Say That To My Face: On Teaching and Learning Diverse Literature for Empowerment and Transformation (Or, On Feeling Itchy)

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My family moved a lot throughout my childhood, a different place and school for every grade. I was the "new kid" over and over, and over, again. When I was in middle school, we made our last "big" move from Lagos, Nigeria, to Westchester County, in the suburbs of New York City. I was, of course, desperate to fit in and planned my outfit accordingly—I wanted the right hair, the right clothes, to say the right words, make the right friends . . . you know. I wanted so badly for everything to be right. I wanted so badly to *be* everything right.

So, my first day, I sat at my desk, and my classmates stared, but it wasn't so bad—until my new teacher said, "Now, Gbemi, come up to the front and tell us all about Africa!"

I was done.

In seconds, she had made me an other, an alien. It was as though I had **NOT ONE OF US** stamped on my forehead. I know she meant well, probably wanted to make me feel welcome and special, but . . . it took me weeks to undo that moment. My now-best friend made up a song about "coming from the jungles," and every possible stereotype about Africa was brought to my attention. It was not pleasant.

I think of that moment a lot when we talk about sharing diverse literature. Too often, we are asking it to "come up to the front of the room and tell us about Africa." I think about how even well-meaning individuals and communities and projects can reflect an attitude of "otherization" rather than inclusion. I think about how, especially with the advent of the wonderful We Need Diverse Books, we use the word "diverse" freely, filling our conversations, our booklists, our blog posts with diversity; many of us have plunged wholly into Children's Literature and Diversity 101.

Now it's time for Honors-level work.

There is certainly some magic that can happen by simply filling a classroom with diverse literature, a multifaceted literary smorgasbord that fills our plates with words like *intersectionality* and *representation*. I'm reminded of the "international festivals" that I participated in many times at those many schools. We'd be invited to come to school dressed in "traditional garb" if we had some, bringing a casserole dish of a food that represented our family's cultural heritage. There would be lasagna, twelve kinds of rice, a mystery dish that everyone was a little wary of, and various platters of lovingly prepared foods that told a bit of our stories. And we took small spoonfuls of everything, because we were either hungry, polite, curious, or just glad that we weren't doing worksheets. It was usually fun, and often fine, sort of like reading a set of encyclopedia.

But there is *big* magic that can happen when we take it further. When we go from sprinkling our lives with diversity and move to inclusion, from inclusion to justice. To reading the change and being it, to inviting readers to read for empowerment and transformation, to read when it's a little bit itchy and we're not sure what's going to happen—because it enlarges both our hearts and our souls.

I was always reading and writing myself into the world as a child. It might not

surprise you to know that I was an exceptionally nerdy kid. I carried a backpack the size of an tiny house. I always did the extra credit. I was shy, and I was a big reader. Books were my lifeline through all of those moves. When I started middle school, I found out that I did not want to be the New Kid anymore. Especially not the new kid with the really long name. Olugbemisola Amusa-Shonubi. In seventh grade, a teacher suggested I change my name to Jane or Sally. Sally Amusa-Shonubi.

But I was welcome to be me in my books. My West African and Caribbean heritage, our travels, our communities in major American cities like New York and Washington, DC, meant that I believed that I had the right to belong everywhere, even if I couldn't quite figure out how. I envisioned myself Lucy's friend in Narnia, commiserated with persecuted little Jane Eyre, and aspired to be the accomplished woman that Elizabeth Bennett didn't believe existed. I knew that Chinua Achebe, Camara Laye, and Cyprian Ekwensi would always welcome me home, and the girls in books by Eloise Greenfield, Rosa Guy, and Camille Yarbrough would teach me to double Dutch and be my friend. I read *Anne Frank: Diary of A Young Girl* in third grade, just in time to put on a bit of armor against the boy who followed me around the school building, across the schoolyard, and even to the bathroom, hissing *niggerniggernigger* in my ear. In fourth, I read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, or at least most of it, because I remember leaving the book feeling like I might marry that strong-minded man, until my parents explained why that would impossible. I read Agatha Christie, imagining myself at tea with Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple; my enjoyment dulled as I wondered if they'd see in me the "coal" blackness, the "bulging eyes" and excessive toothy smiling that seemed to be all they saw of the Black people in their stories. Soon, I began to skip those parts or roll my eyes and read a little Virginia Hamilton as an antidote, pitying poor Agatha Christie who didn't know the People Who Could Fly. I read books like *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *The Bluest Eye* when I was in elementary school, because they were there, and my family believed, more or less, in free-range reading. A lot went over my head and under my radar. I survived.

