



THE **VIDA** COUNT: ON **DISABILITY/DIFFERENCE/IMPAIRMENT**

Why is it important that the VIDA Count to survey women writers with disabilities or impairments?

VIDA believes in the importance of intersectionality in trying to gain a broader and more complex understanding of women in literary arts. Writers with disabilities and writers with impairments face obstacles and barriers that other women may not, and it is important to identify and acknowledge how these obstacles, including invisibility, access, and bias against them, make writing careers more challenging.

What do the numbers tell us in the most recent Disability VIDA Count?

The numbers tell us that women writers with disabilities and impairments are not being published widely by major journals and book reviews. Everyone's voices should be heard in some measure from a variety of publishing platforms.

How did you arrive at the identity categories in the Disability VIDA Count?

In compiling the survey categories for the Disability VIDA Count, we consulted with multiple sociologists and activists. And, once we agreed upon identity categories, we spent extensive time speaking with members within the community to formulate the questions that would best represent those identities.

What is the difference between a disability and an impairment? Why do people with a similar issue identify differently?

Disability and *impairment* may sound the same, but they are different. An impairment is the loss or difference of all or part of a function of the mind or body. A disability is the loss or restriction of function as a result of that impairment. Among disability studies scholars and activists, disability is viewed as not only loss or restriction of function, but it also includes the social ramifications of impairment.

Not all people with impairments identify as disabled, as outlined in the definition above and/or because of personal choice.

Why do you include issues that don't seem like disabilities to me, like long-term illnesses or cognitive differences?

Not all disabilities and impairments are obvious or visible. A long term illness, such as cancer or cystic fibrosis could seriously limit a writer's ability to participate fully in the literary scene, for reasons ranging from not enough energy to submit work to publications to being too immune-compromised to attend a conference. Cognitive differences, such as dyslexia, autism or bipolar disorder, are similarly less outwardly obvious but can also affect writing, promoting, educational and networking capabilities.

Why do you make a distinction between congenital and acquired disabilities?

It is important to note whether a disability is congenital or acquired because the effect on, and challenges to, a writer's career may vary because of it. For example, a writer with a newly acquired disability might have had decades of able-bodied privilege and gained success and connections more easily acquired with those privileges. A writer with a congenital disability, on the other hand, has had more time to live with the challenges a disability might bring and might feel more ease with requesting access or other accommodations.

What can we do to be more mindful and inclusive of disabled writers?

Everyone can **be mindful of ableist language** and accessibility issues. Remember, accessibility goes beyond wheelchair ramps and might also include assistant dogs, closed captions, recording devices for lectures or readings, braille editions of magazines, submission systems that are accessible for those with cognitive or visual impairments, accommodations at readings and conferences for those dealing with sensory overload, and more. Everyone can be vocal about including writers with impairments and disabilities.

It's okay to talk about and advocate for these issues; just remember not to speak over or for a writer with a disability or impairment. Ableism disempowers people with disabilities and impairments by assuming they can't do or understand things, and that they deserve "pity" for being less fortunate; don't reinforce this attitude. Also remember that a lot of disabilities are "invisible" and sometimes people with disabilities are closeted about it because of the stigma.

Writers and readers can be mindful of what they are reading and of their community. Seek out writers with disabilities or impairments, demand access for those in the community who need it, and be mindful of ableist language. If you participate in a conference or teach at a school that has no faculty or panels/classes on disability, make some noise about it! Review books by disabled writers.

Teachers can be mindful of what they are reading and what they are teaching. Include disabled writers on your syllabi and among your guest speakers. Make sure your classroom and any out-of-classroom events are accessible to all. Discuss issues of disability and ableism among your students and use disability positive texts and speakers to challenge ableist attitudes and assumptions.

Editors can seek out disabled writers. Read more widely and solicit writers from the disabled community. Make sure your submissions process and publication are accessible to all.

Wordgathering is a terrific resource for writers, readers, teachers, and editors who rightly wish to expand their reading lists to include writers with disabilities.

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VIDA

Women in Literary Arts

THE VIDA COUNT: ON TRANSGENDER WRITERS

Why is it important that the VIDA Count survey for trans women writers?

VIDA believes in the importance of intersectionality in trying to gain a broader and more complex understanding of women in literary arts. Trans women, transgender, and genderqueer writers face obstacles and barriers that others may not, including transphobia, transmisogyny, cissexism, discrimination in jobs, housing, and medical coverage, and a continuing widespread lack of education about trans issues and trans history among cisgender readers who represent 99.5 - 99.8% of the population. It is important to acknowledge how these obstacles, including invisibility and bias against trans writers, make writing careers more challenging. These issues are so important to us that we published an Open Letter in 2013 and, with our 2013 VIDA Count, began counting an inclusive “transgender” category among writers in our data breakdown. The 2015 Intersectional Survey seeks to further specify particular identity categories, notably introducing the category of “trans women” because these writers have historically tended to fall through the cracks between sex and gender in feminist discussions about visibility, representation, and the valuable activist pursuit of expanding options beyond the gender binary.

