

Pages as Mirrors

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Reminiscing about the books I read years ago, I feel slightly conflicted. Back then I hadn't put much thought behind how my identity connected with the books I was reading. When I would read books that centered around White male and straight protagonists, I wasn't aware of the lack of representation, because I grew up seeing whiteness operate as the default identity for most books. As I've grown up, I began to see the underlying harm that this conditioned view had caused me. While reading about characters who didn't look like me had taught me how to relate to identities I don't share, it caused me to live through years of reading where I never deeply resonated with characters. The ones I had shared identities with were either uncomplex characters or objects of trauma¹. Looking back, I wish I had a greater choice in the variety of narratives and identities available to me. If I could read a variety of diverse narratives and identities, it would have helped me feel less invisible while exposing myself to multitudes of identities where I could empathize and discover myself through. Instead, my reality was that I wouldn't deeply connect with a book for years.

While there were some books that centered around non-White, most if not all of them were books that focused on slavery and civil rights settings. The relegation of most Black characters to books that focused on our enslavement and civil rights made it hard for me to read many of the books that had that type of Black representation. I didn't want to read books that only detailed Black characters in situations where we are deemed less than human, because I was already hearing and seeing those stories from my family and the news. Additionally, it hurt me to see that White characters could have fantastical adventures in different dimensions, but Black characters were forced to be in narratives where we experienced reality's harshest brutalities towards us. It felt like there was no escape from segregation and the worst of discrimination, because Black characters were a fundamental anomaly in all the worlds we inhabited. I appreciated the presence of these books, but their dominance over the narrative around Black characters in the literature I had access to contributed to my aversion². As I gravitated towards reading books with majority White characters, I realized that it was hard for me to envision myself inside of the story as a character. I would still imagine myself in the world, but it would be as my own separate head cannon because I never felt represented by any of the characters I read about.

The 1st time that I deeply related to a character was in middle school when I read the graphic novel *New Kid*. It was a book about a Black kid switching schools to a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) and the different situations he encountered when trying to find belonging. I

remember it specifically also because the author, Jerry Craft, came to our school to deliver a speech where he described how *New Kid* was influenced by a mix of his own upbringing and the experiences of his son. It resonated with me so much because it gave voice to the different emotions that I was unable to deeply understand at that time. The novel gave a voice to the everyday microaggressions I experienced at school like the name mispronunciation and the confusion between me and other Black students. The book even spoke towards the attitudes I had felt towards previous books that centered Black characters as in chapter eight of the novel “a teacher gifts books she picked out for of the kids. Alex a White character, is gifted a book called *The Magic of Magical Magicon* described as a Magical Adventure. While Murray, a reoccurring Black character, is gifted a book called *The Mean Streets of South Uptown* described as a Gritty tale of Survival” (Craft 137). Seeing chapters that addressed the absurdities of being Black at a PWI helped me to understand that what I was noticing and experiencing wasn’t normal and that I wasn’t alone in my experience, which was a message I really needed at the time.

Books with LGBTQIA+ themes and romance have been even more of a recent read for me simply because of access. I never had any books whether it was at my house or in school libraries / book fairs that centered around, or even had, LGBTQIA+ themes noticeable to me above the subtext. My first major experience that I had encountering books that centered around LGBTQIA+ identities was when one of the English teachers at my school decided to teach a class that focused on exploring identities through literature. In that class, we read and discussed works from different writers under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella, such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Joseph Beam, Audre Lorde and other figures. All the books afforded me a deeper understanding of myself, and they also helped to form my understanding of the roles identity and intersectionality play both in society and in our social structures. I enjoyed all of the literature which we read in class, but the one that I developed the deepest bond to was Joseph Beam’s poem, “Making Ourselves from Scratch”.

I fell in love with this poem because it spoke to the obsessive self-consciousness and code switching that I had convinced myself was necessary, and its overarching message gave advice on how to address it. Specifically, Beam’s verse on the importance of style confronted many of my feelings. After expressing how witnessing icons who embraced their authentic identities had impacted himself as a child, Beam then expands on the impact that the style of icons played: “Style, at best, is an attitude, a reaction to oppression, a way of being perceived as less oppressed, a way of feeling attractive when we are deemed unattractive” (39 - 42). This verse deeply resonated with me because it communicated the importance of taking agency over the expression of identity. Under all circumstances, style expresses your hope when everyone wants you to be hopeless, the pride in your difference when everyone else wants you to conform.

Style was more than a fashion statement or personality; it was a protest which testified to who you were.

Recently, I've focused on reading books that center Black and Black LGBTQIA+ identities because reading them helps me feel like I'm making up for the years where I never saw alternative narratives of characters that shared my identity. As I begin to see a greater variety of books become banned from school and public libraries, it pains me because people are removing the few avenues for identity exploration and representation we have in literature. People in favor of book bans based on erasing LGBTQIA+ themes or under the pretext of Critical Race Theory, are invalidating the importance of representation those books have for the purpose of maintaining control of the dominant identity being a straight White one³. Understanding how much of a struggle it was for me to feel represented when narratives of Black and LGBTQIA+ characters and stories still existed, while difficult to access, makes me deeply saddened knowing that the future for other Black children could mean an environment where books with non-White non-straight perspective don't exist⁴. The erasure of diversity in narratives and identities fulfilling those stories is an attack on self-expression and identity itself, because it aims to control the visibility people feel when they find representation in literature. As such, it's more important than ever to endorse the creation of books that embrace the diversity in identities and stories as opposed to seeking their erasure⁵.

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1. When calling non-white characters uncomplex, I'm referring to how characters which existed outside of a white cisgender straight identity weren't (and often still aren't today) allotted the same capacity for complex expression as other characters which fit said identity. Their characters were often relegated to fill the roles of comics, shallow side characters, or objects to reflect the personality of the characters who were straight white cisgender identity.
 2. I want the stories of Black History to continue to be written, but for there to also be an abundance of Black fictitious stories in Sci-Fi, Fantasy, Romance etc. written alongside those stories.
 3. The stories of resistance, discovery, and community which these books provide are also equally as invaluable as the presence of diverse identities within literature. Additionally, "dominant identity" in this sentence refers to hegemony over literary narratives.
 4. I would like to alter my statement here slightly; I believe that Black and LGBTQIA+ narratives will always exist. However, my fear and sadness come from the increasing

potential of a future where our identities and stories become publicly inaccessible because of constant targeted erasure.

5. While I mainly talk about Black and LGBTQIA+ identities in this essay, I believe that it is imperative to endorse, write, and publish stories with a variety of representations of the multitudes of other minoritized identities. Especially as an avenue to combat certain biases and stereotypes with counternarratives.

Works Cited

Beam, Joseph. "Making Ourselves From Scratch." *Brother to Brother*, Townsend Press, 1991.

Craft, Jerry. *New Kid*. 2019. HarperCollin's Childrens Books, 2019.