Breaking down the traditional structures of screenplays in an innovative and progressive way, while also investigating the ways in which screenplays have been traditionally told, this book interrogates how screenplays can be written to reflect the diverse life experiences of real people.

Author Jess King explores how existing paradigms of screenplays often exclude the very people watching films and TV today. Taking aspects such as characterization, screenplay structure, and world-building, King offers ways to ensure your screenplays are inclusive and allow for every person’s story to be heard. In addition to examples ranging from *Sorry to Bother You* to *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, four case studies on *Killing Eve*, *Sense8*, *I May Destroy You*, and *Vida* ground the theoretical work in practical application. The book highlights the ways in which screenplays can authentically represent and uplift the lived experiences of those so often left out of the narrative, such as the LGBTQIA+ community, women, and people of color. The book addresses a current demand for more inclusive and progressive representation in film and TV and equips screenwriters with the tools to ensure their screenplays tell authentic stories, offering innovative ways to reimagine current screenwriting practice towards radical equity and inclusion.

This is a timely and necessary book that brings the critical lenses of gender studies, queer theory, and critical race studies to bear on the practice of screenwriting, ideal for students of screenwriting, aspiring screenwriters, and industry professionals alike.

**Jess King** is an Instructor of Screenwriting and Cinema Production at DePaul University, USA. Jess is an educator, scholar, and interdisciplinary filmmaker, teaching courses in screenwriting, independent television, and film analysis. King’s creative scholarship revolves around frameworks for reimagining screenwriting for inclusion and social justice.
INCLUSIVE SCREENWRITING FOR FILM AND TELEVISION

Jess King
For Julie
CONTENTS

Acknowledgements ix

Introduction 1

PART I
Towards a Critique of Screenwriting 13

1 Screenplay Manuals and the Homogenization of the Imagination 15

2 Reimagining Character 27

3 Rethinking the Role of Conflict 40

4 Changing the Narrative (Structure) 49

5 On World-Building 60

PART II
Towards an Inclusive and Intersectional Practice of Screenwriting 71

6 From Killing Eve to an Eve Who Kills 73

7 Queer and Trans World-building in Sense8 85
Contents

8 The Generative Power of Paradigm Destruction in *I May Destroy You* 100

9 The Explicit and Specific Politics of *Vida* 114

Conclusion: A Way Forward 132

References 140
Index 147
I am immensely grateful for the thoughtful feedback, enthusiastic encouragement, and generous support of many of my colleagues at DePaul University, including David Gitomer, Dustin Goltz, Anna Hozian, Susan McGury, and Brad Riddell, all of whom read and gave feedback on early drafts of this book. I’d also like to thank Fatou Samba for our many generative conversations about problematic media representation and how screenwriters can do better to upend it.

Throughout this process I’ve been consistently delighted by my students’ earnest engagement with and practical application of the ideas presented throughout this book in classes like The Female Gaze, Writing the Independent Television Series, and Queer(ing) Narratives. Thank you to Dominique Prince-Points and Karan Sunil for talking with me about writing characters who code-switch. And I’m overwhelmingly grateful to Liv Krusinski and Tessa Melvin, who, as undergraduate research assistants, provided limitless questions, additional relevant examples, and thoughtful suggestions from a student perspective.

In addition to my colleagues and students, I’d like to thank Claire Margerison and Sarah Pickles at Routledge for being champions of this book and demystifying the publishing process with grace and kindness.

And, finally, to Julie, my love. I could not have done this without you. You encouraged me every step of the way. You read and commented on so many drafts without ever acting like it was a chore. But I know it was. Thank you.
Over the past decade, there has been a shift in on-screen and behind-the-scenes representation in popular entertainment. Along with the rise of affordable technology for the production and distribution of independent film and television, the generative power of social media movements like #MeToo, #TimesUp, and #OscarsSoWhite has forced Hollywood to reckon with longstanding issues around the representation of women, BIPOC, queer and trans folks, disabled people, and more. At the forefront of efforts towards equity and inclusion on television—where some of the most noticeable strides are being made—are show runners like Steven Canals (Pose), Michaela Coel (Chewing Gum and I May Destroy You), Ava DuVernay (Queen Sugar and When They See Us), Tanya Saracho (Vida), and Phoebe Waller-Bridge (Fleabag and Killing Eve), all of whom have been lauded for centering series on women with intersectional identities, hiring mostly female and/or of color directors, and creating unprecedentedly inclusive writing rooms. Further, their work has been held up as exemplary of progressive female/of color/queer and trans representation.

