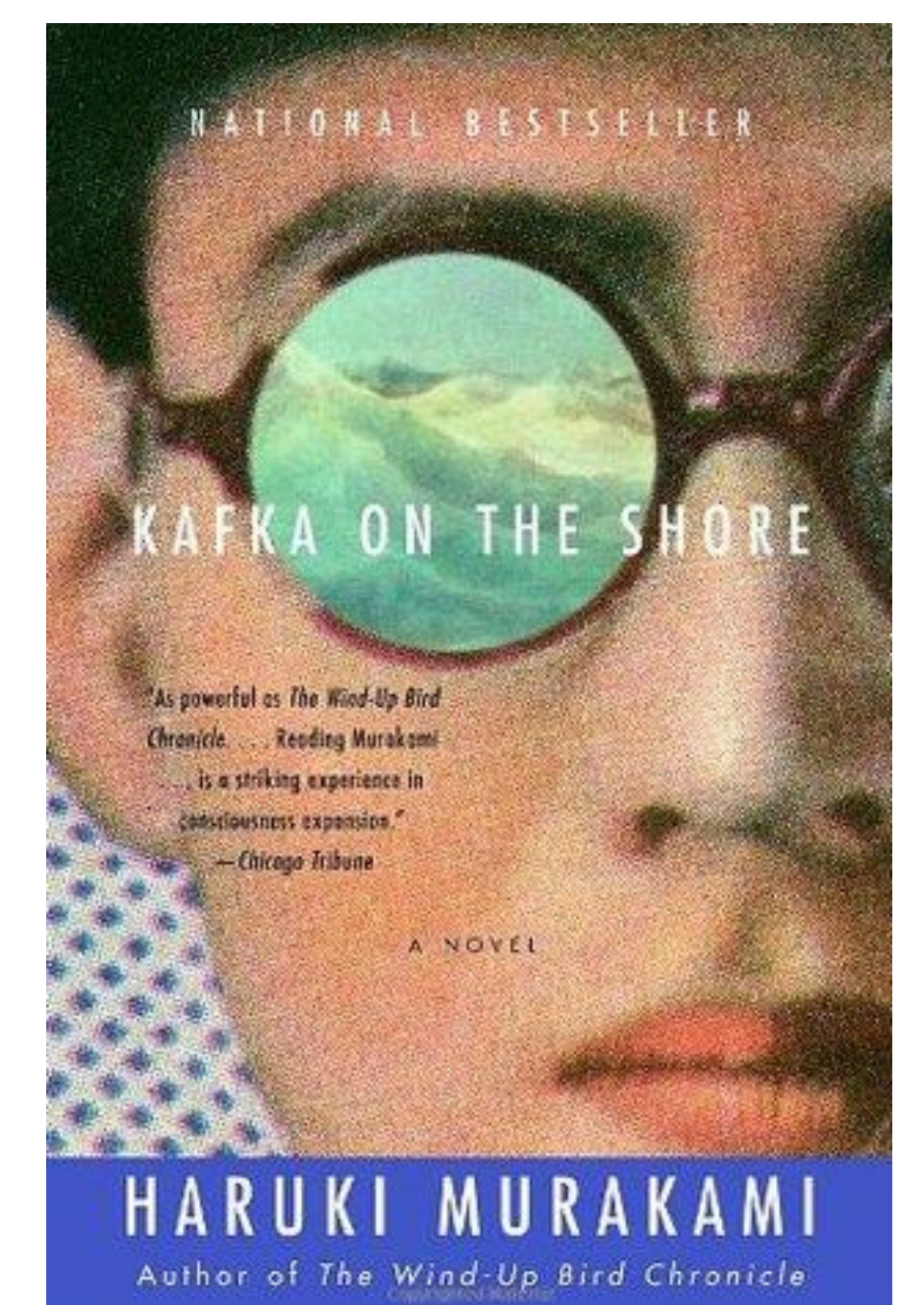
- The current conversation about "writing the other" is incomplete
- The flawed standard for representation in fiction stems from the idea that empathy can substitute research
- The literary world is not ready to critique minorities on their depictions of other minorities
- Writing is not created or published in a vacuum: writers write for an audience of themselves, through a biased gaze



A Vietnamese-American, gay writer representing a Vietnamese-American, gay character