What do the numbers tell us about the most recent trans women VIDA Count?

The numbers tell us that trans women writers are not being published widely by major journals and book reviews—and often, not at all. Everyone’s voices should be heard in some measure from a variety of publishing platforms

How did you arrive at the identity categories in the trans women VIDA Count?

In compiling the survey categories for the Trans VIDA Count, we consulted with multiple sociologists and trans authors. And, once we agreed upon identity categories, we spent extensive time speaking with members within the community to formulate the questions that would best represent those identities.

Why do people with a similar issue identify differently or have different embodied manifestations of their sex or gender?

Trans and genderqueer lives can be complex and varied. One may approach them from the perspective of how people identify, one may approach them from the perspective of how people transition, or one may look at the overlap between these two groups. It is very difficult to find a single definition of the “trans umbrella” that suits everyone perfectly. Some people begin from assumptions of “binary vs nonbinary,” some begin from assumptions of “transgender vs cisgender” (or “transsexual vs cissexual”), and others have a perspective on gender that incorporates some degree of overlap between these categories. A survey such as ours is just an initial step towards making different categories of trans authors more visible in the literary world, in an as inclusive way as possible.

How is this count related to recent widespread publicity in the media associated with “The Transgender Tipping point?” Are you being trendy or jumping on some kind of bandwagon?

The commonly assumed idea that trans and genderqueer literature didn't exist in the past is an illusion, and we are accustomed to accepting this illusion because cissexual and cisgender authors were trying to write it in place of trans people. Well-connected and established cissexual and cisgender authors in the publishing industry have for a long time produced and celebrated texts with characters that blended or crossed genders without having to explain how such texts related to the lived experiences of transgender people or authors. This phenomenon tended to reduce the embodied experience of actual transgender authors and people to a set of mere metaphors and textual effects, and it is part of a larger societal misunderstanding in which trans people's identities are misunderstood as a symptom of other cultural phenomena. But in reality, trans and genderqueer authors have actually existed in some form at least since the middle of the twentieth century, and many are now only starting to become visible in the wake of “The Transgender Tipping Point” announced by *Time Magazine* in 2014. We are simply stepping up to recognize and celebrate their continued presence by trying to document actual numbers in major publications.

What is your policy with regard to counting male and masculine-identified writers?

Because VIDA seeks to bring attention to misogyny, discrimination, and other obstacles that women writers face in contemporary literature, VIDA does not count men in our survey. We therefore decided not to count writers who identify as trans men because our assumption was that they benefit from male privilege and get taken more seriously by publications to which they submit their work. However, because the way that people identify and live as trans can be complex, we did include a “transmasculine” category that was counted in the survey.

Why are two-spirit writers, intersex writers, and agender writers not yet reflected in this year's VIDA Count?

For this year's Count, we included a blank space in the survey where respondents could write in their identification if it differed from the existing survey options. We did not explicitly include options listed for Two-spirit, Intersex, and Agender writers because surveying these identities involved some complexities we still need to figure out. With regard to Two Spirit: given that our survey requests how writers identify as variables which are only later cross-referenced, and given that it would be problematic for a white person or someone without native ancestry to identify as “Two Spirit,” we would need to design a survey that would cross-reference gender and race earlier in the process, a challenge we will work toward in future. With regard to intersex: we debated how to most effectively include this category, but were not able to reach an agreement. Some writers who are transgender have an intersex condition, but some writers who are intersex do not see themselves as “transgender.” There are also different types of intersex identities, some of which are more common and some of which are rare. We aim to discuss this category in more detail with experts and work toward including intersex writers in as appropriate and respectful a way as possible in future VIDA Counts. With regard to agender, no respondents to the survey explicitly wrote in that they identified as agender this year but we plan to include the option in future surveys.

How do you count writers with multiple or fluid gender identities?

For the purposes of this survey, we have included the categories “genderqueer”, “nonbinary” and “genderfluid” for writers who identify along these lines. The notion of writers who have more than one gender identity gets complicated because some of these writers frame what they do as drag, and some refer to themselves as cisgender. In cases where a writer goes by a different gender in their professional life than they do in their personal life, we have counted them based on their professional identities and presentations.

What can we do to be more mindful and inclusive of trans women writers?

Everyone can be mindful of transphobic, transmisogynistic, or cissexist language and assumptions. Everyone can do their own “transgender 101” research online to learn about how to treat trans and genderqueer people respectfully in professional situations. Everyone can be vocal about the need to include trans and genderqueer writers in journals, reading series, and social groups.

