EVENT TITLE: "Yes, And": A Bisexual Exploration of Genre

EVENT DESCRIPTION: The publishing world often uses genre as a means of classifying and separating creative output. As useful as these classifications can be, they can also create silos within the literary world, systems of definition that rely on exclusionary criteria. Bisexual writers—writers whose sexuality is shaped by a rejection of exclusionary rhetoric—may feel particularly hemmed in by traditional genre categorization and driven to experiment across genre boundaries by hybridizing aesthetics and subverting convention. This panel will explore the unique approaches bisexual writers bring to the question of genre.

EVENT ORGANIZER & MODERATOR

- Rachel Cochran is the author of the novel The Gulf (HarperCollins, 2023) and associate editor of Machete, a literary creative nonfiction series at the Ohio State University Press. She is an assistant professor of creative writing at Marian University.

EVENT PARTICIPANTS:

- **Katie Schmid** is a 2023 National Endowment for the Arts Fellow in poetry. Her debut book, Nowhere, was published by University of New Mexico Press. She is an assistant professor of English at Ursinus College.

- **Zaina Arafat** is a queer Palestinian writer and the author of You Exist Too Much, which won a 2021 Lambda Literary Award and was named Roxane Gay's favorite book of 2020. She was also named a Champion of Pride by The Advocate. She teaches at Barnard College and is working on her second book.

- **SJ Sindu** is the award-winning author of the novels Blue-Skinned Gods and Marriage of a Thousand Lies, along with the short story collection The Goth House Experiment and the graphic novels Shakti and Talk Water (forthcoming). Sindu is an assistant professor of creative writing at VCU.

- **Katharine Coldiron** is the author of Ceremonials and Junk Film. Her essays and criticism have appeared in Ms., Conjunctions, the Washington Post, the Guardian, and elsewhere. She earned a BA in film studies and philosophy from Mount Holyoke and an MA in English from California State University Northridge.

OPENING REMARKS AND HOUSEKEEPING ANNOUNCEMENTS:

- Writing is often broken into a handful of basic genre categories—the primary of these being poetry, creative nonfiction, and fiction. These genres mark out territories, establishing basic qualifying criteria to let readers know what they’re about to read. These criteria build expectations in the reader: a reader of a poem will generally expect
that the piece will be in verse form, where line breaks and other forms spatial intentionality create movement and emphasis throughout the piece. But the existence of the prose poem helps to prove the truth: that genre, like language itself, is slippery and resists definitional certainty. Even so, in calling something a “prose poem,” a writer engages the reader’s expectations and gains effect in their defiance. In an identical piece—a flash essay or piece of flash fiction—the spatiality would read as neutral; in a prose poem, the intentionality of its prose formatting can inflect the piece powerfully. Indeed, often the only was a reader knows that something is a prose poem (rather than a flash essay or a piece of flash fiction) comes down to paratextual indicators: it appears in a book of poetry, or the writer or publisher has in some other way tagged it as a poem, flipping the light switch in the reader’s minds and ushering in all their genre expectations and its natural effects.

- All of this to illustrate one way in which working against genre expectations—even what can feel like the most obvious and important genre “rules” of writing, which are the territorial divisions between poetry, creative nonfiction, and fiction—can create powerful moments of purpose and resonance in a creative work. There are so many areas where genre territories adjoin each other, and where they can share qualities with one another. And there are even more borderlines to be transgressed when you consider that each of these three genres contains a multitude of genres of its own, such as the lyric, elegy, and tragedy of poetry; literary journalism, the hermit crab, and the lyric essay in creative nonfiction; and the many genres of fiction, like science fiction, fantasy, the mystery, the Western, the romance. And of course any one of these can break down further into what we call subgenres, such as fantasy splitting off into high fantasy, low fantasy, urban fantasy, not to mention steampunk, grimdark, sword and sorcery, Arthurian fantasy, and the list goes on and on.

- Genre can be helpful in many ways. Like any other labeling system, it increases visibility and access: genre labels help interested readers and writers to locate texts they wish to read, study, or emulate. For literary scholars, genre provides a narrowing lens that can yield valuable insights: tracking a genre’s development or evolution in relationship to cultural and historical changes can provide valuable insight into the moment (think, for instance, how communicative the “COVID novel” will be to future historians about the years we have all just lived through).

- But genre can also be limiting. This is perhaps inevitable when market forces in the publishing industry capitalize on genre so heavily—everything from a book’s title to its cover to its publicity campaign to the awards for which it qualifies tends to come with clear genre signifiers. But what about texts that aren’t interested in this clarity? And what is the experience of writers for whom the exclusionary rhetoric of genre definitions feels not only limiting but also irrelevant to the way they make sense of the world?

