

Unheard Voices:

Minority Female Presence in Fiction Including Folklore & Fantastical Elements

A Thesis Submitted to

Professor Justin Morgan

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By

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Dedicated to every woman who inspired me to become who I am today.

Abstract

This thesis is about the representation of women and racial minorities and the incorporation of folklore and fantastical elements in contemporary American short fiction. This incorporation includes the characterization of nonwhite characters in fiction and the role they serve. Also, the main idea is to provide an explanation concerning the importance and relationship it has for minority female writers and readers. The Artistic Statement defines the author's reasons, inspirations, and creative process for her choices in creative writing. The Critical Paper is supported by research and data to describe the use of fantastical elements and how they are implemented into her short fiction. The body chapters provide examples of the author's short fiction and published authors who give voices to the underrepresented minority women characters. Three original pieces of short fiction will be followed by comparisons and analyses that contextualize the author's work with other similar fiction.

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Thanks to my family, my church, and all my diverse friends who have taught me so much about life and culture. I appreciate and am highly blessed that the women in my family showed me how to be strong and that my church taught me to rely on God for anything I put my mind to.

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Artist Statement

Introduction to Manuscript

The goal of this manuscript is to give voice to how minority women are represented and characterized while incorporating a fantastical element for a real-world theme. Female characters are in many fictional works, but there are specific characters that need attention. These characters are nonwhite women, and with the use of folklore, which is based on culture, or a fantastical element, their stories become more intriguing. Their representation matters to readers who are similar to them by ethnicity, culture, belief system, or overall way of life. Also, my personal interest in folklore and the fantastic is because of the boundaries for creativity are limitless. It is an intriguing topic that can be used in various ways in short stories. The connection to the importance of representation is personal because of my ethnicity and gender.

Process for the Work

The process for the work began with analyzing female characters within popular novels. By analyzing female characters and what they represent, especially those in precarious situations, specific types of stories stand out from the many in fiction. For example, in *The Hunger Games* saga, Katniss volunteers for her sister and deftly wields a bow and arrow, so readers are inclined to pay attention to her. As the main character, Katniss is set apart, but interestingly, no one would have cared about her opinion if she did not volunteer for her sister. The characterizations of Katniss give her importance and appeal in a way that a mediocre character like Peeta, the baker's son, does not have. Another similar example of a strong female character is Star in *The Hate You Give*. Her voice is drowned out by herself and society as she tries to figure out who she is as a young black woman. For example, Star goes to a predominantly white high school that is safer

and offers a better education than the one in her district. However, Star admits that she does not behave or talk the same way in school as she does when she is home. Eventually, Star realizes that she must be true to herself and what she believes in, no matter which group she is around. Her drive to protest the unfair treatment of black people gives her a voice and raises awareness among anyone who reads the book. Star is exceptional because she witnesses her friend's murder by the police and is the only person who can speak on behalf of the incident. Another example of a minority female protagonist is Sierra in *Shadowshaper*, a novel inspired by Latin American folklore. Sierra discovers that she has the power to place ancestors into artifacts and art magically. Her powers are a metaphor for the importance of culture, family, life, and the meaning of death. Who she is before and after she gets powers is part of her journey. Her story comes together beautifully and includes a minority female protagonist with a supernatural element. In conclusion, these three books represent and communicate realistic themes through complex, multi-dimensional female characters. The authors of these novels successfully give voice to their female protagonists, whether it is about controlling others with sacrifice and violence, overcoming hate centered around someone's differences, or using magic to symbolize the importance of family.

Vision for the Work

Since I am a black woman from a small city with a big family full of veterans, preachers, singers, and teachers, the vision for my work is to both align and differ from my experiences. Every writer is limited, so research for correct information and a more profound understanding is essential. My goal is to expand on the topic of race and gender in short fiction and explain the importance of why it matters. The answer, in part, is that "fiction carries a different weight for each of us, depending on how we connect to it and what we find in our experience. Even when

we seek it just as entertainment, to spend our free time or relax after a long day at work or school, it still makes an impression. We see something we like in those stories, something that keeps us coming back” (“Why Fiction and Representation Matter”). Writers should have an audience in mind when writing, so they must know or realize who will connect with their story and who will not. Writers should venture beyond their limitations and understandings to some degree. Therefore the inclusion of fantastical elements, magical, or folklore can be successful tools for including many different narratives within fiction. Certain people read stories as a form of escape but writing about real-world issues within an alternate reality helps authors get their point across while entertaining the reader. Short stories I write are based on truth but are not overwhelming factually: the characters allow a suspension of disbelief.

Readers need to be able to connect with the material they are reading. Most popular novels, like the *Twilight* saga, did not include characters related to me. The characters I enjoyed and loved existed as outsiders. The characters were outsiders because they did not connect to or represent me. Krystal Jagoo explains the importance of representation in literature by stating, “when children read books that only depict one kind of protagonist, it can skew their perceptions of themselves in a negative way. Children may see less value in themselves because of such poor representation, which can potentially minimize, erase, and ignore their identities” (“The Importance of Representation in Books”). Jagoo’s argument is young readers need to be able to envision themselves in the literature they read. Each young reader, no matter their age, should be represented and able to connect with a protagonist. Realistically, there are not any sparkly vampires to worry about or relate to, but there are racial, gender, and sexual issues that have become more prominent in literature. With proper representation, readers of any ethnicity can both relate to the subject matter or main idea in fiction while being entertained. Authors that

accomplish both in their fiction successfully discuss themes in ways that are both enjoyable and informational.

My passion for writing comes from the need to express and feel. In theatre, the actor must become the character, feel, react, and portray the character to bring him or her to life. The same can be true for writing a character because the character must evoke something within the reader. As a theatre student, I investigated roles for characters who looked like me and found examples of poetry. For example, the poetic devices in Ntozake Shange's *For Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf* showed me how a script could use similar literary devices as fiction and poetry. It was impressive how well theatre and writing went together and how writing a character was like creating a character for the stage. Something powerful is communicated when an author's background can resonate with a reader. When this happens, the reader is no longer an outsider but a participant who can offer his or her own experiences or beliefs. The reader can put themselves into the story, and the words become real. Again, words hold power, and even a simple story can unexpectedly touch someone. Something needs to be communicated from the page to the reader: intense emotions, realizations, and information can be shared through literature. My passion drives my vision to focus on women and tell narratives from lesser-known, represented, or explored perspectives in literature.

Furthermore, representation in literature is successful when diverse characters are accurately portrayed. The characters must be believable and true to a culture, tradition, or example to resonate with readers. Angela Ackerman explains how to represent diverse characters in writing. She states,

Seeing people who look, act, and experience life like them in [print] media makes a person feel included in society, and it reinforces positive views of themselves and what they can achieve. For people outside of these marginalized and underrepresented groups, it can be hard to imagine life with the experiences and hardships that minorities experience. Without those experiences, writing characters of diverse backgrounds can seem daunting (Ackerman).

Proper representation involves being able to connect with what is being presented; for example, a reader originating from the same culture as a writer. In this way, if a writer outside of that culture tries to write a character or plot that is unfamiliar to them, it can prove overwhelming. Ackerman is explaining why accurate inclusivity concerning diverse characters is essential in literature and storytelling. These points are not to suggest that male or white stories are not worth reading and enjoying but to raise awareness that white male narratives have been present longer in American fiction compared to minorities. Furthermore, "the United States [becoming] a majority-minority nation, with nonwhite people outnumbering white people...betokens political, cultural, and social upheaval because a white majority dominated the nation since its founding. [R]esearch on immigration, public opinion, and racial demography reveals that diversity is bringing Americans together" (Alba and Levy). Alba and Levy's research finds that accepting and blending ethnic differences works in the favor of America and not against it. The action of accepting and blending ethnic lines is the presence and incorporation of diversity. This is possible in literature with accurate representation and inclusion of minority women and characters.

Literary Context for the Work

Diversity and representation are developing minority presences in fiction because stories with a female protagonist or a minority express various viewpoints. Minorities in North America include anyone not white since, historically, white people have been in the majority for media, fiction, government, and values. Minority voices were not held to the same standard in the past; therefore, what they represented was not displayed in the same ways that their white counterparts were. However, those who research this topic of representation, like Ackerman, Alba, and Levy, have found that including various viewpoints from different perspectives and cultures is beneficial.

For example, a story could be about the horrors of Latin American immigration into the United States, or an adventure based on ancient Asian culture. These examples offer insight into nonwhite characters' lives for better cultural understanding. Curiously, both stories will teach the reader something about the characters and their culture to the reader through representation. The story must be able to reach the reader personally, and all fiction does not do this. The world is full of narratives, folklore, stories, and genres that must be represented by all types of readers so they can see themselves in the world around them. What does this mean? It means that the characters that female or nonwhite readers are reading about can connect to them personally. It means that the books readers enjoy include more than a character they will never be or look like. Why is this important? Let us say an Asian child sees someone on the book's cover who looks like them. That representation will capture that child's attention since that story or character directly resonates with them. Representation includes diverse people and allows readers from different backgrounds to see their place in the environment and world around them. Representation is how people connect with the world through their eyes personally because they can read about others like them.

Positive reinforcement is essential to representation because out of the 2700 books that are published daily in the USA, half of them could feature a female or minority main character (Zander). Thousands of books are published in the United States but only a small percentage are authored by women, have a female lead, or are popular. Kelly Jensen explains the number of male authors and characters statistically compared to females. Jensen concludes,

male-identifying writers and characters garner more positive reviews and descriptions than female. The research began by compiling a list of 200 bestselling fiction books. Starting with gender and popular fiction, it's clear that the bulk of authors were male. 70% of the bestselling books used in this study were by male authors, while only 30% were by women authors. The bulk of male protagonists were (roughly 65%), with female protagonists at about 26% (Jensen).

These statistics show how important representation is and how the gender gap may seem equal, but it is not. More importantly, if the gender gap was equal, books would still require representation based on culture or race. Also, representation does not have to be proportional to the population because books are not just for one set audience or country; they are widespread. Nigerian author and editor Deborah Dixon explains that representation is crucial in literature because it allows "inclusivity and perception" (Ackerman). Statistics show how unbalanced fiction is concerning gender, and they are even more imbalanced concerning minority characters. A study of books published between 2012 and 2015 reveals that "75% of main human characters were white; blacks were protagonists in 15% of the books while other cultures combined for less than 6% of lead characters. 32% of multicultural characters from minority groups [do not] offer insight about those cultures or their traditions. Many characters are kept in the background or only to support the white characters" (McGowan). Again, positive reinforcement combined with

the representation of nonwhite or male characters will increase these low percentages many readers relate to.

Significance of the Topic as a Christian Scholar

As a Christian scholar, I include religious aspects and beliefs even when they are not extensive or prominent. Normally, I do not include explicit religious language or characters. Still, religious symbolism and themes, such as the Golden Rule, caring for neighbors, choosing to love rather than to hate, and other moral principles taught in the Bible, will be included to some degree. Some people do not adhere to this way of thinking to be selfless and loving to include and entreat those around them. I want to be among the people that are caring, loving, and inclusive to those around them in the same ways my religion outlines and creatively. Actions or forms of creativity can speak louder than a lecture could. Some are called to lecture and preach, while others use the power of words, such as in fiction, to offer narratives readers can learn from. I want to showcase loving our neighbors, including them, and caring for them despite their differences.

Critical Paper

The fantastical element in fiction is broad and includes magic, folklore, horror, and much more. Magic and folklore elements are included in my personal fiction to demonstrate how my topic relates to my work. Fantastical elements form and add to stories that grasp the readers' attention in powerful and unique ways. Emma Liggins explains how supernatural elements deftly portray, reveal, and expose readers to historically and presently relevant real-world themes. Liggins informs readers that there were successful magazines with short stories and illustrations during the 18th and 19th centuries. These magazines were full of thrilling adventure and “yet embracing other subgenres of the short story has been neglected. Ghost stories and other supernatural tales featuring fantastic creatures such as vampires, fairies, and monsters remained popular from the 1890s into the twentieth century” (365). This is proof of how intriguing magic or fantastical themes can be in fiction: for centuries, these elements have been popular and they still are.

Systems of Beliefs from authors

While creating a system of belief beyond normal comprehension, fiction incorporates the fantastic, which can and has served multiple purposes. Past examples of supernatural elements are used in the stories by Jewelle Gomez and Terri de la Peña. Both authors “have incorporated the rich heritage of the vampire myth along with authors’ personal and political concerns as reflected in the 1960s and 1970s American feminist rhetoric” (Amador 9). Not only do both female authors include the supernatural, but their stories are also women centered. Gomez and de la Pena wrote about feminist theories and the other topics mentioned above. Although there is fiction, including minority characters and the fantastic, few focus on the voices these characters

can embody. For example, “Gomez’s *The Gilda Stories: A Novel* is a collection that explores the parameters of oppositional power among African American and Native American subcultures. Chicana author Terri de la Peña similarly explores power constructs within her short story ‘Refugio.’ De la Peña [focuses] on contemporary social challenges [and] effectively utilizes certain Gothic tropes to emphasize her activist agenda (Amador 9). Repeatedly throughout history, the fantastic has been used in fiction. It is used as a singular element for the plot and as a device to bring awareness to an underlying theme.

Here is an example of a fantastical element and minority female voice in fiction that raises the unheard voice's awareness. The unheard voices in this example are of queer minority female characters. Gomez and de la Peña utilize the female presence in their writing to represent characters that are not mainstream. Sexuality aside, Amador discusses how African American folklore has inconsistent vampire appearances and how “African Americans have been largely absent from modern vampire movies and novels’ reinforcing the marginality to be surmounted by Gomez while indirectly reiterating Toni Morrison’s question, ‘In what public discourse does the reference to black people not exist?’” (11). Gomez created a space for women like her and created stories that offered representation, inclusivity, and awareness using vampires. De la Peña focuses on queer identities and reinforcing “the female Chicana and Latina legacy” (Amador 14). They write about topics that directly include and affect them and their surroundings. Similar authors open spaces for others to see and understand themselves through fiction.

Similarly, Christoph Reinfandt explains how fantastical elements can be used in fiction to help include and explain the “representation of the unrepresentable” throughout the short stories “The Tain” and “The Condition of New Death” by China Mieville (130). The unrepresentable that Mieville and Reinfandt are discussing is not the weird creatures present in the story but the

endeavors of humankind and their existence which is constantly monitored by time because death is inevitable (Reinfandt 138). Reinfandt's main point is about the effects of New Weird fiction compared to literary and genre fiction. New Weird fiction includes fantasy, horror, or supernatural elements. Another writer whose stories focused on fantastical elements of the supernatural was Kyoka Izumi. Masaya Shimokusu describes Kyoka as superstitious with an intense interest in anything deemed out of the ordinary. Furthermore, many of his works have a variety of fantastic features such as the supernatural female characters appearing as avengers (220). Concerning Japanese literature, Kyoka is popular, and some of his works have been translated into English. Western culture influenced his writing style, especially the writings of Tzvetan Todorov, who also writes about the fantastic. Shimokusu explains that "[Kyoka] deeply considered the effect of a rational explanation given to the event which seems to be supernatural in a narrative. A rational explanation to a seemingly supernatural incident is also important in Todorov's categorization of fantastic literature in his 'The Fantastic'" (222). Rationalizing the fantastical is part of what helps the characters grow within a story. A fantastical element might already be established or accepted, but in most instances, the supernatural is presented to the characters, who must accept or overcome it. This element can add to a story and heighten the themes the author hopes to convey or solidify the main character. The relationship between a fantastical element and folklore is that these elements engross the reader in the story. Once a reader is engrossed in a story, the embedded topics and themes will inform the reader of the author's main point. An enticing way to pull a reader in is to include an element of the supernatural.