## Continued Questions

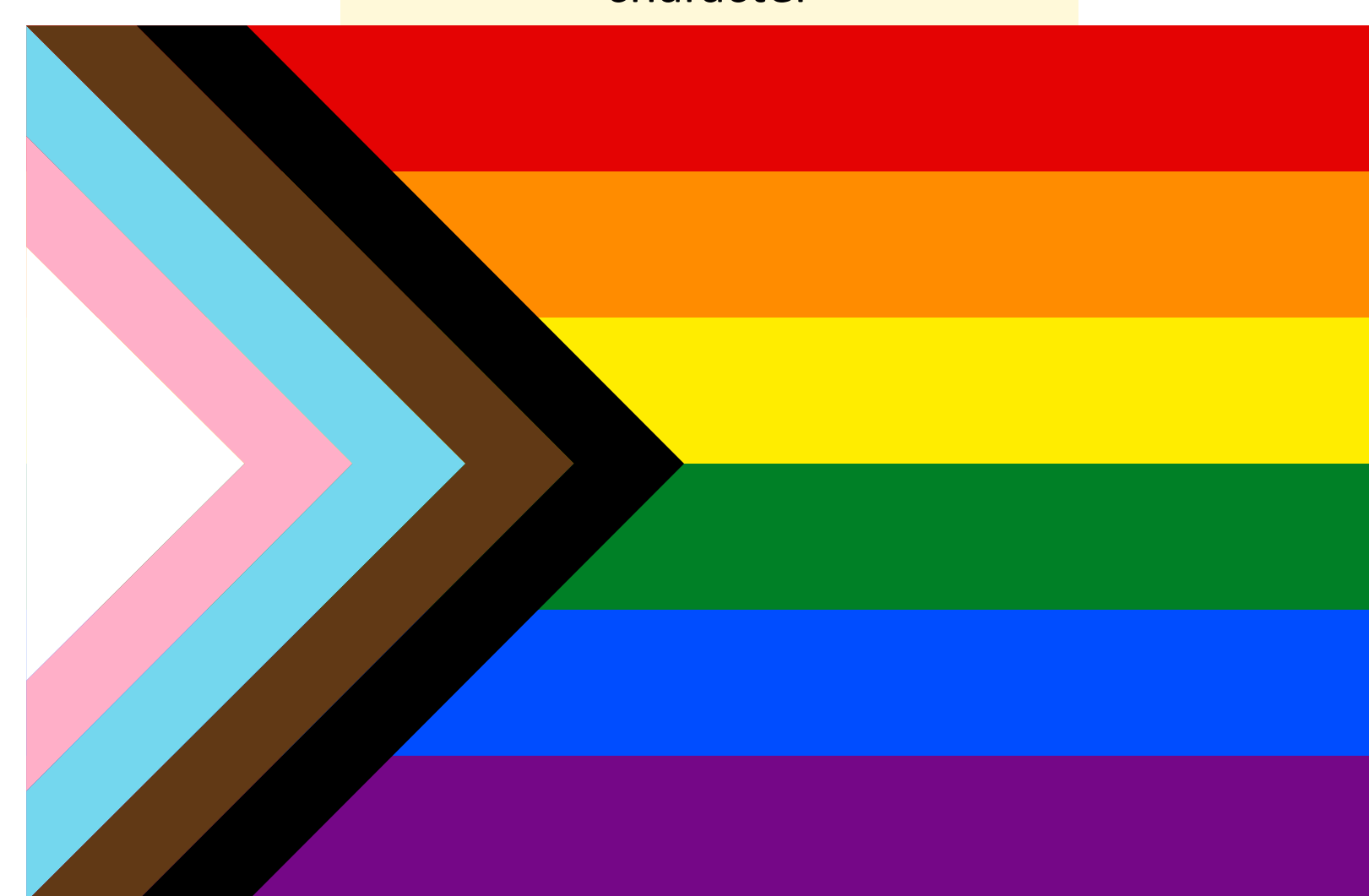
- What bearing does an author's identity or positionality have on the stereotypes that their work reinforces or deconstructs?
- How do we distinguish taking space from diverse voices in publishing from making space?



A Japanese, straight, cisgender writer representing a Japanese, gay, transgender character

## Real-World Importance

- Writing and publishing are intentional political acts, and written works have the power to cause harm as well as bring joy.
- Just as positive and authentic representations have positive real-world effects, poor representation has negative real-world effects
  - Both the blatant, violent depictions and the more subtle reinforcements of stereotypes have negative political and social effects
  - Covert and unintentional reiterations of negative stereotypes are more dangerous than blatant bigotry or misunderstanding



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