- I’ve long thought about my relationship to genre in the same lane as my relationship to sexuality. As a bisexual writer, I have a tendency to want to do away with categories
altogether: I write what I write, what I’m interested in writing, and I’m surprised when it’s done and readers tell me what it is. I organized this panel under the hopes that hearing musings on genre from four bisexual writers I admire—writers whose own work crosses, experiments with, and comments on genres in both direct and indirect ways—would help me to further explore what is for me one of the most delightful and mystifying parts of the writing, reading, and publishing processes. (Quick introductions of each of the panelists)

PARTICIPANT OPENING REMARKS, INITIAL THOUGHTS, OR READINGS:

• Katie: I’ve been thinking recently about how genre is a conservative idea meant to describe something that already exists and may or may not fit the writing itself neatly. Similar to the idea of bisexuality—a word which describes something messier, more queer, more complex and beautiful than the word itself is able to impart, as queer thinkers have pointed out. My approach to genre is similar—I don’t know if I understand it as a categorizing technique, but I do understand how it’s useful to marketing, and useful as a kind of shorthand to describe what should be and is inarticulable. When I write, I’m in conversation with both the category and what is inarticulable—both inform how I write, I think. Rainier Diana Hamilton is writing these really interesting queer essay-poems, some of which engage explicitly with bisexuality and its discontents; I’m currently looking to them as a guide for what’s possible in genre-bending. But just like queerness itself—coded, felt, unspoken or overt, joyful, and embodied, the somatic experience of reading and being alive as a queer person defies categorization, and is perhaps worth the effort of trying to articulate, all the same.

• Zaina: As an Arab-American writer, I think a lot about intersectionality, about characters who often defy categorization and who don’t fit into tidy boxes. To embody overlapping and seemingly contradictory identities is what makes for interesting, rich characters, and that intersectionality extends to sexuality. Just as I strive to represent intersectional characters that defy easy categorization in terms of these various identities, I also try and “intersectionalize” genre. To use forms and structures often associated with nonfiction, like braiding and vignettes, in my fiction, for example, or to employ the lyric in a novel. I think defying genre expectations is in some ways a form of resistance against oppressive categorization.

• Sindu: Like my colleagues have already said in different ways, genre to me is an artificial signifier. There’s nothing innate or inherent in genre. Genre simply reflects the ways in which Western literature has organized itself over the last few millenia, and especially in the past two centuries. So genre is something that has acquired meaning over repeated cycles of marketing and audience demand. Mary Shelley publishes *Frankenstein*, and we have a new genre, which then others copy or add to, and over the course of several
hundred years, we now have science fiction and horror. To me, genre is a slippery thing. I come up with the story first, and decide its genre second. I make the concept, figure out the right container for it, and then create. As a bisexual writer, and as an immigrant writer of color, this slipperiness is something I’m accustomed to in terms of my own identities, experiences, and expertise. In other words, my lived experience as a bisexual person of color means I’m acclimated to the liminal spaces between concrete things, and this perspective helps me to navigate slippery and changing genres.

• Katharine: The hyper-organized part of me is annoyed by hybrid books, because where does it go in the bookstore? What Dewey decimal number is it assigned? But the more I explore the liminal spaces between genre, the more I find that some stories can't be told in any other way. In general, I’m far more inspired and fired up by hybrid work, both reading and writing. Certainly when I wrote Ceremonials, which is a novella involving bisexuality and inspired by an album of music, I found that prose which felt like poetry or music served me and my characters far better than a normal register. Out There in the Dark, which is coming out in 2025, is a collection of essays that each involve memoir, film criticism, and fiction in order to evoke specific experiences -- specific states of mind. I still feel uncomfortable in liminal spaces, but I find that the more I chase down that discomfort, the better and more interesting the work is.

MODERATOR QUESTIONS:

1. First, I’d love to hear about your early relationship to genre. What genres first spoke to your or captivated you as young readers and writers?
2. What is your relationship to these genres now, both as a reader and as a writer?
3. Alternatively, were there any genres you had an innate dislike of as a reader? If so, why? And what are your relationships to these genres now?
4. How do you understand the concept of “queering” genre? And how does this apply in your work?
5. In what ways have you experienced genre categorization as a limiting factor?
6. The history of genre shows that it can be an immensely gendered space, not to mention often a racialized one. How have these aspects of genre affected you, as both a reader and a writer?
7. Who are the writers who influence you most in your relationship to writing genre?
8. What current writers are doing the most exciting things with genre?
9. New genres and subgenres are always being formed, growing, mixing, melding. Are there any new—or new-to-you—genres you’re excited to work in in your future writing?
10. How would you like to see the world of publishing or writing instruction evolve in relationship to genre?