Suspension of Disbelief

Fantastical elements in fiction suspend disbelief and can open a reader's mind to characters and events that should be impossible based on an author's stylistic choices. Moreover, suspending disbelief while describing realistic issues aids in understanding that the story may be implausible, but there is relevance. In "Writing in Style: Pattern Languages and Writing Short Fiction," Alex Mitchell and Kevin McGee explain the relevance of style or "pattern language" in writing (139). Pattern language is the writer's stylistic choice, the order stories follow, and the reoccurring themes. Writing style can be word choice, focusing on a particular element, or plot arrangement in a standard or unique way. Every writer's approach, design, and way of writing differs from another. Pattern language is as particular to authors and readers as behavioral patterns implemented in writing. It is an author's choice to include fantastical elements: something strange or extraordinary that brings "attention to the fact that aspects of the supernatural are comfortably incorporated into everyday life in a variety of cultures as part of belief constructions and behavior patterns that have significant cultural function and effect" (Walker 1). The suspension of belief and the occurrence of the impossible through the fantastic is wielded is a power wielded by the author to inform and entertain readers. The use of this is integrated well with the representation of minorities because of its cultural significance. To explain this further, cultural identity described through the fantastic provides a greater awareness to human experiences, expressions, and how groups use the extraordinary to regard behavior, patterns, and meaning (Walker 4).

Representation of minority female character and folklore

Connections and representations involving real life are easier in a story with a fantastical or folklore element. An extraordinary story with these elements gives suspense because it holds the reader's attention. It grasps a reader's attention because folklore can be experienced in every

aspect of one's daily life. Walker explains that this is true through "the things we say (ghost stories, creation myths, prayers), the things we do (what we wear, what we eat, how we bury our dead), the things we create (religious symbols, charms, food), [and] the things we believe in (gods, spirits, interplanetary travelers)..." (7). Walker's point is that folklore and the fantastic are inseparable from culture and that culture is present in our lives regardless of who we are.

Readers will be able to relate to the elements in fiction or a character because of these connections. The role of these elements in fiction is further explained by Raphael Zähringer, who states, "Due to the legacy of myth and folktale, and thus to its relation to narrative forms that not only ascribe significance to the ordinary but also highlight the marvelous, supernatural, or fantastic element of storytelling..." (113). Including cultural stories can enrich the narrative based on the characters because of the connections readers make with the story or how well a cultural aspect or person is represented.

Additionally, a minority is defined as "a culturally, ethnically, or racially distinct group that coexists with but is subordinate to a more dominant group. Subordinacy is the chief defining characteristic of a minority group. Minority status does not correlate to population. In some cases, one or more minority groups may have a population many times the size of the dominating group" (Encyclopedia Britannica). With this definition in mind is why a large ethnical group is still a minority instead of the majority. Books are primarily Eurocentric, white, or male, and so is much of the fiction Americans read. Statistically, only 5% of English language books had non-white authors between 1950 and 2018; however, focusing on 2018 only, 11% of books had non-white authors (Song). Any familiar topic is what people gravitate towards because the topic resonates with them, and the same is true for literature. However, a problem arises when there are no topics to resonate with because of a lack of material, inspiration, and representation.

Miasol Holgado explains the importance and absence of diverse ethnicities. She highlights how mainstream voices and characters in fiction often do not include nonwhite ethnicities. Holgado states:

In many books, the character's race is either not mentioned and probably assumed to be white or, if mentioned, is irrelevant to the story's events and functions only as an additional descriptor. This is not only a problem of the content of specific works but of the publishing industry itself, as it is still largely dominated by white male authors. This literary situation is nevertheless gradually changing as more black, and Indigenous writers turn to the genre of speculative fiction. (79)

Different ethnicities being absent or not fully included in fiction further explains why representation matters in fiction. If characteristics are not explicitly stated and described, race or gender is assumed. When this happens, the narrative is indirectly excluding all other characters; therefore, in fiction, minority women's voices have not been included enough.

Moreover, their voices have not been included in many ways that are not stereotypical. In this way, writers like Nicola Yoon or Toni Morrison, who use proper, less offensive ways to describe characters and include minority narratives are admirable. These minority women authors give voice to diversity by using characters that are realistic. Another writer is Nalo Hopkinson, author of *The Salt Roads*, a novel that “[focuses] on the black female body and the use of the Afro-Caribbean supernatural. This complex novel follows three female characters along three different timelines who are visited or possessed by two goddesses. [The] epistemologies that emerge from Afro-Caribbean traditions challenge and subvert Eurocentric forms that pervade canonical fantastic genres” (Holgado 1-2). By using a folklore element,

Hopkinson represents Afro-Caribbean diversity, minority women, and gives insight into deeper themes. Although his novel is a work of fiction, it successfully creates awareness in a pleasing and non-stereotypical manner. Similarly, Gwendolyn Pough and Yolanda Hood studied Black female writers writing about magic and female characters. Their goal was to bring awareness about different black writers who included magic, fantasy, and the supernatural in their fiction. Pough and Hood explain that “Black women writers and their works have not been drawn into specialized canon. The same can be said for the work of Latina writers and Asian writers. The rise in Black women's literary forms that started in the seventies with writers such as Morrison, continued in the nineties in renewed fervor with writers such as McMillan continues into the twenty-first century” (2). Pough and Hood conclude that minority women’s writing could become canon because of the artistic ways they write fiction, including race, experiences, and fantastical elements. They pay close attention to Black writers and other minorities, hoping their works will be as recognizable as other distinguishable authors.

Likewise, there are various other examples of minority women including cultural characters in their fiction. These authors represent their culture and add to the representation needed in fiction. The first author is Indian American Chitra Banerjee, whose two short stories “The Bats” and “Clothes” discuss the topics of feminism, domestic violence, marriage, and cultural conflicts (Gopikrishna and Premraj 91). Banerjee’s female characters are strong Indian women trapped by societal and cultural norms seeking freedom. Her fiction serves both as representation and awareness. Both of her stories are concluded well: “‘The Bats’ and ‘Clothes’ project the status of women. In both stories, women protagonists have a strong aspiration and expectations for a good life. These two stories show Chitra Banerjee the feminine reality of Indian women” (95). Banerjee focuses on her culture and brings awareness through topics that

other women and readers can relate to. Second, are the Asian-based short stories Quayum Mohammad describes. He states that the literature is “grow[ing] in its adaptation, acculturation, and nativization. The unique vitality of English in Asia is evidenced by a substantial body of literature flourishing in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, Nepal, and Hong Kong” (Mohammad 1). Mohammad describes how women from various social backgrounds reflect Asian culture proudly. He mentions the many short stories that portray Asian women as being powerful, submissive, rich, and poor. He states that “they defy the restrictions of gender and traditional inequities with pluck and call on all their courage to face the ordeals with stubborn persistence” (2). Mohammad wrote about twenty-two short stories released in 2016 with topics including folklore involving traditional customs and women’s writing. Third are the African writers Tanure Ojaide and Chris Abani. Chris Abani, a native Nigerian writer, states that he writes about Nigerian characters because he does “not see the story of Nigeria represented” (Hernandez 6). This connects to representation and creates a space for culture or character to exist in literature, where minority characters do not. Abani further discusses how he has “taken some ideas about what it means to be Afikpo Igbo and woven that into a work of fiction that I think transcends any representational limitations” (Hernandez 6). Abani concludes that fiction, how it is written, and what it means does matter. It matters to the writer, the reader, and the audience that shares in the cultural aspects of the story. Ojaide uses African spirituality and mysticism within his stories, and Enajite Ojaruega explains, “Modern African literature reflects the realities of the African existence. That reality includes the norms, values, superstitions, philosophies, traditions, and other belief systems. Since literature is a cultural production, African writers, in their literary representations, often reflect the lived experiences of their people (45). Incorporating reality into fiction is important, especially when explaining or

including a culture. In this way, the folklore and characters can be better understood by the readers and others from a similar background can relate to the story. What happens in real life can be represented in fiction. Ojaruega states, “fiction sometimes imagines and stretches the humanly possible into fantasy. That is why many aspects of the spiritual fall into the realm of fantasy and myth. The realism that the fiction writer thus aims at is to express the humanly possible even in the imaginary” (47). These four authors are examples of using culture to include minority characters and how they represent characteristics of their ethnicity in fiction.

Cohesion of minority gender and folklore

A minority character will have a distinguishable culture, way of life, and belief system that directly affects the story's subject. The belief system within the story originates from folklore or an included fantastical element. In “The Role of the Supernatural,” the article states, “In its most general meaning, the adjective supernatural means something not explained naturally, which is not subject to the laws of nature. In the field of fiction, the term supernatural is usually close to the concepts of fantastic and wonderful” (“The Role of the Supernatural”). There are many fantastical stories in black, Asian, and Latinx cultures. These oral, written, or painted stories are thought-provoking and teach the reader a lesson about life or themselves. Other than the fantastical element is the importance of the race connected to the story that give background to the story's significance. In fiction, “racial meanings depend on situational context. The significance of race in any given encounter emerges from the ‘interpretive repertoires’ that people bring to it: the ‘terms, descriptions, and figures of speech that shape perceptions of one’s actions and motivations” (Rosario 712). Context gives reasons for the character’s behavior and motivations. Combining the importance of gender and a fantastical element through folklore offers a perception about any aspect or subject of life. Different writers voice opinions about

various topics concerning gender or race within the context of their fiction. Diana Wallace states that “the short story has long been associated with the marginalized – Irish, Black, post-colonial and, especially, women writers – writers who often use it as a vehicle for knowledge which may be at odds with the story of dominant culture...to express something suppressed/repressed in mainstream literature” (58). Wallace explains how women had to prove their worth as writers because of gender roles. Because of the marginalization of minorities or women, gender and race became prominent subjects to discuss in fiction, and writers wrote to express their frustrations with unfair treatment.

Ayleen Barbel Fatal defines and describes the purpose of gender roles. By definition, “Gender roles are the ‘social definition’ of women and men. They vary among different societies and cultures, classes, ages, and during different periods in history. Gender relations are how a culture or society defines rights, responsibilities, and the identities of men and women in relation to one another” (Bravo-Baumann, 2000). Gender relations are similar to why female characters are essential to be included as prominent voices in literature. For example, a female Palestinian author, At’ut, writes culturally traditional short stories to underscore gender issues and feminine perspectives to “subvert male literary writing conventions” (Gottesfeld 305). Although minorities and gender are broad terms, their combination draws focus to female authors and characters. Male authors and characters have always been included and present in fiction because their role was more important than women. Now, fiction can and should include a diversity of women and ethnicity for the representation of all aspects and people of life.

In brief, the fantastical element is included in many fictional works and is a successful topic. However, the focus is not on this element alone but the combined effect with female minority characters by minority women authors. In my research and reading, all three elements

are easily found in fictional writing, but not all together. Writing should be freeing for the writer, and the characters should offer the reader a significant lesson about an aspect of life. Fiction writing is an art, and it should include more than overused tropes and narratives.

Chapter I. Misunderstanding of Self and the Role of Delusion

Introduction

The misunderstanding of self and the use of personal delusion is a major theme for chapter one. The protagonists within the included short fictions are not settled in who they are and do not know what it means to exist on their own. Other than being written by minority

women, the stories include folklore and unnatural elements that artistically serve my goal of connecting real-world issues through imagination.

“The Disturbance on Pearl Avenue” focuses on a minority female protagonist and a corresponding cultural folklore element. The story centers on Josie, a Korean woman suffering from Delusional Disorder, previously referred to as paranoid disorder, who succumbs to her dark fantasies and murders her family. The story explores mental health, alludes to Gwisin (Korean spirits or ghosts), and portrays a love that is misunderstood, taken for granted, and lost. Similarly, Carmen Maria Machado’s short fiction showcases a woman whose husband takes her love for granted. This leads to him losing his wife because of his selfishness and greed.

Personal Fiction 1: “The Disturbance on Pearl Avenue”

[Officer Kujawinski sidesteps through the crime scene. He’s had practice with things like this, but every so often, there’s a scene that makes his mouth salivate, stomach clench, and bile rise in the back of his throat. He swallows his puke with an audible gulp. He creeps through the house, examining each room and imagining what took place. The suburban house is quiet with death but seems to still breathe. Kujawinski is almost certain the culprit remains in the house. Something catches his eye, and he hurries toward it. Kujawinski turns the corner or the hallway and holsters his weapon. It’s not the killer but a survivor. He crouches next to the woman. A question is asked. A question is repeated.]

The woman does not respond to the officer’s voice or presence, although she seems to be aware that he is there.

“You know when it was that I first fell in love with you, Jackson? It was in undergrad. I always knew I wanted to be a nurse or nutritionist, just anything along those lines. It was instilled in me at a young age. My entire family is doctors or dentists, psychiatrists, or physical therapists. And when I met you, the handsome aspiring lawyer, I fell so quickly.” Josie clutches her hands at the fondness of the memories.

“Who knew only a year later I’d be knocked up with twins and be disowned for not finishing college?” she laughs humorlessly. “It did not matter then because you had a plan. We’d get married immediately; I’d look after the kids while you attended law school, and afterward, I could go back while you worked. I had no worries and no complaints. I was so naive and so full of dreams.”

Drool oozes from Jackson’s mouth onto his plate. “That’s disgusting, honey,” Josie says, squinting her slanted eyes judgmentally. “But it’s no surprise you’d do something like that. You never liked my cooking. Not that you told *me* that. Nope, too much of a coward.”

Daniel, their son, drops his fork.

“For God’s sake!” Josie cries. “I am trying to have a conversation with your father. Did I not say quiet? Quiet! No one pays any attention to what I say. Not you, or your sister, or your father. Well, tonight, you all are going to listen.”

Tears well up in her eyes, and she hurriedly excuses herself. She goes to the kitchen and opens Jackson’s hidden bottle of Rum. He thought she didn’t know where he had hidden it. Who could blame him with the way she constantly mixed her medication with alcohol?

[This was just supposed to be a disturbance call. Something simple before Kujawinski went to his apartment, had a few beers, and fed his rottweiler, Duke. A quiet night, that’s all he wanted.