Writers and readers can be mindful of what they are reading and of their communities. Seek out trans and genderqueer writers, demand inclusion for those in the community who need it, and be mindful of transphobic language. If you participate in a conference or teach at a school that has no trans or genderqueer faculty or no panels/classes on trans and genderqueer issues, make some noise about it! In feminist conferences, literary events, or professional gatherings, trans women should be included and celebrated because they are women. Review books by trans and genderqueer writers.

Teachers can be mindful of what they are reading and what they are teaching. Include trans and genderqueer writers on your syllabi and among your guest speakers. Make sure your classroom and any out-of-classroom events are welcome to all. Discuss trans and genderqueer issues among your students and use trans-positive texts and speakers to challenge transphobic attitudes and assumptions. It’s okay to talk about and advocate for these issues; just remember not to speak over or for trans women writers.

Editors can seek out trans and genderqueer writers. Read more widely and solicit writers from the trans community.

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VIDA

Women in Literary Arts

THE VIDA COUNT: ON SEXUALITY

Why is it important that VIDA Count survey for sexuality?

VIDA believes in the importance of intersectionality in trying to gain a broader and more complex understanding of women in literary arts. Non-heterosexual writers face obstacles and barriers that other women may not, and it is important to identify and acknowledge how these obstacles, including invisibility and bias against them, make writing careers more challenging.

What do the numbers tell us in the most recent Sexuality VIDA Count?

The numbers tell us that non-heterosexual women writers are not being published widely by major journals and book reviews. Everyone's voices should be heard in some measure from a variety of publishing platforms.

How did you arrive at the identity categories in the Sexuality VIDA Count?

In compiling the survey categories for the Sexuality VIDA Count, we consulted with multiple sociologists and activists. And, once we agreed upon identity categories, we spent extensive time speaking with members within the community to formulate the questions that would best represent those identities.

Why do you include sexuality categories I've never heard of, like "pansexual" and "asexual"?

Just because you haven't heard of a sexuality category does not mean it does not exist! All writers deserve to be heard and counted.

Why does sexuality, which seems like a private matter, need to be counted? How could it affect someone's ability to be published or reviewed? What does sex have to do with writing?

Historically, people who are not heterosexual have been discriminated against in regards to hiring, housing, marriage, and many other basic human rights others take for granted. The writing community is no exception to this discrimination. Counting sexuality is not about sex; it is about ensuring that, no matter how a writer lives or loves, they have the same opportunities as anyone else.

Now that there is marriage equality, aren't things basically equal for gay and straight people? Why bother to count this at all?

While the Supreme Court's ruling on marriage equality was a great step, there is far more work to be done in this country and in the world to ensure equality for people of all sexualities. In the writing community, there is still disparity between heterosexual and non-heterosexual writers in terms of access, opportunity, and publishing.

What can we do to be more mindful and inclusive of non-heterosexual writers?

Everyone can be mindful of homophobic language and assumptions. Everyone can bring up issues that affect non-heterosexual writers in conversation, at work, and with their peer groups. Everyone can interrupt homophobic comments when they come across them.

Don't assume the sexuality of anyone, regardless of appearance or anything else.

It's okay to talk about and advocate for these issues; just remember not to speak over or for a non-heterosexual writer.

Writers and readers can be mindful of what they are reading and of their community. Seek out writers with non-dominant sexuality identities. If you participate in a conference or teach at a school that has no faculty or panels/classes that include non-heterosexual writers, make some noise about it! Review books by writers who identify as other than heterosexual.

Teachers can be mindful of what they are reading and what they are teaching. Include non-heterosexual writers on your syllabus and among your guest speakers. Make sure your classroom and any out-of-classroom events are welcome to all. Discuss issues of sexuality and homophobia among your students and use texts and invite speakers to challenge negative or harmful attitudes and assumptions.

Editors can seek out non-heterosexual writers. Read more widely and solicit writers from the non-heterosexual community. Make sure your submissions process and publication are open and welcome to all.

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VIDA

Women in Literary Arts

THE VIDA COUNT: ON RACE, ETHNICITY & WRITERS OF COLOR

Why is it important that VIDA Count survey for race?

VIDA believes in the importance of intersectionality, working toward a broader and more complex understanding of women in literary arts. Women of color face obstacles that white women may not, and it is important to identify and acknowledge how these obstacles, including invisibility and bias against them, make writing careers more challenging.

What do the numbers tell us in the most recent Women of Color VIDA Count?

The numbers tell us that women of color are not being published widely by major journals and book reviews. Everyone's voices should be heard in some measure from a variety of publishing platforms.

How did you arrive at the identity categories in the Women of Color VIDA Count?

In compiling survey items and response categories for the WOC VIDA Count, we consulted with research academics in humanities fields (sociology, psychology and gender studies) and activists. We agreed upon a working set of race and ethnicity categories that were informed by the previous year's participant responses and that moved away from US-centric Census options. We sought feedback from community members to formulate how to best represent those identities as response options.