Though more inclusive media now exists for audiences hungry for diverse representation, the Comprehensive Annenberg Report on Diversity in Entertainment shows that we have a long way to go in both on-screen and behind-the-scenes representation. In an examination of major studio releases and television series, the report finds that racial, gender, and LGBTQ+ parity is much less than what anecdotal evidence suggests, most likely on account of the increased volume of media production for the streaming market, which yields proportionately more media created by and focused on white men. From film to broadcast to streaming, the ratio of males-to-females with speaking parts is 2:1, and the numbers get worse for LGBTQ+ people and people of color. On television, for instance, only “26.6% of series regulars were from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups;” less than 2% of characters were identifiable as LGBTQ+, and of those, most were white.1

In terms
of LGBTQ+ representation, GLAAD’s 2020 “Where We Are on TV Report” shows additional declines in the area of queer representation overall, which was expected due to pandemic-related series cancellations. For example,

of the 773 series regular characters scheduled to appear on broadcast scripted primetime television this season, 70 (9.1 percent) are LGBTQ+. This is a decrease from the previous year’s record high percentage of 10.2 percent, and the first season to see a decrease since the 2013–14 report.

This dip in numbers is consistent across broadcast, cable, and streaming platforms. Behind the scenes, in terms of screenwriters, the numbers are equally bleak. The WGAW’s 2020 Inclusion Report shows that when broken down by ethnicity, “Latinx, Black, and Asian-American Pacific Islander screenwriters have less representation relative to their share of the overall U.S. population—and Native/Indigenous and Middle Eastern screenwriters have almost no representation at all.”

All is not lost, however, as identifiable gains behind the scenes are occurring. It’s simply that when the data shows increases in representation, they are usually modest. As the WGA reports “[i]n T.V., women and people of color held 5% more jobs than in the previous year. In motion pictures, women gained 4% and people of color gained 2%.”

While small improvements are worth celebrating, the overall dominance of white, cis, straight male-centered media remains largely unchanged. It seems that despite the critical success of series like Fleabag, Pose, and Insecure—and the ways in which those series and others like them have fostered sorely-needed discussions around the female gaze, casting trans actors in trans roles, and adjusting cinematographic practices to light actors with dark skin—the majority of work produced in Hollywood still lacks substantial diversity and inclusion in casting and creation. Visible on- and off-screen representation in the form of writers, directors, actors, and producers with traditionally marginalized identities, however, is only one part of the equation, and focusing too heavily on the quantity of visible representation creates additional issues. As Kristen J. Warner argues in relation to casting, when the focus is on the quantity of visual signifiers, “the degree of diversity [becomes] synonymous with the quantity of difference rather than with the dimensionality of those performances.” A focus on quantity thus yields what Warner terms “plastic representation,” where “any representation that includes a person of color is automatically a sign of success and progress,” which fosters a studio culture “whereby hiring racially diverse actors becomes an easy substitute for developing new complex characters.” Essentially Warner’s argument exposes that a fixation on quantity short-changes a deeper look into the quality of representation. Quality, in this case, refers to the depth, complexity, and nuance afforded to a character in order to make that character feel genuine and coherent—as opposed to “plastic” or artificial—much of which is the purview of the screenwriter. Thus, missing from discussions of equity and inclusion in the industry is an engagement with how industry-wide acceptance of traditional screenwriting norms and story development creates barriers to telling nuanced and complex stories by and about marginalized people.
Favoring qualitative measures over quantitative measures, however, can yield equally fraught results. Too often, conversations about quality stop at identifying problematic stereotypes or tropes and categorizing various representations as either good or bad. When we focus solely on “positive” representation in the form of characters with marginalized identities holding significant if not lead roles in which they are shown as palatable and respectable (the Black doctor, the married gay person with children, the female CEO), we may chip away at long-standing problematic stereotypes perpetuating white supremacy, heteronormativity, misogyny, classism, and the like; but if we want to upend those systemic biases, we’d be wise to plumb deeper into the ways that storytelling paradigms perpetuate the dominant culture. As Jack Halberstam argues, “positive” representation is often assimilationist and, therefore, just as troubling as “negative” or stereotypical representation because the “positive” representation serves to mimic and reinforce the status quo by supporting its values. This means that even when a media text depicts “positive” images of marginalized subjects, it may do so “without necessarily producing new ways of seeing or a new inscription of the social subject in representation.” Simply put, Halberstam acknowledges that queer people and others without dominant subject positions often think, behave, and live in vastly different ways, and when representation of those types of characters don’t honor that, it erases alternative ways of living and being. Additionally, in relation to Black cultural production, Michelle Wallace contends that the fleetingness of “positive” depictions of Black characters in comparison to larger racist narratives that saturate the culture means that positive images of Black characters amount to “a temporary reversal of terms—like a media version of Sadie Hawkins Day—and not only don’t challenge racism but may in fact corroborate it.” Too often “positive” representation disciplines and assimilates marginalized subjects to be in line with the status quo, which ultimately serves to make those characters palatable to white audiences and reinforce normativity. As Racquel J. Gates argues, media texts that are praised for presenting “positive” images are more likely to be those that bear resemblance to “proper” (e.g., white) films and television shows as far as the scenarios, characters, and behaviors that they portray, while “negative” texts are identifiable as such via their distance from those standards. While this is by no means a comprehensive look at the complexities and controversies of the “positive images debate,” what Gates, Halberstam, and Wallace lay bare is the way qualitative approaches keep viewers, critics, and creators mired in a playground designed to favor the status quo. By moving away from the “positive images debate” that consumes so much of media studies and popular criticism, it becomes possible to enter a space more akin to transformative and healing justice. A transformative politics invested in healing and human dignity asks us to move beyond “strategies built upon the possibility of incorporation and assimilation” because they unjustly make the status quo accessible “for more privileged members.
of marginalized groups, while the most vulnerable in our communities continue to be stigmatized and oppressed.”11 Transformative and inclusive storytelling practices, therefore, must be suspicious of assimilating characters with marginalized identities into traditional screen narratives, lest they become normalized, disciplined, and more in line with cis, white, heterosexist, patriarchal values.