I wrote. Illustrated versions of the TV shows that we weren't allowed to watch, and in middle school, a seventh-grade play about the game my sister and I played in Nairobi when I was 8, when our mosquito-net covered beds made us think of princesses and *The Green Fairy Book* so we jumped up and down on them, wearing yellow towels and whipping our "hair" back and forth. I wrote about that because by middle school, I was moving past wondering and into doing the work of unpacking and sorting my complicated story. It was embarrassing and painful, but it was a part of my story, and to process it, I wrote it. My mother gave me *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and I gasped, it was so beautiful. I wanted to take my teacher and classmates along on that magic carpet ride, Hurston's celebration of language and laughter and sorrow and love, only to come up against the school librarian, who told me there was no such person as Zora Neale Hurston. So I wrote the story of me and Zora in a term paper, and when I got it back, I showed it to her, the book too, so that she could get on that magic carpet the next time it pulled into the station. (Also I wanted her to see my big fat A+.)

But back to sixth grade, where I went up to the front to tell them about "Africa." Early on, I wandered into the school library, where I browsed and grazed and pulled books randomly from the shelves the way I always did at the public library. I went to the check out desk with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which I'd heard of and had been curious about. The agitated librarian told me that I couldn't check it out. I didn't understand why. It was in the library, it was in circulation, why couldn't it circulate to me? "You're not ready," said this woman I'd just met. I countered that the sixth graders were the oldest students in the building, so why were there books that we weren't allowed to read? She stammered; I went home and told my mom, who wrote a note explaining that actually, I *was* ready, and if there was a book in the library nestled among all of the other books that we were allowed to check out, I should be allowed to check it out.

So I did, and I hated it; and I read *Gone With the Wind* and hated that too. I threw *To Kill A Mockingbird* across the room because I'd heard so much love, so much praise for this story that just seemed to my middle school self to portray Black people as having no agency, as needing a White savior who could offer life lessons and folksy wisdom. It seems that way to my adult self too.

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"The more books there are, especially books created by authors and illustrators of color, the more opportunities librarians, teachers, and parents and other adults have of finding outstanding books for young readers and listeners that reflect dimensions of their lives, and give a broader understanding of who we are as a nation."

—Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC)

"Where are you from?" is a question I've been asked all my life. "What are you?" is the less-polite version. While there are many sarcastic answers that run through my mind, real answers do too. I'm a first-generation

American. I'm Nigerian, I'm Jamaican, I'm a New Yorker. Most of all, I'm an amalgam of all of my reading and writing, I'm a story made up of all of the stories I've read and inhabited, and struggled with, and clung to. I'm a story I'm still writing, a complex one that grew up loving Julius Lester, Madeleine L'Engle, Romare Bearden, scary movies, afternoon tea, Charles Dickens, VC Andrews, Afrobeat, Bach, George Michael, hard cheese, and hip-hop.

I didn't always know all of the places that I was from until I encountered them in books. I think that we can and should be intentional about including diverse lit as a matter of course whenever we discuss lit in different genres, styles, and so forth. When a reader tells me he loves historical fiction, I might suggest Margarita Engle's *The Lightning Dreamer*, YS Lee's *Agency* series, or Rita Williams-Garcia's Gaither Sister trilogy, and I talk about them as compelling historical fiction—great stories, first and foremost. Lovers of "family stories" might appreciate Coe Booth's *Kinda Like Brothers* or Tanita Davis's *Peas and Carrots*. I think it's vital that we are thoughtful about being inclusive in our recommendations. Too often the first things that come to mind are our old favorites—the ones we grew up with—or the books that get the most marketing and promotional support from publishers; in our libraries and classrooms, we have the opportunity to make diverse lit a regular part of those automatic recommendations and mentions, to inspire readers to find everyday inspiration in them. We don't want to reduce books to being **only** about the things that make them "diverse" (and that's really an inadequate word for what we're talking about here), but we can and should celebrate and promote the things that make a book special. If we promote diverse lit as being only "medicinal," we can lose out. But if we focus on the "effects" of that good medicine—the joys, the reading pleasures, we can present *all* literature as vibrant, enjoyable, and relevant to all.

And yet.

"While these narratives are often true and heart-warming in their way, this shock of recognition, I think, misses the major point of literature. Literature is a place for imagination and intellect, for stretching the boundaries of our own narrow lives, for contextualizing the facts of our nonfictions within constellations of understanding that we would not be able to experience from the ground, for bringing our dreams and fictions into detail, clarity, and focus. Books allow us a bird's-eye view of our own lives, and especially how our lives relate to those lives around us."