He tells the woman to stay put. He quietly inspects her home, searching for signs of struggle, weapons, corpses, or clues. This much he could handle without backup. Being new to the force, Kujawinski had his work cut out for him. He had to prove himself to the department, especially if he was going to make detective. Being a police officer wasn't like the stereotypes civilians thought or what television depicted on cop shows— although there were occasionally donuts. There was nothing exciting to quench his eagerness. There was nothing exhilarating about paperwork, taking complaints, traffic stops, or disturbance calls.]

“I just need a moment,” Josie calls to her family in the dining room. Josie pours herself a full glass, leans over the island in the middle of the kitchen, and wipes away frustrated tears. For years she'd asked herself, *Where did it all go wrong?* When her twins, Daniel and Delanie, were born, she couldn't have been more scared or ill-prepared, but Jackson had kissed her forehead and her wedding ring, assuring her everything would work out and that he would hold to his promises. For a while, it did. He did. She would take care of the children and work a part-time job once Jackson returned from class. His parents would help with anything they could since Jackson was their only child. They didn't have four more to replace him like Josie's parents did. The oldest child of a Korean second-generation family, and she gets pregnant in college. She couldn't be a bigger disappointment. Years seemed to fly by, and Josie was content. She'd been so proud when Jackson completed law school and even happier when he was offered a job only two months later. He quickly became successful, and money was never an issue. Her friends were always admiring how perfect she and her family were. Her husband was her world. Her children were her joy.

Josie downs the rest of her drink and, with a deep sigh, reenters the dining room. No one had touched their food. The room was full of silent, uneasy tension. Josie pats Delanie's hair and picks up Daniel's fork before going to her seat. "Come on. Someone eat, please. It's been a while since we've all eaten together."

[As he carefully explores the home, making his way from the dining room, Officer Kujawinski observes the dead plants that hang in the hallway, the collapsed stems, and petals falling over their pots in the living room. Pictures cover the walls along the stairwell. He ascends the stairs and observes the photographs. The pictures become less happy, without smiling and no brightness; instead, there is palpable desperation and unhappiness visible in the photos. Whatever happened to this family did not just start. For a moment, he thinks he sees a reflection of a woman, but it is gone once he turns around.]

She knows Jackson can probably smell the alcohol, but he remains silent. He stares unblinkingly at her waiting for her to continue. Josie hates that condescending look. It makes her feel small. "Jackson, almost every day, I ask myself when it all went wrong. I've come to the conclusion it was not long after you started at the firm. I think it was then when nothing I did was ever good enough. You let the kids undermine me; you would purposely let them go against my wishes. Was it fun to watch me have a hard time? Like when I told Daniel he couldn't play football, and that same day, you bought him all his gear. I told Delanie her curfew was 8 o'clock, and you said she could stay out until 10." Josie takes a bite of her food and chews slowly. She turns the taste over in her mind thoughtfully.

Delanie slumps in her chair. Josie grimaces and speaks through gritted teeth. “Don’t show me attitude. I brought you into this world, and I’ll take you out.”

How empty that threat usually was. Josie’s lips twist, and she makes a noticeable effort not to laugh before she’s doubled over, wiping tears of mirth from her eyes at her own joke. It’s something her *Halmeoni* used to tell her *Eomma* and then she told Josie. It’s not an uncommon saying; hundreds of children must have heard it when on their parent’s last nerve. It was something they picked up once they came to America. Her daughter’s eyes roll.

“See that, Jackson. No respect for her own mother and it’s your fault.” All humor is gone as she regards her husband. His eyes drift away from staring at her and focus on his cold dinner. He’s become such an insensitive monster. Jackson lost all love for his wife. Their life and marriage are made of only passing moments for the last few years. On a list, Josie felt she had become second, then third, for his devotion and affection. After everything, she’d done for him, and he could not appreciate her.

“Why have you caused so much pain? The minute you started that job, everything changed. All the signs were there, and I refused to see them. Coming home late, ignoring me, smelling differently, not wanting me to touch you. Before you wanted to have me every other day, then nothing. Not so much as a kiss. ‘I’m just tired, Josie. Everything isn’t about you.’ You were right: *nothing* was about me. It hurts to admit that.”

Spotted memories of arguments and pleading resurface. She tries to focus on them, and for a moment, something seems off, and she almost knows what it is. Unfortunately, just then, she is distracted. A streak of red dribbles from her son’s mouth. He likes his steak medium rare like his father. Her mother would berate her if she knew she was undercooking meat purposely. Josie can almost hear her mother yelling. Her ears are ringing.

“Wanna be so much like your old man, Daniel?” Josie taunts. “He’s a liar and a cheater. He’s the disappointment. Not me. You were always blaming me.” Was it blame? Maybe it was shame or something more fitting like pity. Josie’s heart was not only hardened towards her husband but her children as well. They knew of their father’s infidelities and did not inform her. Surrounded by so much deceit, she always felt trapped and often dwelled on how to escape.

[Officer Kujawinski notices a distinct, chilling temperature difference between the upstairs and downstairs. Someone was stabbed and chased upstairs. Maybe the daughter. By the stab wounds in the son's hands, it would seem he tried to block the strikes or fight back. All the blood had led the officer back toward the dining room. The murderer had dragged the victims to the table.

‘*Disturbing.*’]

Josie gets up and sits on Jackson’s lap. Carefully she takes off her wedding ring and puts it in front of his face. She looks over the simple gold band. It is her, really every married couple’s, treasure worn to show the eternal love, devotion, and bond that transcends time between two people. Often, vows were lies and eventually broken, and love did not last forever. It could not even last one lifetime.

“This is more than just a ring, Jackson. It holds all the promises you ever made me. It was supposed to represent the *binding* agreement to cherish each other. You broke that agreement. Why?”

[The previous urge to vomit returns with a vengeance, and Officer Kujawinski pukes into one of the dead flowerpots on the back porch. He found the dog. What in God’s name had been done to

it? He whips his head away quickly. Away from the bits of protruding bone, leaking intestines, swollen tongue, and matted fur.]

Josie slams the wedding ring down on the table. She begins to pace and pull at her long black hair back; it falls over her forehead and into her eyes. A sense of sadness and desperation is evident in her movements. Tears streak her face, but her eyes are on fire.

[Nothing makes sense to Officer Kujawinski. None of the clues add up. Wait. The dread he felt earlier settles over him again. It feels as if cold hands are lightly scratching down his neck and across his shoulders. Pieces are beginning to form and a picture that's too impossible to believe is painting itself in his mind. He rubs his dirty blonde hair, eyes widening, and realizes his survivor is not a victim. And she is not having a traumatic episode in response to her family's tragedy. *'Oh, God no.'*]

“So, you see, I had no choice!” she yells. “You forced my hand. Over and over, I tried to reason with you. Over and over, I tried to save this marriage. I gave you my all. Anything I had or could get was yours. What wasn't yours I gave to our kids. Screw you for making me feel like a bad mother and like a nutcase. In the end, I saved them, I still protected them. Daniel was not going to become you and Delanie already wasn't anything like me. I couldn't allow it. I'd pour and pour and pour myself into you all not realizing I had nothing left. What kind of life is that?” She's panting now, heaving with each breath she takes. Her mouth has gone dry, so she gulps down the water then the Rum.

“You were my *life*, Jackson, my air.” Josie touches her palm to the hole in her husband’s chest right where his heart should be and where his heart was moments ago. “And I needed to know how it felt to breathe again. I couldn’t because you were suffocating me. I don’t care if you forgive me. Because I don’t forgive you. Leave me? Abandon me after you’ve taken the best of me? Leave me after you ruined my life, and I lost my family for you?” She circles his chair, “Not on your life, babe. I told you. I warned you, didn’t I? Not on your life.”

[The wife is beautiful: monolid brown eyes, petite features, and a sparkling smile. No one would suspect her, not even him. The truth is horrifying, and he does not want to believe it, but there it is, as bold and angry as blood. The white blouse and skirt are sticking to her, soaked in blood. He could see better now that she was standing. She seems to float about the room. Her ghostly appearance is ghastly. Then Kujawinski notices what he could only assume was her husband’s heart on her plate.]

“Daniel. Delanie,” she says their names in a tone she thinks is nurturing. She touches her children; they bleed under her hands. “I gave up on my dreams. I buried them. I was dying and now I’ve never felt so alive. You children understand, right?” She pulls her children’s heads to hers and cradles them.

This is not the first time Josie had such thoughts. For the past two months, these thoughts would come more frequently and even appear in her dreams as real and as vivid as a memory. She would wonder what Jackson’s expression would look like if she slit his throat. She wondered if it would equal all the pain he put her through by being unfaithful. All the love she gave and didn’t receive. Josie would think to herself, ‘I could sever the carotid artery and his jugular. If I

cut deep enough, I could even sever his trachea below the larynx so he couldn't scream or yell. Jackson would choke on his apologies, excuses, and lies.' Afterward, she could look into his eyes—green, wide, and red with tears and see herself in those eyes during his final moments. 'Would I finally be deemed worthy enough of all his attention, all his love, all his acceptance? I would be the only woman he remembered when he finally died. I can make him love me eternally. This is how I can take the love I deserve.' Such thoughts would give her enough joy and strength to continue. After all, the delusions are fantasies that could not harm anyone. That is not true. Her fantasies wanted to come alive and play themselves out for her. She fought those dark thoughts repeatedly.

"I got tired of fighting," she admits aloud, as if she has an audience. "Tired of pushing that feeling away. So tired. I would wake up and already wish the day was over. I would smile though my heart—" her voice breaks and her eyes fill with tears, "my heart was breaking. I wanted someone to save me. It could have been anyone. In the end, I had to save myself." Josie pulls a cigarette from her late husband's pocket and lights it before crossing her legs at the edge of the table.

"I knew you hadn't quit. Liar. You know I can't stand the smell."

The house is dead quiet as Josie smokes her cigarette, but to Kujawinski it's anything but. The silence isn't quiet; the victims scream and cry, and the blood pounds puddles into the floor and soaks the carpet. A shadow drapes itself around Josie's shoulders even though the room is well lit. The only noise is the faint ticking clock near the stairs, the breathing of two occupants, and everything seems so loud at once. Perhaps it is just Kujawinski's pulse and heart that are racing, pounding, and echoing in his ears. No. Kujawinski knows better.

A question is asked. The question is repeated. “Mrs. Thompson, why did you kill your husband and children?”

For the first time, she looks over at Officer Kujawinski. Her eyes are framed in shaky liner, glossed over, her pupils overtaking the color, and he wishes she was looking anywhere but at him. Her hair has become matted to her face. Her skin is pale, and her stare looks ghoulish. It is as if she is a ghost, a remaining apparition of who she once was. Gone is the bright young woman her husband had known and buried is the stoic woman she had become. Now there is a girlish glow about her: the kind a woman gets when she’s especially happy or in love. It was frightening in comparison to her bloody clothes and wild hair.

“Call me, Ms. Hyun.”

Delicately she puts out her cigarette and folds her hands on her lap. “Officer, haven’t you been listening?”

She continues to stare at him, and he feels every hair on his arms stand up. Kujawinski calls for backup to assist him because she is making him uneasy. No matter whom he wanted to impress, this was beyond him. He goes to question the suspect once again. So far, he has not received any meaningful answers. He demands an explanation with a stern voice, but his hands are trembling. They rest on his hips near his weapon, and he hopes he doesn’t have to use it.

“Look there! The pictures of him and that woman together. Like I told you before.”

Officer Kujawinski observes the developed photographs. He looks at them once. Twice. Then he looks up at her carefully.

“Mrs. Thompson,” he begins slowly, “these photos are all blank.”

She tilts her head to the side as if he's just said something she didn't understand. He frowns and something like clarity settles over him. Kujawinski catches sight of a brief shimmer in the corner of his eye. Whosever presence it is, maybe the son, it gives him courage.

“Your husband never cheated on you. Did he, Mrs. Thompson?”

She curses in Korean. “I saw the pictures. I know what I went through all these years—”

“No,” he says surer now, “That’s what the medication is for.” He continues remembering the various pill bottles in the bedroom upstairs. “You didn’t see anything.”

The officer’s words sound like something her husband would tell her all the time:

“But it was there, Jackson. I know what I saw!”

Jackson shushes her before she can go further and says softly, “Calm down. It’s all right. Nothing was there. Nothing happened, honey.”

His words echo in her mind. She holds her head as all the pieces fall into place. She remembers—at least she thinks she does. Yes, that is right. Jackson never cheated on her; her children never despised her.

There was always a little voice in the back of her head that knew it wasn’t real, but it was easier to give in to the darkness growing in her mind. Honestly, she wanted to give in to them. Making what she could see, but no one else could, would finally ease her mind. What was real for Josie wasn’t real for anyone else most days. Everything was true except the cheating husband and disloyal, distrustful children. Delusion and reality mixed. No, no, no, no. “He was laconic, cold, insensitive, selfish.”

“He was? Or you were, Mrs. Thompson?” The way the police officer looks at her has changed. When he first came in, he was kind and thoughtful. When he asked why she killed her family he looked sorry for her. Now a hard, purely professional aura and tone, usually used for criminals, is directed at her.

She knows she’s seen that woman so clearly on those photographs. It’s like she breathed life into her. The shade of her eyes, the bangs of her hair, the freckles on her arms, even her scent she’d point out whenever her exhausted husband came home: “Calm down. There’s no one else, Josie. I would never do that.”

Blackened pots from countless dinners she’d burned, the psychiatrist visits, her daughter’s anxious looks every time she entered the room, her son’s soft smiles and reassurances, and her husband’s patient whispers and caresses on her back. Josie looks at her bloody hands. She remembers Jackson’s skin beneath her nails as he held her trying to force her to take her pills: “Darn it, Josie! You said you’d been taking them. We all need you to get better.”

It all comes into sharp focus before all the events of that night replay over again. This was real. What really took place is overshadowed by what was conjured up. This is not going to be one of those moments she imagined. Her husband was gone. Her children are gone. She butchered them, and they were never coming back. They would never call her name, check on her, or clarify what was real or not.

[Kujawinski observes her reactions and words carefully, storing them in his mind. He knows he will have to recount what happened since he was first on the scene, and he wants his report to be accurate. Mrs. Thompson is a mentally ill murderer, and it is his duty to seek justice. A loud, heartfelt laugh alarms Kujawinski, and he puts one hand on his weapon.]

It starts as a brief, small giggle before Josie laughs hysterically. It fills the entire home and almost blocks out the approaching sirens. When she quiets down, there are happy tears in her eyes. For once, she won't have to feel like locking herself away or sitting in her chair quietly deciphering what is and has happened in contrast to what everyone knows to be true. This isn't a delusion. Josie doesn't think she's ever seen clearer. Tears gather in her eyes, but Kujawinski cannot tell if it's from her laugh or regret over her family. Either way, she smiles with tears tracking down her cheeks.

“I’m—”

Officer Kujawinski strains his ears to hear what she said, but the noise of doors being kicked in and yells flood out her words as backup bursts in.