Why do you include race categories I've never heard of and allow women to write in their racial identities?

We recognize that women writers are not limited to categorizations sourced in the US. That is, the race and ethnicity labels developed within The States do not hold true for persons who are born in other countries. Our goal is to accommodate identities, including those with which we are unfamiliar given our homegrown designations.

Often people assign race to others based on appearance -- or even behavior -- as part of an inherent desire to categorize. This kind of assigning denies individuals their origins and thrusts upon them a social construct with its politics, values and rankings. Further, assigning these categories can foster stereotypes, privilege one group over another, determine the distribution of preferential or disparaging treatment, and has implications on disparities in protections, safety and opportunities. We want to feature the nuance in race and ethnicity when discussing its ties to publishing. White and black races encapsulate a variety of ethnic backgrounds, for example, but are not binaries. They are two of dozens of racial identifications if not more, and this impacts visibility and opportunities.

In our effort to more thoroughly capture survey participants' designations, readers will see the VIDA community grappling with methods that capture any number of lineages instead of broad groupings informed by public perception. . It is a method decision that might impact our capacity to compare racial and ethnic outcomes across the early years of this count, but this refinement process holds true to our intent to understand participants' complex demographic identities. For example, this year's WOC VIDA Count did not include a category for Jewish, Muslim or other identities that are simultaneously ethnic, cultural and religiously. As a result of participants adding "Jewish" to the open-ended "Other" response category, we decided that this category will be added next year to accommodate women across continents of Jewish (ethnic) ancestry. Thus, we are still crafting a standard set of race and ethnicity categories that we feel are appropriate for annual use.

We are open to discussing with experts in more detail as to how we might incorporate these complex identities into future VIDA Counts.

Why does race, which seems like a complex concept, need to be counted? How could it affect someone's ability to be published or reviewed? What does race have to do with writing?

Resources, rewards, safety and access have been historically reserved for a socially dominant group—the white American population. Groups external to white Americans were purposefully and lawfully excluded from this system, causing great deficits between whites and nonwhites in hiring, housing, marriage, legal protections and basic human rights. The writing community context is no exception to this discrimination. Counting authors' races and ethnicities allows us to note where women writers of color are absent and informs discussions on what causes such omissions; whether causes are conscious or unconscious bias; historical publishing practices that leave writers of color feeling unwelcome and therefore implicitly discourage submissions; and editing practices that marginalize and send writers of color to submit elsewhere. It also allows us to identify and explore where other identity facets, such as class or sexuality, intersect and impact perceptions of race.

Now that we have a black president, aren't things basically equal for white people and people of color? Why bother to count this at all?

Racial equity is a goal yet unmet in this country. Environmental, educational, income and health disparities exist along race demarcations, for example. While race-based discrimination is generally illegal now, there is far more work to be done in this country and in the world to ensure that disparities are actively minimized between groups. In the writing community, there are remarkable gaps in access, opportunity, and publishing between white writers and writers of color. Note the disproportionate absence of women of color writers throughout our VIDA counts.

It is up to everyone, including and perhaps even especially white people, to look at bias directly, speculate on the causes, acknowledge the effects on people of all races, and end the practice of leaving out voices of writers of color. The culture risks bankruptcy of the imagination and the ability to empathize when we think of white voices as representing universal experience. Exclusion reduces voices that have been historically-repressed and restricted, thus rendering people of color into the dichotomous "other," defined by what they are lacking or only as existing in relation to, and often in the service of, white people.

What can we do to be more mindful and inclusive of women of color?

Everyone can be mindful of racist language and assumptions. Everyone can bring up issues that affect writers of color in conversation, at work, and with their peer groups. Everyone can interrupt racist comments when they come across them, can make space for voices that have been historically-silenced, and challenge theirs and others' expectations that white voices speak for all.

Don't assume the race or ethnicity of anyone, regardless of appearance or anything else.

It's okay to talk about and advocate for these issues; just remember not to speak over or for a writer of color.

Writers and readers can be mindful of what they are reading and of their community. Seek out writers who are not white. If you participate in a conference or teach at a school that has no faculty or panels/classes that include writers of color, make some noise about it! Review books by a range of writers, including those who identify as other than white.

Teachers can be mindful of what they are reading and what they are teaching. Avoid "tokening" and include more than one writer of color on your syllabus and among your guest speakers. Make sure your classroom and any out-of-classroom events are welcome to all. Discuss issues of race and ethnicity among your students and use texts and invite speakers to challenge negative or harmful attitudes and assumptions.

Editors can seek out writers of color. Read more widely and solicit writers from non-white communities. Make sure your submissions process and publication are open and welcome to all.