Christopher Myers, "Young Dreamers"

Sharing literature won't always end up warm, snuggly, and celebratory, with the whole class two minutes from recreating a 1980s-era pleasantly bland unity exercise like "We Are the World" or "Hands across America" and that is OK. We worry that our students aren't ready or that they can't handle it. It was not fun for sixth-grade me to read *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. But I think it was even more uncomfortable for that librarian, and her discomfort is often the discomfort we really mean when we worry that a work of literature isn't appropriate for our readers. It's *our* discomfort as adults, the fear of not having answers and solutions. We are afraid that we won't know what to say, that we'll uncover some ugly truths about our communities, about ourselves. Probably, we will.

Sometimes we shouldn't seek the commonalities, the things that make us alike. Sometimes literature can help us view difference, and difference is just as important. When you say you are color-blind, then you don't see me. When you say that your experiences are exactly like mine or you know exactly what I mean, you are wrong, and *you are erasing my experience*. We are different, and that is just as important as the ways in which we are alike. When we don't talk about *why* a journal like *Kirkus* made the decision to identify characters' race or other identity in its reviews and talk about when it works and when it seems clunky, we miss something important. Or why sharing Louise Erdrich's *Birchbark House* series with a *Little House* lover is about more than just offering more of the same genre, we lose out. When we pretend that our students aren't saying that they disagree or that they don't get it because slavery ended a long time ago so why should they be held responsible, we are missing out on opportunities to do the real, and yes, uncomfortable and unpredictable work of teaching and learning together.

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"We are each other's business; we are each other's harvest; we are each other's magnitude and bond."

—Gwendolyn Brooks, *Paul Robeson*

When I accepted the invitation to visit a small parochial school, I hadn't consulted a map—this school was FAR. I had to rent a car that I couldn't afford. A neighborhood of tree-lined streets, well-kept single-family homes, billboards congratulating local teams, and not a Black person in sight. I did see tight, closed faces when I stopped at a gas station to ask for directions. The community looked similar to the one where that boy followed me around, muttering hate close to my ear.

Why was I here, carrying brownies I'd baked, no less? Where was I going? How would this group care about where I'm from? I contemplated leaving the brownies

in the car—these racist kids who obviously hadn't read my work didn't deserve them. But I took in a breath and prepared to see it through.

The door opened to a big welcome banner and bigger smiles of dozens of middle school students waiting for me. They had created a *museum* dedicated to my book—posters, dioramas, a short film, and community service projects. Reader, I cried. This Italian- and Irish-American group of readers had climbed through a window and met my Jamaican-American character between the lines. What they'd found there, they told me, was a relationship that extended into the way they thought about their own lives. Their teacher had done incredible and extensive work to engage them with a book, to do more than write a report or add it to a reading log, but to use it to reflect on who they were and who they wanted to be.

One of my favorite pieces of reader mail came from a young Black male at a predominantly Black middle school in DC:

Dear Mr. Rhuday-Perkovich,

I'm a student here at _____ Academy. I just finished your book called Eighth Grade Super Zero. *I think it was one of the best books I've ever read. When I first started the book I felt normal. Then after that, I started getting real excited. When I finished it I was kinda upset because I wanted to keep reading it. The main thing I like about 8.G.S.Z. is how you connect it to life. Now I'll have a feeling of what it'll be like next year in eighth grade. This is my comment to you about the book.*

Your book lover,
XXXXXXXXXXX

PS If you get this... can you send us more if you can, I also have a question, can you put my name in a book. (If you want.)

I forgave the "Mr."

Along with the message came a photo of his entire class, draped across their desks and chairs, some sitting comfortably in corners and nooks, reading. They had ample time and space to read every day, and it was magic.

In a recent *New York Times* piece, Newbery Award–winning author Kwame Alexander points out that books can't do all of the work, but their "capacity to entertain, enlighten and empower—all at the same time—is *an* answer, and without them, we most certainly obstruct our children's vision." Alexander goes on to note that

> we are at a crossroads, trying to figure out what's next, and in order to get to the other side, we have to wade in the water. Perhaps, this is us reckoning with our muddy past, crossing over the River Jordan. Even some of the antiquated questions being asked, some of the objectionable books that are being published, might, oddly, be necessary blunders that bring us closer to becoming more human. Like our students. (p. BR33)

Reading itself can be such a transformational act of expansion. We need all hands on deck to join the movement beyond Diversity 101. How we engage with each other on this matters, and each one of us has power. It means being respectful, thoughtful, intentional, and honest. It means understanding that diverse literature provides opportunities, it's not just an obligation. We are each other's business. We can leave some questions unanswered. We can be uncomfortable. There is a world full of beautiful, complex stories out there—let's go up to the front of the room to share, and struggle with, be challenged by, and enjoy them—together.

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