Kujawinski nods to himself. He's not sure how to feel or what he should feel as an officer. He better get used to it if he wants to be a detective. He wonders what the papers will say. Will they be brutal, detailing the killer she is, or will they be gentle towards the disillusioned wife and mother? He watches his fellow officers take Josie into custody. One of them pats him on the back. As his eyes follow her, she stares right back, they eventually land on the mantle. From the slight graying of Mr. Thompson's hair, it was recent. A picture of him and his wife. He's looking at her, his smile is a little sad, but there's so much love in the way he looks at her.

Kujawinski looks at the slumped-over man with a hole in his chest. The last to be moved away and zipped in a body bag.

Her husband must have thought he could save his wife on his own. Poor fool, his wife is beyond any help he could give. Because of that, he and his children died terrible, preventable deaths. Officer Kujawinski changes his plans: talk to the chief and investigators, go home, feed Duke, take a long shower, and definitely have something stronger than a beer to drown this nightmare. He does not mention the eerie presence he felt and saw in the house. On his drive home, the word comes back to him. *Free*. That was what she said. "I'm free."

Literary Comparison & Analysis: Recognizing the character's body and voice

The unheard voice is absent because the protagonist's body and voice are not understood or considered within the two included short stories that portray how easily a person can lose themselves and become someone, or something, different. Carmen Maria Machado's "The Husband Stitch" is the short story in comparison to "The Disturbance on Pearl Avenue." Both stories show how women are not as they appear and use folklore and magical elements to support the themes. Machado, a prolific Cuban American author, often writes about women and folklore in her stories that incorporate relatable issues. These issues include gender, marriage, feminist viewpoints, and cultural representation. Josie and the unnamed protagonist go through transformations throughout the stories that are the result of the characters and circumstances around them. The voice that was once unheard is revealed and recognized by the end.

Machado showcases how easily parts of life can be misunderstood, taken for granted, and lost. The narrator is misunderstood by her husband, who disregards her wants at various points in the story. Machado does not include names for the characters; therefore, all the characters have a mysterious ambiguity. The wife is taken for granted since she is very open about how much she

loves and is willing to do for her husband. The one thing that is hers to keep is her ribbon; no one is allowed to touch or remove the ribbon around her neck. Ironically, she has only one rule she will not break she denies her husband, and he cannot accept it. Multiple times in the story, he touches or tries to remove her ribbon resulting in a break of trust. At the end of the story is when both characters lose. The husband loses his wife as her head falls off since the ribbon no longer binds it. The wife dies, and her only condition against her husband is to not touch her ribbon. In the end, she even gives him the satisfaction of removing the ribbon. She gives him the last part of her she held to and for herself. Likewise, Josie resembles some of these qualities. However, she is more assertive and stubborn. This is because Josie is suffering from Delusional Disorder, and she refuses to accept anything that goes against her wishes. The narrator begins the story as a teenage girl who grows into a woman, wife, and mother. However, as she grows, her husband does too, until the fiery independence and surety she had in her youth dims. At the beginning of the story, the narrator is young, free, and unburdened; yet, by the end, she is weary of her husband's demands and persistence. The narrator's transition from her youth to adulthood is led by the men in her life: first her husband and then her son. Machado is showing rather than telling how women give in to what they believe a woman should do. The narrator falls short of being a good wife because her husband cannot possess her in every way he wants. Since she falls short of being a good wife, she falls short of being a woman. Candance Walsh offers insight into the narrator's journey from adolescence to adulthood:

The narrator's unique experiences run into the river of female stories, her legacy as a woman, in spite of her bravery, her bold self-determination. We are given stories as lessons in how to become a woman, and many of them are untrue, misleading. Within the tellings nest betrayals, as the narrator has just cautioned: "When you think about it,

stories have this way of running together like raindrops in a pond. Each is borne from the clouds separate, but once they have come together, there is no way to tell them apart.”

And when one can't tell stories apart, wrongs cannot be examined and vindicated.

(Walsh)

With this explanation, readers understand that Machado is revealing how toxic and misleading expectations of women are, especially as young women who turn into wives and mothers. The wrongdoings of the husband are admissible because he feels he deserves all his wife has to offer; he feels so strongly about this that he does not recognize that he has betrayed his wife's trust when trying to remove her ribbon. Machado layers her story and narration by using tone, including small but important pieces of stories of other women and stage directions. Machado prompts the reader to read the story in certain voices and directs the overall movement of the story. She includes these directions for the reader to be led toward how to feel, understand, and relate to what is occurring within the story.

Similarly, multiple critical points within the story cause it to be memorable and striking. First is the beginning where Machado begins, “If you read this story out loud, please use the following voices: Me as a child, high-pitched, forgettable; as a woman, the same. The boy who will grow into a man and be my spouse: robust with his good fortune. My father: Like your father, or the man you wish was your father. My son: as a small child, gentle, rounded with the faintest of lisps; as a man, like my husband. All other women: interchangeable with my own” (3). Here is one layer that opens the story and includes an example of the use of stage directions and characterization of the characters within the story. Machado builds suspense and opens the readers' minds to each character they will encounter. Second is the first discussion about the green ribbon:

What's that? he asks.

– Oh, this? I touch my ribbon at the back of my neck. It's just my ribbon. I run my fingers halfway around its green and glossy length, and bring them to rest on the tight bow that sits in the front. He reaches out his hand, and I seize it and push it away.

–You shouldn't touch it, I say. You can't touch it (4).

At this moment, the young man is respectful of the main character, which is nameless, and removing the ribbon is not a power move or something he feels entitled to have. There is a definite contrast after years have passed where the young man is now the narrator's husband. Slowly she has given, or he has taken everything greedily. The narrator's body is not her own, hence the story's name about the husband's stitch. It is implied that her husband had the doctor add another stitch when sewing her after the birth of their son. The husband's greed grows boundless and is revealed in the lines:

And I don't realize that his hand is sliding down the back of my neck until he is trying to loop his fingers through the ribbon.

– A wife, he says, should have no secrets from her husband.

– I don't have any secrets, I tell him.

– The ribbon.

– The ribbon is not a secret, it's just mine.

– Were you born with it? Why your throat? Why is it green?

– I have given you everything you have ever asked for, I say. Am I not allowed this one thing?

– I want to know.

– You think you want to know, I say, but you do not.

– Why do you want to hide it from me?

– I am not hiding it. It is not yours (20-21).

As a man, the husband has demanded of his wife, whom he feels should be subservient. It angers him that there is something that she possesses that he cannot have. Later in the story, the narrator even forbids the other man in her life, her son, from touching or asking about her ribbon.

Interestingly, when describing how to read the voice and character of the protagonist's son, she states that he is kind and gentle, but as a man, he is like her husband (3). This point seems to suggest a generalization about men once they have grown into adulthood. The third example is what brings the use of the ribbon and the husband stitch together:

Resolve runs out of me. I touch the ribbon. I look at the face of my husband, the beginning and end of his desires all etched there. He is not a bad man, and that, I realize suddenly, is the root of my hurt. He is not a bad man at all. And yet –

– Do you want to untie the ribbon? I ask him. After these many years, is that what you want of me?

His face flashes gaily, and then greedily, and he runs his hand up my bare breast and to my bow.

– Yes, he says. Yes.

– Then, I say, do what you want (30).

Shortly after, the narrator's head falls off as the ribbon is removed. The ending is crafted and influenced by a folklore tale told as a children's story in 17th-century France (Meirick). In this tale, two youths fall in love and grow old together before the wife gives her husband her blessing to remove the ribbon, and she dies.

Similarly, Machado utilizes the fantastical element and influence of Medusa for her main character. Unlike the original tale, Machado's protagonist favors the unfavorable and complicated emotions between men and women. Samantha Fisher offers a literary analysis titled "Monstrous: The Grotesque, Abject, and Monstrous in 'The Husband Stitch'" for Machado's short story. Fisher's main idea and argument are how Machado "[aligns] the Narrator with Medusa through secondary research, marking her as an archetypal monster through her overt sexuality, pregnancy, and green ribbon. My interpretation ends in the finale as, like Medusa, the Narrator's husband beheads her, resulting in the satirical conclusion that the perfect patriarchal woman dies as soon as she is created" (Fisher). The Narrator, like Medusa, is beheaded and meets her end by a man; this is an interesting inclusion that solidifies Machado's themes within "The Husband Stitch." Machado writes a story where the Narrator loses herself piece by piece. She allows her husband to take everything that makes her who she is. Likewise, Josie loses herself because of her mental disorder and transforms into an eerie alternate version of herself. Neither character can hold onto who they are or believe themselves to be.

Both my story and Machado's center on women protagonists and aspects of folklore and legends to draw in the reader and reinforce important and relevant themes. During an interview,

Machado was asked by Lauren Kane what motivates her to write in between the space of reality and the fantastic. Machado answered:

It's very close to how I actually perceive the world but turned up to a higher degree. I don't actually believe in ghosts and angels, I don't believe in anything really supernatural, but I'm attuned to what they could look like in the real world. My imagination is very vivid, and I feel like life is a little surreal already, so when I'm writing from my own experiences, I'm really just pushing the situation in the story slightly further than what I perceived in reality." (Kane)

The supernatural aids readers' imaginations and how a story theme is applied in the real world. I agree with Machado about going beyond the boundaries of reality in writing. Machado pushes boundaries of gender, anxiety, and other unfavorable emotions, relationships, and supernatural elements. Furthermore, she is a successful female minority writer who revels instead of fears breaking normalized constructs. Machado gives voices and opportunities to those who may not have a voice or are too small to accomplish anything, especially alone.

Chapter II. Into the Unknown and the Role of Time

Introduction

The second short story is titled "11:59 on Yesterday." This is a story about the constructs of time, change, and the inevitable. Time is a gift, and time is a curse: it continues forward no matter the circumstance. The purpose of this story is to showcase the what-if of time. What if time could stand still, repeat, or even go backward? Stanton meets Yasmin, a young woman who has power over time, and together they try to make sense of the situations around them. The supernatural element is the control of time which repeats for reasons Stanton must discover.

During their time together, Stanton and Yasmin discuss many things about life and how time connects each person.

Personal Fiction 2: 11:59 On Yesterday

11:57 PM. Yasmin's eyes repeatedly dart from me to the clock. Her breath quickens. Her voice trembles when she says my name. I know she's scared. I hold onto her hand and let her squeeze until my fingers go numb.

11:58 PM. A heartbreaking groan escapes her, and I realize Yasmin is close to giving up. I encourage her with my words and look into her eyes. She holds my gaze like she cannot look away. The seconds on the clock are silent, but I feel each one pulse inside of me.

11:59 PM. We wait.

several days earlier

I awoke exactly ten minutes before my alarm. The red numbers glared at me. A strange feeling settled in my chest, so I sat up. Posters covered the walls, laundry was piling up in the corner, the window was slightly open, and my homework was strewn across my desk. Something didn't feel right. I still hadn't put my finger on what it was when my dad opened my door.

"I made—"

"Waffles and bacon," I interrupted him.

"Yeah. I did! You must have smelled it." He blinked at me and smiled. He was always like this on days he worked late and cooked me breakfast. I looked over his graying sideburns, slight crowfeet in the corner of his eyes, and wide smile.

I watched my dad leave, never confirming his statement. I hadn't smelled anything. I just had a feeling, no, I knew what he would say. Even as I showered, ate, and talked with my dad, I had this feeling I'd done all this before. What was I saying? Of course, I've done this all before. High school was just a huge routine anyway: five days a week, I woke up, showered, and ate breakfast. Today was just a normal Thursday. At least, that's what I told myself, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I should wear my sneakers instead of Nike slide sandals. I stared at my sneakers for a full minute before toeing them off and rushing out the front door. My friend Parker and I always walked to school together, and I was the one that made sure we were on time. Parker was my best friend, and we were similar in a lot of ways. Parker was tall, dark-skinned, and handsome, while I was the responsible one. I was attractive too, just not as attractive as Parker.

The day went on, and I could not shake the feeling that everything was out of place even though it was going on like it usually did. I began to give myself a headache trying to figure out what was off, so I focused on what my Statistics teacher was blabbing about. When it was clear that if I listened to her any longer, I would fall asleep, I turned my attention to Yasmin. Her hair was different. It was not usually sleek and straight but thick with curls. Yasmin and I only had two classes together and in both, she sat in the second row on the left-hand side. Placing my knuckles against my chin so it appeared like I was looking at Mrs. Cammarata—except I wasn't. I was watching Yasmin debating with myself if I'd ever be able to ask her out. Somehow, I fell asleep anyway, only waking when the bell rang. The day passed slowly and was interrupted when all the students were dismissed early. Apparently, we were in for a snowstorm. Imagine that! Living in Scottsdale, Arizona, a snowstorm was approaching. The weatherman was predicting eighteen inches of snow. There was not much fear from any of the students; rather,

uncontrollable excitement. There were whoops and cheers and all-around noisy chaos. An eruption of noise collided throughout the room as binders snapped shut, textbooks slammed closed, loud bangs echoed from the metal lockers, and teachers yelled at students for not following hallway protocol. The idea of finally being able to round snow in our palms and hurl a snowball or making a snowman had all the students running out the doors. Sometimes Scottsdale got a bit of snow if it was not washed away by the rain. Usually, it was melted by the afternoon, and the snow wars and pranks ended, much to the teacher's satisfaction.

“Bro, my mom's picking me up today. We have to get to the store to stock up because of the storm. Want us to give you a ride?” Parker says, sticking his tongue out for snowflakes.

“Don't worry about it. I'm just gonna go straight home.” I said, stuffing my hands in my pockets. Parker's mom never picked him up, but I wasn't surprised.

“You sure? Alright. Catch you later.”

I walked home briskly, wishing I had worn my sneakers. At least then, I could have jogged home. I could make it home quickly and easily being on the cross-country team. Parker and I were two of the team's best. Once home, I got a call from my dad. He was going to wait for the storm to pass but would be home the next day. My dad carpooled to work since his job was three hours away. He was a hard worker: ten hours a day, six days a week. It was just me and my dad since my mom took off. I reassured him several times that I'd be fine before he hung up. The hours passed while I busied myself around the house. After a shower and an overcooked bowl of macaroni and cheese, I fell asleep on the couch.

The next day was when things started to get weird. I woke up in my bed exactly ten minutes before my alarm sounded. I leaped out of bed to see how much snow had fallen. There was not an inch of snow out there. It all couldn't have melted in the night, could it?

My dad entered. "Good, you're up. I made—"

"Did you just get back?" I asked, still staring out the window for any signs of snow.

"What do you mean? I never left."

I looked over at him. "You said you'd be home in the morning. You were going to wait the storm out, remember?"

My dad just blinked at me. I groaned at his confusion. "We had a storm. It was snowing. And you were already gone when I got home then—"

"Hold on a second. Stanton, what are you talking about? I was here when you got home. You were late because of practice, remember? And what storm? The news already confirmed it's going to pass us."

We stood there staring at each other until my dad chuckled. "I think you had a crazy dream, son. That or your coach is working you way too hard. Now hurry up; you don't wanna be late for school."