Privileging quantitative and qualitative analysis over structural analysis risks obscuring the foundational issues that undergird harmful representation. Put another way, the focus on the number of marginalized characters represented, alongside whether or not those representations are “positive,” does not address important structural questions around who created those characters and how the paradigmatic requirements of screenplay structure shape character, world, and story in particular ways. When the creative process is left unexamined, we lose an opportunity to parse out the ideological investments of creators along with the ideological implications of their creative choices, not the least of which impacts how audiences and culture-makers perceive and understand screen stories, as well as what is recognized as a legitimate film or television series.

During the 2020 awards season, for example, some media critics lamented the lack of recognition for Greta Gerwig’s lavish and clever adaptation of Little Women, Ava DuVernay’s scathing and deeply moving series vindicating the Central Park Five When They See Us, and Lulu Wang’s crowd-pleasing The Farewell, among many other critically acclaimed and financially successful films and series helmed by marginalized creators. Instead, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and the Hollywood Foreign Press Association—in a move that seemed oddly regressive considering prior recognition for films like Moonlight (2017) and Get Out (2018)—rewarded old standbys, exemplified by epically long and antiquated tales featuring white men brutalizing one another throughout history in films like 1917, The Irishman, and Once Upon a Time in Hollywood. Progressive-minded critics scratched their heads in wonder: how could the Academy not see that Hustlers was as deserving as The Irishman? Though enigmatic, I argue that the question contains the answer: they can’t see it because they can’t see it. And they can’t see it because—as I will demonstrate throughout this book—the signifying practices at the heart of screenwriting are designed to produce stories by, for, and about straight, white able-bodied men such that when films and series don’t do that, they become at least somewhat illegible. In much the same way that heteronormativity thrives through the unspoken assumption that homosexuality is a poor imitation of heterosexuality, films made by women, Black people, folks of color, queer and trans people, and more are seen as “shadow[s] of the real.”12 Therefore, when a film is made by and about women—even if they’re also white and straight—it’s much harder for audiences to accept that it’s a viable, serious, awardable screen story. Often films and series made by marginalized creators are glossed over, or, as Lili Loofbourow argues in relation to stories by and about women, they’re dismissed by what she calls the “male glance.” For Loofbourow, in a nod to Laura Mulvey’s work around the “male gaze,” the “male glance” results from the assumption that “we don’t expect female [or other marginalized] texts to have universal things to
Therefore, we shrug them off, assuming that there is nothing to see, no deep insights into our collective humanity. This is how Hustler’s becomes a “Chick Flick” and The Irishman gets nominated for ten Academy Awards. If we want to improve representation in both quantity and quality, therefore, we must engage in a sustained interrogation and upending of the hegemonic storytelling norms that perpetuate the idea that certain stories are originary, “proper,” and “real” while others are derivative and/or too “niche.”