I sat on my bed and held my head in my hands for a few moments. Could I have been dreaming? That explanation made the most sense. I showered and ate breakfast, trying to figure out what was going on. I hesitated when I went to put on my shoes. I grabbed my sneakers instead of my slides. I ran to meet Parker at our usual spot; maybe he could help me make sense of everything.

“Yo!” Parker greeted, putting his hand out for a dap. I gripped his hand quickly and asked him if he remembered yesterday. He nodded.

“Great! So, you remember all about the storm, and your mom picking you up, going to the grocery store, the snow, and all of that, right?” I looked at him hopefully.

He frowned comically before laughing. “Um, no. Bro, what are you talking about? That is not what happened yesterday.”

I felt my resolve sinking. There’s no way I could have imagined it, no way I was dreaming or making this up. However, my best friend wouldn’t lie to me. Maybe my dad was right. Parker was the second person that did not remember yesterday the way I did. I told him to forget it as we walked to school. I could barely concentrate on the conversation as I tried to make sense of what was happening. I shook my head in disbelief as I read the date on the board: January 18th. But yesterday was the 18th. I looked around the room and tried to catch sight of anything different. Nothing happened out of the ordinary. Careful not to turn my head too much, I glanced over at Yasmin. She looked exactly like she did yesterday. I never got tired of watching her. Nothing was out of place except me. The strangest part was that the day replayed just as I remembered.

“I told you,” I gloated to Parker once we were at our lockers, “We have to leave early just like I knew we would. There is a huge snowstorm coming.”

Parker elbowed me playfully. “You must’ve watched the news last night. That doesn’t make you psychic, Stanton.”

I groaned in frustration before I tried to explain it to him again. Something strange was going on. Parker looks at me confusedly after he got a call from his mother. “That was my mom. She’s coming to get me today. How did you know that?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you! It’s like today has happened before.” I yelled and a few students looked over in our direction.

“Bro, I don’t know what’s up with you, but I’ll call you later. Alright?”

We never talked that afternoon. I only received a text saying he was wrapped up with his mom. Apparently, his house was stocked and locked down as if there was a zombie apocalypse instead of a winter storm. My dad called again to let me know I was right about the storm, and he would be waiting it out with his coworkers. This time I did not overcook the macaroni, but it wasn’t exactly fully cooked by the time I poured the cheese sauce over it either. I showered and fell asleep in front of the TV.

I woke up and knew that it was ten minutes before seven. I ran downstairs and almost barreled into my dad.

“What day is it?”

“It’s the eighteenth. Are you alright, Stanton? Something important today at school?” He asked, frowning his brows. I slowly stepped away from him. When I told people what was going to happen yesterday, well, today, it didn’t go over very well. It might be best to stay silent and see how things go. “Nope, nothing at all. Don’t worry about it, Dad. I’ll be down for breakfast.”

I continued with the day as I usually would, trying to act as if I didn't know the events. I did my best to pick up on clues, anything that would explain why the same day was repeating over again. Each recurring day I tried and failed to discover what was happening. I would run straight home and research until I fell asleep face first into my computer keyboard, but the next morning, I woke up in my bed. I've come to a few conclusions. One, nothing online made any sense: it was all about déjà vu or time travel. None of the theories I read about had anything to do with what I was experiencing. Two, the day reset no matter what I did, and I always ended up back in my bed. Three, I seemed to be the only one who realized the day was repeating. Every morning, my dad came in about breakfast, Parker was waiting to walk to school, Mrs. Cammarata would not shut up about math, school was dismissed, on and on. The good thing was that after a week of the same day and having the same thing for dinner repeatedly, I have perfected the dish of macaroni and cheese.

I sighed heavily as I awoke once again to the same day. I did not bother to look up when my dad entered my room. Before he could get a single word out, I tell him I'm not feeling well. I never missed school, so my dad gave in pretty quickly and promised to bring me soup before he left for work. I ate the soup and sat in my room, going over what I knew. I came to the realization that maybe I was looking at everything too broadly and should focus on the smaller details. There had to be something I was missing. As far as I could tell I didn't have any superpowers so there had to be a logical explanation for this.

I walked through town looking for anything that seemed peculiar, but nothing stood out and I failed to find anything. That night I decided to search the school—the only other place I'd been. If the answer wasn't in town or at home, then it had to be there. The next day I skipped breakfast and jogged to school early. I texted Parker I'd just meet him there. I carefully inspected

all the rooms and hallways I could and greeted all the faculty I came across, looking for some sort of clue. Then the bell rang while I was outside, then the late bell rang while I was two feet from first period's door.

“Late! Stanton, please be on time. If everyone else can be here on time, so can you.”

I clicked my tongue in response and opened my notebook to do the bell ringer.

“Another tardy. Nice of you to join us, Yasmin.”

My head snapped up at the mention of her name. She caught my eyes as she walked by, and I looked away first. Yasmin wasn't usually late today. Every time I thought about it, Yasmin was already in her seat when I came in. I checked the board to make sure it was still January 18th and yes, it was. I stared at her from across the room. Was it just a coincidence? Throughout that day and the next day, I watched and silently followed Yasmin. I got butterflies each time she caught me looking at her. I have liked Yasmin since sophomore year when she transferred in from Texas. I had a girlfriend at that time, so I was unavailable. By the time my girlfriend and I decided to be friends, I had never worked up the courage to ask Yasmin out. Now she probably thinks I was a creep. Nonetheless, I watched, hoping for clues. A few things stood out to me, but it wasn't solid evidence. For example, Yasmin's clothes were different every time she came to school; furthermore, the snow did not surprise Yasmin, and she didn't run to her locker like everyone else did. What confirmed my suspicions were in the fourth period on the second day. Right before dismissal, Mr. Trojak came in and handed out a worksheet before an announcement was made because the school was closing due to the storm. This was nothing new, except Yasmin was mouthing the words of the announcement. One thought muted all the noise of cheers, chairs scraping against the floor, teachers yelling, and bells ringing: She already knew.

“Hello,” I said, walking beside her. Hearing my own voice made me want to run away and try again the next time. But if I was correct, Yasmin would remember I did that. Instead, I smiled.

“Hi. Can I help you with something?” she asked. A perfect question. She lifted one eyebrow, and wow, she was so much prettier and intimidating up close.

“Actually, yes.” Here goes nothing. “Have you noticed it’s been Thursday for a while now?”

She turned and looked at me with wide eyes. She just stood there staring at me, frozen, with her mouth open. Then she did something I did not expect: she ran away from me. I did not chase her. I just sighed with relief and walked home with a bounce in my step. *She knew*. We could make everything go back to normal.

What I did not see coming was how good Yasmin was at avoiding me. With each recurring day, I had to chase after her and try not to look like a stalker in the process. At first, I tried to be subtle, but I quickly became impatient. Both of us were a step away from sprinting as I followed her up the stairs. I groaned in frustration. I was a runner, so she was lucky we were in the hall because out in the open, there was no way she’d escape me. When I was closing in, she escaped by dashing into the girls' bathroom. Parker caught me outside the girls' bathroom and shook his head at me.

“Bro,” he gestured to me, then to the bathroom, and repeated the gesture again. I bit my lip, ashamed. It wasn’t what it looked like! I wasn’t chasing her because of my feelings for her.

“Whatever. You won’t remember any of this later.” I mumbled as I stomped by. I was trying to save the world.

“Stanton, I think everyone in around is going to remember this.” He said as I passed him.

Each day set my nerves on edge. I just wanted tomorrow to come. I was so *tired* of repeating the same day over and over again. If I had to write “Thursday, January 18th” on the top of another paper, I would scream. And I never thought I would say this, but I did not want to see pork or any form of pasta for a long time after all this was over. I took a deep breath as Parker, and I walked to school. It had been five days since Yasmin ran away from me and I just had to try a different approach. Following her from class to class and begging for her to talk to me clearly was not going to work. Maybe bribery. I sighed and asked Parker for his opinion. Parker removed his durag and smoothed the waves in his hair. He put his arm around my shoulders, smiling widely before speaking.

“You must be assertive, Stanton. You like girls to come to you and that’s your problem. If you want her to pay attention to you, how about inviting her out somewhere and then try talking to her?”

Parker spent the rest of the walk to school, giving me tips. I only took half of what he told me into consideration. Parker was the type of guy who had a new girlfriend every couple of months. He was either doing something very right or very wrong. A date with Yasmin sounded like a dream come true but I needed to solve my problem first.

To psych myself up, I repeated myself over and over that this is the day I would speak to Yasmin no matter what. I decided to ignore her until fourth period right before we were

dismissed. Then I'd catch her off guard and demand answers. The entire morning, I was anxious. My sweaty palms caused me to move my pencil from hand to hand, tapping, spinning, or drawing doodles all over my paper. From all the countless times I'd heard the lessons, there was no need to take any notes. I glanced up and wondered if Yasmin was actually taking notes for the umpteenth time or just passing the time like me. I tried to ignore the tight feeling in my stomach and the doubts in my head. I asked to go to the bathroom ten minutes before I knew the announcement would come on. I went to my locker and grabbed all my belongings before I waited for Yasmin. She had to help me. There was no way she was enjoying this circle of events. Just the thought of having to spend the rest of my life stuck in one day made me extremely anxious. The announcement was made, the hallways filled with commotion, and I waited for my moment. She was about to walk away from her locker when I slammed my hand against it.

“We need to talk. And you are going to tell me what is going on,” I demanded, trying to be assertive and feeling very outside of myself. She worried her bottom lip with her teeth and her furrowed. I sighed.

“Look,” I added softly, “you are the only person who can help me. If you know something, please help me. I don't know what else to do, and I feel like I'm going crazy.”

Her eyes softened and she exhaled slowly. Finally, she gave in.

We sat outside on the bench in front of a tiny One-Stop place with drinks she bought with my last ten dollars. If we were going to talk, I figured it would be nice to have an incentive. I gave Yasmin my last ten dollars without any second thoughts.

“Guess I couldn’t avoid this forever.” She said before turning to me. She squinted her eyes and looked me over dubiously. I sat up straight, hoping my hair wasn’t sticking up or my face wasn’t flushed from the wind. “Your name’s Stanton, right?”

“Yeah. We have first and fourth periods together.”

She sighed deeply. “Look, I don’t have all the answers either. I didn’t think anyone else was aware of what was going on. When did you figure it out?”

“Well, about two weeks ago, I just became aware that the day was repeating itself and no one seemed to know except me. I thought I was dreaming. Y’know, like having a recurring dream. Then I slept, and when I awoke and instead of a new day, the dream started over. That’s when I realized, and I knew something was very wrong.”

“Go on. What else?” She sipped her juice, tucking her hair behind her ear. At any other moment, I would be elated to be spending time with her. However, thoughts about how nice it would be as her boyfriend were unimportant compared to the matter at hand.

“Well, nothing transfers over either. The day just starts over, on the same course, every day.”

“Yeah, no matter what, the day does reset just as it did before. We can’t go out of the time balance of this day. In a way, it’s comforting to know what to expect before the day even begins...” She trailed off deep in thought about something.

“What do you mean? Explain it to me.”

Yasmin scoffed and put her drink down. “Time is a conundrum for even the smartest person, Stanton. No one has all the answers.”

“Just tell me what you know. We can work together to figure it out. Besides, we’re the only ones who know what’s going on.” I said and hoped my smile was encouraging.

“Time is complicated. If time can go forward, why can’t it go backward or repeat itself? Everyone thinks it’s a sequential order. The present is now, the past is behind, and the future is ahead. Always a simplistic view of yesterday, today, and tomorrow when it could just as easily be the reverse. You get it?”

I nodded my head to agree with her. Then I thought better of it and shook my head slightly. Actually, I was not sure what Yasmin meant. I’d never thought about it. “We have to stop this somehow. You and I.” She did not return my smile. Yasmin’s eyes did not meet mine as she sipped her beverage. Her body was tense like she could bolt at any moment. Something was telling me Yasmin was hiding something.

“And,” I continued after a short pause, “I know that *you* know more than what you’re saying. You have to help me, Yasmin.”

“I know how this story ends,” she whispered. “And I can’t let it happen. I can’t let go. This is something I just cannot accept. I’m sorry. This is the last regular day of my life, and I want to enjoy it. Tomorrow is when everything changes, and my life changes forever.” With each admission, her voice became more breathless. She placed a palm against her chest as she tried to steady herself. I reached out but was not sure what I was going to do, so I put my hand down.

“What does that mean? What are you talking about?”

She stayed quiet and I felt the remains of my patience slipping away. “Yasmin. What aren’t you telling me?” She stood but still did not reply. “Yasmin!” I yelled, standing as well.

“What?” She screamed back. “I know something bad is going to happen tomorrow! I want to stop it, but there’s nothing I can do. What am I supposed to do? It’s not fair! I just want everything to stay the same.” She yelled eyes closed tight. I had a feeling her anger wasn’t directed at me.

Once she calmed down, she looked up at the sky. “Free will, Stanton. There’s free will but there is no control. Control over our lives doesn’t belong to us. Time is an even bigger enemy than death.” Yasmin’s phone dinged with a notification. “I have to go. It’s my little brother.”

“But we need to—” I protested.

“Later,” Yasmin said with finality and hurried away.

I returned home with more questions than answers and ignored my dad’s call while replaying the conversation in my mind. I attempted to make sense of what Yasmin told me. If someone knew what was going to happen, they had free will to act but no control over whether it happened or was preventable. Free will did not equal control and knowing what was going to happen did not mean anything. It made sense that we could do things differently on the same day but couldn’t stop the things that were bound to happen. I could skip school and change how I went about the day, but the storm was still going to come, my dad would be at work, and Parker’s mom would pick him up. Only things that concerned Yasmin or I could change with each day. What could Yasmin be afraid of tomorrow? What happened on Friday? Pain began to pulse in my frontal lobe from an oncoming headache. I tried to clear my mind for a peaceful night of sleep. It was becoming harder and harder to do so.

When I woke up, the morning went exactly like I knew it was going to. At school, I skipped every class. I had already made up my mind that today was the day everything stopped. Once everyone was dismissed, I saw Parker off quickly and trailed Yasmin to her house.

“Go home,” She sighed exasperatedly. I kept following her.

When she got to her house. She closed the gate quickly behind her. “What are you doing, Stanton?”

“We are going to end this today.” I declared.

She rolled her eyes. “How do you plan on doing that? You gonna stand outside my house until I decide to stop it?”

“Yeah.”

My reply stunned her. The look on her face would have been funny if not for the circumstances. “You’re not serious?”

I nodded. This was the best plan I could think of. I never said it was a good plan.

“Fine,” she said, squinting her eyes at me. “This won’t work. There’s a storm coming, and there is no way you’ll stand out here for long. Even if you do,” she hesitated, calculating her next thought, “you can freeze to death for all I care.” She slammed the door.

I’m not sure how long I stood there. It was long enough to wish I was as understanding of girls as Parker. I wished he was in this with me. I was deep in thought as the babysitter, I assumed, dropped her younger brother off. He was small and darker than Yasmin with straight hair instead of her curly hair. The babysitter greeted me, but her brother didn’t spare me a glance. Jeez, and I thought I was good with kids. The snowflakes got thicker and heavier. The kind of

snow that stuck to clothes. Although Yasmin did not come out, I could see the blinds move every time she checked if I was still out there. I wanted to go home; I wanted to get under a blanket. I needed to do this, so I did not budge. This day had to come to an end.

“I’m not leaving!” I yelled at the house, shuddering. “I won’t go until you help me, Yasmin.”

Abruptly, the door swung open, and Yasmin stomped up to the gate. She unlocked it and stared at me with disdain as I entered her home. My coat was damp with cold as I peeled it off to hang. We did not talk while I warmed up. There weren’t any shoes allowed in the house, and I happily left my shoes by the door. I looked around at all the family photographs scattered across the walls. The dining room was rich in burgundy and black. There was a dimmer light Yasmin rotated to medium. The room was nice and warm and was helping to calm my nerves. I sit back in a plush chair and relax my shoulders. After inspecting the room, I sneaked a glance at Yasmin, but she was not looking at me. Her gaze was far away. Yasmin stared out the window, and I sipped hot chocolate while trying to play with her little brother. He avoided eye contact with us and tapped away at his game. He would not let me see what he was playing either. Her little brother was even better at ignoring and avoiding people than she was.

“I don’t think he likes me,” I mumbled. So much for being good with children.

Yasmin sighed, “He’s autistic. It’s not you. Benjamin is like that with everyone, especially strangers.”

“I see. Well, where are your parents?” I asked, looking around.

I didn't notice right away how Yasmin visibly stiffened. It was noticeable once she began speaking. "On their way back from a trip. Since I'm old enough to take care of the house and Benji, they go on monthly trips. Just to get away, so..." she trailed off. Her eyes darted around the room, and she blinked rapidly.

I wasn't sure, but it looked as if she could be fighting back tears. Her hair fell in her eyes a bit and she gave me a small, half-hearted smile. Oh my, she was beautiful. We fell silent. I only realized I'd been staring at her for a considerable amount of time after she raised an eyebrow at me. "I like you," fell out of my mouth.

She smiled, letting out a little huff of a laugh. Her eyes were genuine when she looked at me. "It doesn't matter, Stanton. Everything is going to change tomorrow. Who knows what will happen to me and Benji."

"What are you so afraid of? What's going to happen?" I ventured a little closer and sat on the opposite couch closest to her.

"I can't tell you what's going to happen. I can't tell anyone. I didn't even expect anyone to notice the day was repeating. I thought I could buy time to figure out another way. There isn't another way. No matter what I say or try I see the accident repeatedly. It all came to me in a dream, and it came true. It came *true*, Stanton."

"Wait. Hold on. So, you created this...time loop in a dream? What accident?"

"I've already told you too much. People who can actually, I don't know how to explain it, see time or feel it don't go around telling people who can't. Where do you think all these ridiculous time-traveling movies come from? All you need to know is I've already given up. I'm

content to go day by day living the life I know. I don't ever want tomorrow to come," Yasmin said in one breath then exhaled deeply.

I turned over everything she said. So, Yasmin was the one with the power. "In doing all of this, aren't you just prolonging the inevitable? Whatever you are trying to stop has already happened. Maybe today isn't what matters, but what happens tomorrow is and what comes after. Because you don't know, right, about the day after tomorrow? You've only seen the accident tomorrow, so you don't know if everything will pan out. You could be worried about nothing." I was definitely not a counselor, but I knew the inevitable and unknown were constantly a part of life. We'd been forced to read enough poetry in Mr. Trojak's class to know that at least. "If there's a God, where does He fit into all of this, I wonder?"

"I don't know," Yasmin admitted, "I don't have all the answers like I told you before. I think God is the one with all the control, though and we have the free will."

Benjamin handed Yasmin the handheld video game that'd been distracting him. He gathered all his fingers together and touched them to his lips twice. I guessed the gesture symbolized food or eating. She sighed softly and smiled warmly at her little brother before going into the kitchen. I waited with Benji while she made us something to eat. Benji even let me play a level on his handheld game. Progress!

We had meatball hoagies, and my growling stomach was very grateful. Yasmin's cooking skills were more impressive than mine. I was excited to have something other than macaroni and cheese. Time seemed to fly by, and the tense atmosphere had eased away. It was beginning to get late. I took a deep breath, knowing I was about to disturb the peace.

“Yasmin, I really do like you. I’ve liked you since before all this. You seem like a nice and smart person. I think everything is going to work out no matter what tomorrow brings. You just have to give it a chance. We can’t go on like this.” I didn’t want to beg, but I would if it came to that.

She looked at the clock and turned away sharply. “I can’t even think about your feelings right now. And you don’t know if it will be alright. You don’t know that!”

“And you don’t know if it’s going to be terrible,” I huffed.

“I know it’s going to be bad enough, Stanton,” she bit back.

“Yasmin, please. Life is hard. We all have problems. You’re going to go through a difficult time, I’m going to go through it, and Benjamin is too.”

“Yeah, well, some of us go through more than others, Stanton.”

I just looked at her. I allowed my impatience to slip away. I noticed that there was fear. Yasmin was frightened by something. Perhaps I’d been going about this all wrong. Typical me. Smiling, I reached over and lightly grasped her hand. “I’ll help you through this, Yasmin. You don’t have to be scared.” I sat at the table and motioned for her to join me. “11:30, Yasmin. Whatever it is, you have your brother here with you and me. You can’t keep this up. It isn’t fair to anyone. Deep down, you know that.”

Defiance flashed in her eyes before they settled on Benji. When she looked back at me, there was resignation in her eyes. Her lax hand gripped mine back and she nodded. I trusted she knew deep down inside that I was right and that we could not continue like we were.

And here we are, clutching each other.

“It’s all right. Just let go. Whatever it is, it’s okay. It’ll work out.” I nod encouragingly.

Yasmin squeezes her eyes closed. The room seems to tremble around us as Yasmin concentrates. My hands are still numb, but Yasmin squeezes harder still. I’m not sure when I close my own eyes, but when I open them, Benjamin is looking up at us, holding his sister’s leg, Yasmin is watching me, and my phone reads 12:02 AM. Just like that, it was over. I release the breath I was holding, and I hear Yasmin do the same. Her eyes are glossy with tears. I wrap my arms around her. We sit in silence as the wind howls outside.

Friday, January 19th, arrives. Tomorrow is here, school is canceled, my dad is on his way, and my adventure is over. Everything should feel right— *it should*. But now, the truth is laid bare, and I realize the gravity of the situation. It’s a new day, and Yasmin and her younger brother are now orphans. Their parents were in a head-on collision with another driver who fell asleep at the wheel. The terrible truth, the accident, Yasmin’s actions, and the time loop to draw out one more normal day all come into clear focus. This day will never be just another day, and it will never feel the same again. Our adventure may be over, but I will make sure that Yasmin and I help each other move forward. I can’t imagine losing my dad or what I could possibly do to make Yasmin feel better. I know I am going to try. I am not sure if time will heal her, but I hope I can.

Literary Connections & Analysis: Complexity and changes of character

An important characteristic of my writing is a focus on independent women who pursue their goals and desires. This characteristic is also present in Roxane Gay’s short fiction, most notably in her 2017 short story collection, *Difficult Women*. In twenty-five stories, Gay captures

the unique voices, struggles, and desires of minority women from their perspective. One story in particular, “North Country,” closely relates to “11:59 on Yesterday” because, similar to Gay’s protagonist (Kate), my protagonist (Yasmin) is a strong woman who follows her own path toward her desires. Both characters are uncertain of where their paths may lead. Stanton helps Yasmin in similar ways as the characters in “North Country.”

To create effective characters and plots, careful consideration goes into how the characters feel, and behave and how that makes the reader feel connected to the story. This goal was in mind for “11:59 on Yesterday,” in comparison to Gay’s “North Country”. Gay deftly connects readers to her characters and plot. Gay’s work represents the complexities of different women through their physical bodies and the things those bodies experience. Frieda Fair, an interdisciplinary scholar at the University of Illinois, describes Gay’s work and inspirations centered on women and their bodies. Fair states, “Of particular interest to Gay is the body [and how it] refuses to be disciplined with identity itself as an: ‘expression of the fear of unruly bodies’ (2017b, 165). The ‘unruly body’ in its capacity to account for diverse practices of living as well as regulation articulates embodiment as a racialized, gendered, and sexualized process” (117). Gay writes compelling stories that resonate with her readers in a way that is experienced through her characters physically and then emotionally. She has a talent for developing intimacy, understanding unfavorable situations, social interactions, and gendered points of view. Gay’s ability to portray characters at their best and worst while exploring difficult themes, such as “emotional deprivation, loneliness, social isolation, trauma, addiction, desire, abuse, psychological and social defense mechanisms, and love among others” (Fair 118). A focus of *Difficult Women* is the female body. Fair argues that “the body comes into focus in Gay's writing through the intimacies it encounters... The stories in *Difficult Women* collectively demonstrate

the reach of Gay's keen talent for writing into and out of marginality while exposing the dysfunction that undergirds normality” (118). For example, Kate is a black woman who can no longer lead a normal life since the loss of her unborn child and the failed relationship with her advisor. Kate has changed and who she once was is fading; the reader follows her journey to rediscover who she is and what she wants. An example of Kate trying to combine her past and her present is clear when she returns home for the holidays. Her struggle, even to explain her problems to her parents, is evident in this quote:

I visit my parents in Florida for Thanksgiving and my mother asks why I don't call as often. I explain how work has gotten busy. I explain how snow has fallen and everyone thinks I'm from Detroit. My mother says I look thin. She says I'm too quiet. We don't talk about the dead child or the father of the dead child. There is this life and that life. We pretend that life never happened. It is a mercy (Gay 97).

Kate is an interesting and complex character: she is a black woman whose career is based on structural engineering; she is misunderstood and stereotyped, and she lies to herself about what she truly wants, especially regarding her relationship with Magnus. Magnus helps Kate reinvent herself and solidify not only who she yearns to be but what she wants in her future.

Similarly, to my work, Gay portrays Kate in a similar manner. Kate must face obstacles other than the emotional and mental strains of her personal life. Kate reveals her daily struggles as she explains why her life is difficult. Also, the reader can conclude why Kate would be considered a difficult woman, as Gay's book title suggests, based on her relationship with Magnus. The reader is made aware of how unhappy she is within the first paragraphs of the story. Kate states: “I teach a section of Design of Concrete Structures and a section of Structural

Dynamics. I have no female students in either class. The boys stare at me and after class, they linger in the hallway just outside the classroom. They try to flirt. I remind them I will assess their final grades. They make inappropriate comments about extra credit” (Gay 85-86). Gay shows how incomplete Kate feels. Her apartment is unpacked. Her coworkers assume she is from a predominately black-populated city such as Detroit. Her coworkers and students unabashedly flirt with her, and she does not know how to accept her growing feelings for Magnus.

Another example that shows how gender and race affect Kate is the moment that unites her and Magnus once and for all:

The hydrologist corners me in the lab late at night and makes an inappropriate advance that leaves me unsettled...Even though it's after midnight, I call Magnus. My voice is shaking. He says, “You hurt my feelings,” and the simple honesty of his words hurts. I say, “I’m sorry. I never say what I really feel,” and I cry. [Magnus] knows me better than I care to admit. I tell him about the married hydrologist, a dirty man who tried to lick my ear and called me Black Beauty and who got aggressive when I pushed him away and how I’m nervous about walking to my car. (Gay 98)

By this point, Kate reaches her breaking point, and she is no longer willing to hold herself back from changing her reality. The reader sympathizes with Kate as she struggles with the pains of her past, the sexist and demeaning behavior of men in her life, and her unwillingness to admit that Magnus is the answer to most of her problems. Kate’s life is challenging, and those challenges weigh on her and the only character who can lift that burden is Magnus.

“North Country” also connects to “11:59 on Yesterday” because both Kate and Yasmin experience loss and subsequent grief: Kate loses her baby; Yasmin loses her parents. Both

women search for peace, understanding, and a way to hide their fears under a facade of strength and control. Once the facade breaks down, another person can mend some of the broken pieces. The supportive and compassionate men in both stories help the female protagonists move forward and face the fear of their unfortunate circumstances. In both my story and Gay's story, the female protagonists are unwilling to change even though their circumstances have altered their lives forever. Kate is lost and on a journey to find herself, what she wants in life, and love. Also, she does not realize that true love and acceptance are within her grasp, and all she must do is take it. In a way, Yasmin is facing the same issues of loss, responsibility, and reluctance. Yasmin has lost her parents and her life as she knew it would never be the same. She is hurt and doing everything in her power to hold on to what was. Stanton is the male that enters her life during her dilemma and is prepared to help in any way that he can. Stanton's attraction for Yasmin encourages him to help her, like the way Magnus helps Kate.

Furthermore, both Yasmin and Kate are headstrong, capable black women at a loss for how to continue forward. Both have the strength to move on and change, but they need the motivation to do so. My personal fiction includes a fantastical element because of Yasmin's power to control time. However, like minority or female characters are important because of representation, the fantastical is advantageous because it suspends reality and creates a certain mood. A draws the reader in as it captivates their imagination and still conveys the desired real-world meaning. With and without breaking the borders of time, "11:59 on Yesterday" demonstrates fear, loss, longing, understanding, social interactions, acceptance, and love just as "North Country" does.

Chapter III. Keys to Unlocking Entrapments and Magic

Introduction

The third fiction is titled “Transience of Memory, Illusion of Time”. It is a story about acceptance of situations out of one’s control, personal regrets, and searching for peace in problematic situations. The protagonist, Marisol Vivar, the Colombian protagonist, struggles with an incurable disease—Alzheimer’s. She is a loner, she is selfish, and she has run out of time. The story explores how time can steal a person’s memories and that only loved ones can keep those memories alive. The main idea was to experiment with what it means when there is no one left to remember.

Personal Fiction 3: Transience of Memory, Illusion of Time

She interrupted her nurse as he tried to excuse himself for about the fifth time.

“My name is Marisol Vivar. My birthday is July 13th. I am 65 years old. Today’s date is September 29th, 2016. I am not married. I have one child; her name is Milisa. I have Alzheimer’s and currently live in Ostrow Home and Rehabilitation Room 141.” Marisol repeated her mantra. It was a reminder to her of what her life had become. Her nurse looked at her and sighed. Who could blame him? It was not as if she was the only patient he had to tend to. No, he should listen and pay attention to every coherent word. He just did not understand. People have no sense of how important memories are until they don’t have them; when they are forgotten, it’s as if a missing piece of a puzzle is never to be found.

The nurse nodded politely and asked, “Anything else, Ms. Vivar?” His tone revealed that he was hoping I say no.