One of the primary purposes of this book is to supplement quantitative and qualitative media analysis with structural analysis that examines the paradigmatic foundations of screenwriting, the identities of those writing film and television, as well as those holding the line on the rules that govern both. Thus, this book is, in part, about perspective and identity. As a queer filmmaker and professor of screenwriting, I’m often frustrated by the ways that narrative constraints like three-act structure and the hero’s journey—with their lock-step patterning of plot points, midpoint reversals, and final resolutions—limit not only the types of stories that tend to be told, but the possibilities for representation within those stories. The standard screenwriting paradigms are not only inherently masculine—most obviously marked by Campbell’s Hero with a Thousand Faces—but straight, in terms of linearity, causal reproductive logics, and structures of conflict that uphold binaries, which makes it difficult to create characters with distinctly queer subjectivities who embark on distinctly queer journeys. Additionally, common strategies for character-building such as psychological realism, individualized subjectivity, and transformative agency are based upon long-standing notions of the universal white male that do not easily map onto marginalized characters and, therefore, might not offer the best strategies for telling the stories of people who have long been stereotyped or erased for existing outside of the status quo.

To be clear, when I address identity, I am not referring to the individual properties of a person or character. Rather, in line with critiques of identity as too binaristic and tied to “forms of state-enforced identification and recognition” that “collapse, individualize, and homogenize both experience and meaning,” I consider identity and affinity to refer to how one’s gender, race, sexuality, ability, and more interact with the familial, social, economic, historical, and political context one lives in. Further, I consider that the relationship between one’s identity and social context impacts how one moves in and is moved by the world. This is not identity as individuality, brand, or commodity, but as immensely complex, deeply personal, and irrevocably social.

This book grapples with the ways identity informs—but does not determine—one’s material lived experience and worldview and how that manifests in and can be used to understand and challenge the storytelling paradigms we have come to rely on in terms of character-building, world-building, and narrative structure. Because much of this book focuses on under- and mis-represented characters, it’s important to recognize that not all people who share facets of their identity are the same or experience the world in the same way. Since identity is relational, there are no monolithic examples that can account for the experiences of all people within
an affinity group. This means that though I’ve chosen a range of intersectional examples to work from, they do not speak to or for all those who might share similar affinities, nor are my examples comprehensive. Notably missing from this book is a significant discussion of the representation of disabled people in film and television, partly because there are still few strong examples of film and television work by and starring disabled people. One can look at the discourse around Sia’s ill-conceived film *Music* to gain an understanding of what people with disabilities want in terms of presence and participation. Similarly, while there is a vibrant and varied independent global Indigenous film community, there are very few people holding Indigenous identity on-screen or in writing and directing roles within mainstream Hollywood. At present, Taika Waititi is the most prominent Indigenous creator making his way around Hollywood, having recently directed high-budget Marvel films and the Oscar-nominated *Jojo Rabbit* (2019). His FX series *Reservation Dogs* (2021) with Sterlin Harjo might be the only television series with Indigenous people at every level of production unlike the Peacock series *Rutherford Falls* (2021), which left many Indigenous audiences disappointed in its focus on a central white male character despite an Indigenous-focused writers’ room. Put simply, I have not included all identities equally in this book, partly due to the lack of good examples of inclusive and intersectional work and partly due to the lens of my own identities.

That said, from my experience as a white, non-binary lesbian, I can speak most thoughtfully on issues related to gender and sexuality. In laying the groundwork for how the cis, white, male perspective came to be embedded in screenwriting, one of my hopes is that new paths will emerge to explore how screenwriting norms impact people who sit at other intersections of identity. If not to tell truer stories about those with shared affinities, then at least less harmful ones. My hope is that a sustained focus on race, gender, sexuality, and more in the field of screenwriting opens a space for critical intervention in the ongoing systemic oppression and discrimination exacerbated by Hollywood narratives, and fosters new practices that center the life stories, experiences, and unique subjectivities of marginalized people. This moves us beyond “diverse” and “plastic” representation and allows us to imagine new possibilities for how identity, agency, and subjectivity are formulated and codified within film and television.

**Methodology: Towards a Radically Equitable and Inclusive Cultural Imaginary**

At the root of this book lies a fundamental conviction that all of life is deeply connected and relational, that to flourish along with the planet and one another, we must make profound shifts in how we relate to one another, the Earth, and ourselves. Our current cultural, economic, political, and social system—based on white supremacist, cis-sexist, heteronormative, predatory capitalist logics and marked by massive income inequality, perpetual war, rabid anti-intellectualism, assaults against reproductive rights, the erasure of disability and aging, climate