She slowly shook her head, and he gave her a handsome smile before leaving. Marisol stared at her mirrored dresser and all the sticky notes around the glass: a constant reminder of things not to forget. Marisol looked away before she caught a glimpse of her worn face. Marisol did not remember when she cut her hair, but she hated it. She always had long hair. She did not look like herself, and she did not feel like herself. Her nosy neighbor said she was there when Marisol cut it and that it looked nice. Marisol did not care what her intrusive neighbor thought. Marisol pulled at the gemstone around her neck as she exited her bedroom. She glanced around, unimpressed. A one-bedroom, single bathroom with a conjoined kitchen and living room. No pictures littered the walls—not of family or friends. Only her artwork is on the walls, and a few she barely recalled when she created. Marisol stood there in the silence of her home and pitied her nurse. If only he had stayed, she could have revealed something of great importance.

Marisol could journey to the past. She did not understand how or why. Little did she know the gemstone around her neck, the only thing she had brought with her from Colombia, was the answer she was looking for. Marisol did not dare tell anyone about her gift. At times, she wanted to ask the others with Alzheimer’s if they could time travel too. But Marisol knew they were too far gone to remember. Marisol never wanted to be that way. She had to find a way to not end up like that. She was the proud Marisol Vivar, and she could not end up like them. Marisol had traveled into her past on numerous occasions since she was diagnosed. She had no control over it. Recently, Marisol had been trying to control or anticipate when and where she journeyed. She knew God had a sense of humor and that it was why she was only been able to go

to the past. It was cruel, considering that was what she had trouble remembering. Her memories were fluttering and teasing images like a dream that vanished the moment she woke up.

The first time it happened, Marisol thought she had a strange dream. She was staring at her breakfast with an open sketchpad and weekly pill organizer. She was absentminded as she pulled at her gemstone necklace. Marisol was sitting at the table with those exact items one moment, and the next, she was sitting with her doctor. It was the day Marisol was officially diagnosed with the demon of Alzheimer's. Yes, that sunny afternoon she spent sitting on an uncomfortable tissue-papered hospital bed waiting for the results. Waiting until her doctor came in with a deep sigh. All at once, she knew it was an awful day to recall. It was the day that her life came to a halt, and nothing would ever be the same.

Every part of the memory was so vivid: her doctor's coffee breath, the laminated pictures tacked to the walls, and the quiet buzz of the muted television. Marisol was confused when she returned to the present and realized her breakfast was still in front of her. She spent the whole day with a headache trying to make sense of what had happened. However, after more frequent occurrences, she knew I wasn't asleep, and her strange feelings had nothing to do with her prescriptions. People were gifted with abilities, second chances, and miracles every day, and Marisol was given hers. Perhaps it was not God's humor but his grace that allowed Marisol to use the talisman gemstone. She was not sure, but Marisol was not going to waste a miracle. So anytime she could, Marisol sat in front of her artwork, stared at it intently and hoped something would happen.

Usually, after a visit to the past, Marisol would awake to hastily drawn sketches or elaborate painted recollections. She looked to her artwork for the answers. Maybe there was a

clue buried within to remedy her unfortunate circumstance. She looked toward the art pieces on the walls. They were the only evidence the impossibility of time travel was real. Things she had forgotten were clear on canvas, in her sketchpad, and on pieces of mail. All those memories were wonderful but not worthy enough to remember. Marisol did not want to fade away surrounded by her memories. She wanted to be herself again.

No memories stuck with her: some she would remember for a while or if she looked at a picture, and others were gone the minute she returned from journeying. This changed the day she traveled to her daughter's birth. One moment Marisol was aimlessly sketching, and the next, she felt strange and outside of herself. Her necklace was tight in her hand as she opened her eyes to reveal the horror of a doctor between her legs. He was urging her to push. An agonizing pain, unlike any other ripped through her. Marisol frantically looked around, searching for answers in one of the faces surrounding her. The lights, the blood, the white masks, and the powder blue uniforms did not offer any relief or revelations. That memory was pain, regret, and displeasure. It came with a physical attachment that the others did not. Typical of her daughter to elicit that kind of response. The memory of Milisa lingered in her body even after she returned to the present. Marisol had not thought of that day for years, but now it was ingrained in her mind. Finally, she had a memory she wanted to forget but could not.

Since then, Marisol realized she was not only remembering her past but reliving it. On her good days, she recognized the signs. First, she got the sense that she was floating then her surroundings seemed heightened. She could hear the clock ticking in her bedroom down the hall, and she could see the dust particles clearly in the air. Once this happened, it was not long before she was traveling. Marisol thought of this ability as a curse and a blessing. A curse because fate was flaunting the memories she wanted to possess just out of reach. They were buried, no,

hidden deep in her brain. On her bad days, she barely remembered what was going on around her: daily tasks, information about herself, or the strangers in her room. She felt her disease truly was a demon. It was an enemy of the mind that would not surrender. What bothered her the most was that she knew she could not win against it. It was a proven fact those with her condition did not get better. They were faced with a losing battle and could only stall as long as possible, and that is what kept Marisol up at night.

Most days, it felt as if someone had taken a huge eraser and erased the visual pictures of her life, and she was becoming a blank canvas. She was almost helpless to stop it. Almost. This is where she found the blessing in her situation. Her ability was evolving. She was sure she was going to the past but, once or twice, she thought she went to the future. The images of the past were vivid, realistic, and familiar when she could remember them. The few times she thought she went to the future; the images were not clear. These journeys resulted in paintings that gave Marisol an aching headache. She would stare at them for so long she would forget why she was staring at them in the first place. The paintings from the future were in an abstract style, which is so unlike anything she had completed before. Even on her best days, she could not understand what they could mean. Drawings and paintings were the way she retained my memory because she could always rely on her art. She would not be able to handle it if her art failed her too. As an artist, Marisol knew firsthand that anything to be remembered had to be on paper. It had to be drawn out in ink, smudged with charcoal, swirled the brushstrokes of acrylic paint, or in the perfect lighting of a photograph. Art could survive or reveal anything in life.

Marisol made up her mind that she was going to control her gift. Since then, Marisol had been practicing to make herself time travel at will. She wanted to be able to tap into any memory she wanted and visit her future. She kept a sketchpad and some sort of art medium nearby, so she

was prepared. Also, she decided to practice more because she did not want her nurse to catch her missing. If anyone thought she'd gone missing, it would become a complication she would have to explain. Marisol began to understand the technicalities of when she journeyed. She noticed that though I could go back into the past, she could not change anything. No matter what she did, the memory would keep playing as if she had not done anything differently. Every time she journeyed, she could move and act freely, but the memory never changed. She could see everything taking place in front of her but could not alter its course. For this reason, Marisol desperately wanted to get to the future in hopes that she may be able to change something. Marisol was on the right track to honing her gift, but she was still ignorant to the source of it: the gemstone she never took off around her neck.

Whenever she could, day or night, she tried to journey or figure out a painting from her future. She had created them for a reason but was no closer to knowing what they meant. Those abstract paintings that represented her future troubled her for many reasons. She did not know what they represented. Plus, the style they were in was all wrong. Her work was always based on realism. Marisol boasted that her art was a mirror image of life. There was no need for anything but what was in front of people at any given moment. There she sat on the edge of her bed to take her medicine. She spared a glance at the mirror and intently looked at the falling sticky notes. She had been so focused on time traveling and understanding her art that she neglected her routine. She was supposed to track her progress and keep important notes on her mirror to read after she woke up and before she went to bed. With a heavy sigh, Marisol decided she would stay in bed. That is where her nurse found her before preparing her to go see her doctor. He noticed Marisol seemed crestfallen and tried to engage her in light conversation. It did not work. He didn't think he'd miss the older woman's ramblings, but that was better than the tense silence.

“I’m adding another prescription,” her doctor said, “It’s normal for your condition to worsen, but don’t become despondent. There are still ways to fight this.”

Marisol ignored him like she ignored her nurse. Only one thing was important. It was the one thing repeating in her mind over and over like her mantra. That one question: what did the future hold for her? After lunch, she sat in the living room with a piece of charcoal and her sketchpad. She took a deep breath and tried to think deeply about something, anything. Although she had more frequent visits to the past, she had not journeyed purposely more than a handful of times. She squeezed the talisman and was able to remember that each journey gave a sensation. The more she focused, the more her senses heightened, and she knew it was not long before she would journey. This journey felt warm.

When she opened her eyes, she was much younger, sitting in a familiar cafe waiting for tea. She looked around, observing the cafe she used to visit to draw. It was where she first met Milisa’s father. She knew she was correct when she noticed the tiny spots of paint on her hands. The acrylic paint would linger on her skin and in the cracks of her fingernails even after washing. The cafe was a small, simple place enriched in warm colors and encased in full glass windows. The owner was Latino and talking to him made Milisa feel like she was at home in Colombia. She glanced around until her eyes found the only love of her life. Their eyes connected, and Marisol felt a deep nostalgia for who she was at twenty years old. The world had seemed so much simpler and carefree. The man smiles and motions for her to join him. She wondered at that moment what life would have been if she hadn’t gone over. She wonders the path she would have taken if she had not fallen in love so soon. Granted, Benjamin was not the villain in Marisol's story, but he was her biggest complication. Their love was probably never meant to be.

After all, two struggling artists were not good together. Stress and tension consumed their home, and a baby did not make it any easier.

Marisol studied the scene before her while she listened to Benjamin talk. She tried to take in every detail, but her attention always went back to Benjamin. When she recreated this memory, she wanted to get his wide smile, the textures of his clothes, and the soft shadows from the gentle sunlight slipping through the window behind him. She was so engrossed in the scene before her she did not realize when it began to shift. This was something that had never happened before. She reaches out toward Benjamin, but he evaporates through her fingers like smoke.

Something new happened after the memory ended. Instead of returning to the present, Marisol was shifted into another memory. Her giddy smile melted away as a new memory unfolded in front of her. Abruptly, she was filled with a sense of dread and a bit of annoyance. This sensation was unpleasant. Marisol found herself sitting in a familiar house. She recognized and remembered the pastel pink paint on the walls, her favorite chair in the corner, and the old radio playing Spanish ballads. Her daughter, just seventeen, has her bags packed at the door, giving Marisol a look. The same look her father had when he left. He walked out the door before Milisa was even born. Just like Benjamin, Milisa was fed up with Marisol. She resembled her father the most and took on his little quirks, but she did have her mother's eyes and mouth. Milisa's crimson red hair, which she dyed against Marisol's wishes, irks me. I hate that I remember this. I was never a very good mother, but I tried my best. I never thought of her in the way a mother was supposed to. After Benjamin left, it seemed like she was only born to punish Marisol.

“So that’s it? You’re not going to say anything?” Milisa asked. Her eyes searched me for a reaction. She was expecting something from me, but I did not know what it was. Marisol did not know what to give her or what to say!

“What do you want me to say, hmm? You’ve already made up your mind. You want to go? Go. Don’t you come back.”

Milisa did not respond. She observed her mother with a guarded expression before turning toward the door. The memory continued on as Milisa gathered her bags and Marisol’s chest tightened. Marisol longed for the cafe’s warmth, for any other recollection of the past. She knew how the rest of this moment went. Her only child left, and, to the present day, Marisol had not heard from her since. Ironically, Marisol never tried to find or reconnect with her daughter over the years either. Marisol sat up straight as the door slammed close. None of this mattered. This was the past, and the past was already done. Marisol was done with the past. Her hope and salvation were in the future.

Soon after Milisa left, Marisol returned to the present. She looked down at her sketchbook and considered this attempt a failure. While she sketched Benjamin, her mind kept wandering to Milisa. Marisol was so discouraged she did not try to journey again the next day. The day went by awfully slowly. The following evening, she sat frustrated because it took her an hour, according to her nurse, to remember where she was. When he left, she let out a shaky sigh. Marisol was worried that despite her everything she’d done, her efforts would be in vain. Abruptly, Marisol sat up in bed as an idea began to form. If that was the case, she needed to be what was remembered in some way. Even if she forgot, she could have someone who would remember for her. For the first time, Marisol thought about ways to reach out to her daughter.

Marisol was a recognizable Latina artist at one point, but there was no one better to keep her legacy alive than her own daughter. The problem was how to reach Milisa after so many years. Milisa had become the top priority for Marisol because, without her, all hope was lost. Marisol understood that she was a woman with too much pride, and that was why she found herself alone. She was too stubborn to admit how she really felt in all the important moments of her life. Now, she felt like she was being punished.

Marisol paced back and forth in her living room, thinking deeply, and pulling on her talisman when everything around her shifted. This time, Marisol was anxious that she would end up in a memory she did not want or need. She was almost afraid to open her eyes. To her surprise, she was on a beach and one she had never seen before. At least, she thought she was sure she'd never seen it before. Her heartbeat sped up. She tried not to get too excited until she knew for sure it was the future. A little boy with a head full of rich dark brown curls was building a sandcastle a few meters away. He kind of looked like—

“Joel!” A voice called, and he ran toward a woman clad in a yellow sundress and hat. She had her father’s insistent habit of holding his head to the side, and my smile brightened her face. Marisol’s mouth was agape, and she held her hands to her chest. Milisa smiled at my grandson, who was no older than four and lightly pinched his cheek.

“What did I tell you about putting dead things in your sandcastles? If you see a fish leave it. You listen to your Mama, got it?”

He pouted, “Papi says it looks cool.”

She raised an eyebrow. "I'll have to talk to him about that." She kissed his cheek and placed her hat on top of his head before settling back under the umbrella. "You can continue building your sandcastle. No fish!" She yelled the last part as he ran off.

They were beautiful, especially Joel. He still had baby fat in his abdomen, but Marisol could tell where he was growing taller and thinning out a bit. She settled in the sand to watch her family. Marisol watched how the water splashed her grandson's little feet; her daughter's sun hat was too big for his little head, so he kept pushing it back before he gave up and threw it behind him. The beach water was cobalt blue and sparkled under the sun, the sand was light brown, and the clouds were just wisps in the sky. Marisol looked over to her daughter, who was looking off towards the left, probably waiting for Joel's father. Marisol began to walk the beach carefully, making sure she was out of their line of vision. Milisa gave up on waiting because she joined Joel near the water. Marisol knew this was her chance to leave a note for her. The note was specifically for her, and it was the words Marisol needed her to know. She felt it was reckless of her, but she didn't want to continue being careful when she was running out of time. Marisol doubted Milisa had looked for her when she had such a happy family, but maybe the note would help. She was the only person who could remember her. She was the only person who could care for her because, selfishly, Marisol needed her. It put a bad taste in Marisol's mouth to even think about the truth of that. She had never needed anyone. That was changing. She placed the note on the towel under the umbrella with a hasty sketch of a self-portrait, so she knew who it was from. Surely, she would recall what her mother looked like, even with a bad haircut and wrinkled eyes.

The older lady etched on the page was different from the mother she left sitting in a chair. Marisol felt confident she would recognize my art style if not my face. Just as a man was

approaching them, everything shrunk away, and Marisol barely caught a glimpse of her son-in-law before she returned to the present.

Marisol wondered how she would be in the future. She wondered about Milisa's reaction when she found the note and if she would come and find her. Marisol realized at that moment she was happier than she'd been in years. Marisol was proud of her daughter. Marisol never realized that her daughter was her biggest regret. Milisa was what needed to be fixed in Marisol's past and whom she wanted around the most. Marisol could not bring herself to care how much her picture interfered with the future because she had placed herself in it. Marisol was eager to implant herself in more future visions. Marisol needed to matter, exist, be acknowledged in some way, and be remembered.

My name is Marisol Vivar. I am 65 years old, and I have Alzheimer's disease. I have a daughter, a son-in-law, and a grandson. My birthday is July 13th. Today is November 2, 2016. Today is the first day of a new beginning for me.

Literary Connections & Analysis: Secrets of belief and release

In comparison to "Transience of Memory, Illusion of Time" is Helen Oyeyemi's "If a Book is Locked There's Probably a Good Reason for That Don't You Think" from a collection of short fiction, *What Is Not Yours Is Not Yours*. Oyeyemi centers her work on the motif of keys and locks, which also serve as a magical, fantastical element. The locks and keys work both literally and metaphorically to keep the character's secrets hidden from others that desire to unlock something that is not theirs to know or reveal. The magical element for "Transience of Memory, Illusion of Time" is the talisman that allows time travel. The main theme of this personal fiction is remembrance. For their comparisons, both stories use magic to correspond to the theme and

include a minority female character. To explain, Marisol's use of the gemstone talisman and her art helps her unlock her gift of time travel is similar Marisol is like a lock because she has kept herself locked away from the most important people in her life. Marisol begins to unlock secrets and revelations about herself. Unlike Marisol, who must unlock herself, the black protagonist in "If a Book is Locked," has an unnamed male narrator who unlocks her secret. Moreover, the secrets that are revealed offer belief to the impossible. The fantastical element in "If a Book is Locked," is the mystery and release of Eva's journal and what happens if it is opened; hence, the title of the short story is that if a book is locked, then it is locked for a good reason.

In relation to minority women characters and magic is the fictional works of Oyeyemi. Her fiction branches beyond her race and experiences to include diverse characters that captivate her readers. Oyeyemi is a Nigerian-British writer who has found herself by reading novels and writing for herself. Helen Shaw's article on Oyeyemi highlights her uniqueness in literature and the personal reasons she has become the writer she is today. An example of these personal reasons and topics that appear in her writing is how Oyeyemi experienced public assault and marginalization as a minority in London. Oyeyemi is highly aware of the disadvantages of being a minority and a female. Shaw reveals the awareness that Oyeyemi uses in her fiction and understands as a minority female by stating:

The first story the world told about Helen Oyeyemi was that she was a prodigy. A South London girl who had emigrated from Nigeria at the age of 4, she was inward-keeping, sometimes bullied, often desperately sad. As a teen, she endured bouts of clinical depression that she countered with books from the library. As a conversationalist and as an author, Oyeyemi is the queen of the sidelong glance, the misdirection, the parable that

can be taken two ways. She often seems on the verge of laughter, especially when speaking about things she takes very seriously. (Shaw)

Oyeyemi's writing offers a narrative for her experiences to relate to others. She does this so well because she directly relates to her subject matter concerning gender and race. Furthermore, she reveals her own need for escape through her characters and the use of the fantastical. Oyeyemi's work includes uncomfortable topics such as race, gender power struggles, or the complexity of human emotion and presence.

In "If a Book is Locked," Eva's race is made clear in the description at the beginning. The narrator states that Eva is black with a heart-shaped face, long eyes, and short hair (Oyeyemi 307). The gendered power struggles are presented in Eva having an affair with a married man but being the only one punished. Moreover, the complexity of human emotion and presence are presented in both Eva and the unnamed male narrator. Eva's presence is known before and after the adultery, even though she wishes to be invisible. The narrator states that the more disinterested Eva seems with her monosyllabic response and the way she does not reciprocate information causes her popularity to grow (314). This was before the crying wife and child came to their workplace (315), bringing even more unwanted attention to Eva. The narrator seeks to be seen and included but is ignored and used by his coworkers. Both characters have complex feelings about their roles at their jobs and socially; however, they are opposites. The most obvious example of this is how Eva is not the protagonist but has a name, while the male protagonist does not though he is the one who wants attention. He tells Eva that he is a loner but takes every opportunity to strike up a conversation with his coworkers. For instance, after Eva is targeted, the narrator, who has been just as interested in Eva as everyone else, chimes in, "Yes,

she should be grateful that people are still asking her out” (317) and is pleased when instead of being ignored his coworkers agree with him.

Comparably to this is my protagonist Marisol because of her complex emotions, like the characteristics Oyeyemi uses for Eva. Marisol is selfish and does not hold anyone else in the same regard that she holds herself. She is a proud and stubborn Colombian woman who is used to having what she wants. When she gets diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, her life is altered in every way she knows. Marisol is used to wanting and receiving the attention she wants to feel important. As her mental state declines because of her illness, she is being forgotten and left to wither away at a nursing home. This invisibility would be welcomed by Eva but is abhorred by Marisol. Considering this, Shaw states, “in several of Oyeyemi’s stories and novels, characters experience a kind of selective invisibility: Other people simply “miss” their presence, or mirrors don’t reflect them” (Shaw). Marisol’s choices and an unfortunate illness have led her to be forgotten and become invisible. Marisol’s work will not keep her memory alive, so she hopes her estranged daughter can. Eva is noticed by everyone, but she wishes to be invisible. Yet, the narrator wishes to fit in as the eyes and ears of the story because he is left out and invisible during most of the story. The language within “If a Book is Locked,” reveals how invisible he is. The unnamed male narrator admits, “She doesn’t seem to remember you even though she only left a few days ago; this says as much about you as it does about her” (Oyeyemi 324). The irony is the narrator tries unsuccessfully to include and add himself into conversations both with and against Eva, but it is Eva’s popularity that grows despite her standoffish nature. In contrast to Eva, Marisol has always wanted to be seen, and until she became ill, she was noticeable. Marisol is fading away in the sense that her memories are disappearing, and she has already faded from the minds of those who were around her. As a mother who did not think twice about her daughter

leaving, she suddenly has an awareness that children are part of one's legacy. Milisa is the only one to stop her from being invisible. Marisol looks at herself in the mirror to show that the woman reflecting back at her has not only withered in age but in importance as well. Marisol needs to be seen and wanted; it is unacceptable to her that her life should be lost, and there is no one to keep even her memory alive. Eva has a mystical journal book, and Marisol has her talisman. Marisol realizes too late what her husband and daughter did years ago: the attention and warmth family brings in more precious than any agenda.

Similar to my literary vision, Oyeyemi incorporates dark magical elements because of folklore and the lessons they provide. Other than the various other topics she includes, Shaw explains why the use of the fantastical is important to Oyeyemi. Shaw reveals that "Oyeyemi has said she is interested in folktales because she is drawn to their 'richness as source stories about the strangeness of thought and emotion.' Being interested in folk legends means she is, by definition, also interested in women in danger" (Shaw). "If a Book is Locked," begins as a normal story where the narrator sees Eva for the first time as she enters the office, but by the end of the story, it is clear Eva has ties to something otherworldly. Eva is a woman who wants to keep to herself and always keeps a locked journal in her purse. Eva is the object of every other worker's attention, and the goal of their objective is to get her to be their friend. All of this comes to an end when a woman and her child enter the workplace sobbing about Eva being an adulterer. Once the office realizes Eva has had relations with a married man, they shun and bully her, resulting in her quitting. The final straw was someone stealing Eva's journal but promising to return it if she resigned—which Eva does the very same day. The narrator is able to obtain her journal and offers to return it. The narrator's grandmother breaks into Eva's journal since they do not have the key or a known address or number for Eva. By this point in the story is where strict

reality bends. All the ink in the journal is violet colored and the narrator sees even when he writes in black pen the ink writes violet. After this, the narrator observes the eerie nature of the book:

[The] diary has been unfolding. Not growing, exactly, but it's sitting upright on your tabletop and seems to fill or absorb the air around it so that the air turns this way and that, like pages. In fact the book is like a hand and you, your living room, and everything in it are pages being turned this way and that. You go toward the book, slowly and reluctantly—if only you could close this book remotely—but the closer you get to the book the greater the waning of light in the room and it becomes more difficult to actually move, in fact it is like walking through a paper tunnel that is folding you in, and there is chatter all about you. (Oyeyemi 322)

This part of the story reveals that secrecy for the contents of the journal is not why it was kept under lock and key but to keep whatever ominous presence from Eva's past events from getting out. It seems the journal began taking on a mind of its own, and this changed Eva forever. Eva's change occurred because she was like the unnamed narrator who wanted attention and to be seen. However, after the events with the journal and being ridiculed for talking too much and trying too hard to fit in, Eva decided it was best to be invisible after all. All of this was a lesson for Eva and supports why she behaves the way she does. She is not a loner, and she does not want to be one, but she has learned to be cautious of those around her.

As shown in both short stories, the characters learn valuable lessons about life that change them or give them awareness about themselves through magic. Marisol has her talisman and her art. Her art helps her or pulls her into time travel before or after a journey. While it is

unclear why Eva wants to keep her journal close but never write in it, it is not unclear why Marisol holds onto her art. Moreover, Eva is young and healthy, while Marisol, in her deteriorating condition, does not have much else. Once old, and certainly if in poor health, many people become shadows of their previous selves if they do not have someone or something that is a light in their life. That light could be family or God. Many seek God once they are old even though we are to “remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them” (Eccl. 12:1). This verse came to mind while writing Marisol because so often many do not seek God until faced with their own morality. Marisol is far from satisfied with her life and serves as a warning to those on a similar path and to those who are facing their end alone.

Chapter IV. Concluding Thoughts: Purpose and Importance of topic

Importance of subject matter and further inspirations

All in all, the representation of gender and race is significant in fiction with authors and characters. These subjects are important to those who write and those who read fiction for multiple reasons. These reasons include a deeper representation of nonwhite characters, the inclusion of realistic female protagonists, and the voices that female authors relay through literary contexts. Concerning this and to further explain the inspiration for them topics is Erin Hamlyn. Hamlyn describes the representations of femininity in contemporary Hispanic and French Caribbean women's writing in her Ph.D. thesis. Hamlyn states that "through theoretical analysis, literary criticism, and social commentary, the messages women writers relay come together as a brilliant tapestry of meaning and influence. Caribbean women's writing is a paramount example of a movement generated by women that demands further attention" (12-13). Hamlyn helps clarify how all writing and inclusion are not the same. Just including a minority or a female character within a work of fiction does not include representation or give him or her a voice. The inclusion of these subjects must be accurate and relatable to be successful. Understanding these topics, especially through personal experiences, cannot be mimicked or

taught. Hamlyn, who focused on Hispanic and French Caribbean women, makes a valid point that women's writing demands further attention. This is not to say that past or current fiction is not useful or helpful, but there is a lack of authentic representation that can be included and explored on a much greater level.

Furthermore, Hamlyn goes on to explain that “this style of writing and the sociopolitical implications surrounding the publication of the female experience [functions] as a cooperative site of resistance. The role of collective imagination is a critical one, which in the Caribbean, draws on a rich tapestry of folkloric references that have likewise held extensive sociohistorical weight” (66). In this case, the representation these authors offer in their writing is more than to offer insight or relatability to readers but for readers to be aware of political factors as well. Also, representative writing includes folklore that showcases culture that helps readers with identity. The stories these female writers create tell stories about minority protagonists that reveal the realities others can connect with or educate themselves on. Regarding this, Hamlyn continues, “the ever-present themes of cultural mythology contribute to the fluid nature of any genre of female-authored short stories, and to the structuring of feminine experience through the female body” (Hamlyn 65). Hamlyn suggests that through the bold works of female writers, specifically in the Caribbean, there is a movement that alters the status quo, gives space to women, femininity, feminism that goes beyond learned materials and patterns and allowed for a field of writing that is more open. This matters because “from this writing there emerges a nuanced relationship between the writer—or one experiencing and relaying experience—and the reader—or one experiencing and receiving experience—that may exist outside of politicized institutions” (Hamlyn 66). Likewise, many things can be translated through a story and written words. Taking all of this, the articles about minority females and the supernatural and the various

authors' works into consideration is how I am inspired to write about these topics. Therefore, the topic of my writing combines three aspects of female protagonists, minorities, and folklore, and magical supernatural elements and means more than representation alone. My topic is influenced by great works that do not stop at representation but wish to bring political and social awareness to these cultural women and their lives.

The Role of a Biblical Worldview concerning my topic

As a Christian, the works I complete for God are important to me. By including characters that are physically or culturally similar to me, I give space and love to the unrepresented and unheard. In a subtle and interesting way, my fiction helps bridge the gaps between male or white authors and non-white female writers. As previously mentioned, and with the use of multiple examples, minority female writers use their work to tell stories that both include and create awareness for their culture or social, political, or emotional status. God is everywhere and with everyone, no matter their differences. I seek to contribute and encompass more than what has been written and read traditionally. I yearn to showcase and demonstrate the differences between women based on their cultures and any supernatural traditions or folklore. Each person's experiences are limited if they do not branch out to learn and entreat others. I believe God wants everyone to include and entreat as many people as they can, especially with kindness. Christian life has rules, guidelines, examples, and commandments for how people should live. The Bible informs believers of many of these attributes that are for all of His people. Since God is omnipresent and omnipotent, he is always present and not just for one particular race but for everyone. With this in mind, writing about minority female characters allows inclusion, so one particular type of writer and subject matter are not overpowering another.

Final Thoughts

In conclusion, the main point is to include narratives that symbolize nonwhite women for characters and authors. Thousands of books are printed annually in the United States, and less than half include main protagonists or are authored by someone who is neither male nor white. There should be a wide variety of fiction to choose from regardless of race or gender. This would be true representation because nonwhite female readers could read thousands of stories whose protagonists accurately represent who they are or real-world issues. Historically and presently, I have included examples of fiction that try to bridge this gap. It is not enough for the character to be a woman in fiction because the symbolization would be specifically a minority female protagonist by a minority female author. Books authored by men that are about male protagonists are not difficult to find. However, this type of fiction only represents a certain group, and a broad category, such as American fiction, should include many and various narratives. This includes the minority female protagonist and the corresponding author.

All things considered, the other point is the inclusion of folklore and fantastical elements within fiction to intrigue the reader while presenting real-world issues. Some real-world issues involve race, gender, social class, culture, and multiple other things. Folklore is based on culture but does not have to be used only by that particular culture because folklore stories are myths, legends, traditions, fables, etc. Folklore and elements of the fantastic that are anything out of the ordinary enhance a fictional story. Dozens of themes, both figurative and literal, are possible with the use of these elements. As previously mentioned, fiction can entertain and inform if written well. That is the goal when all three aspects of this thesis are combined: for each reader to be represented, to inform any reader who reads the story and to draw them in with compelling elements like ghosts, magic, powers, or adventure.

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