



RIGHT TO READ

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Writing Across Identity Elements:

An Interview with Cynthia Leitich Smith, William Alexander, and Kekla Magoon

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Although recent national conversations have been dominated by multicultural issues, such as immigration bans, young black men's violent encounters with the police, or the ongoing struggle of LGBTQ peoples to gain equal rights, diversity has been largely absent from the majority of books written and published for young adult readers (CCBC, 2017). Despite this dearth, English teachers have often been at the forefront in bringing these types of texts to the attention of young readers. NCTE has also addressed this void in the literature by passing a resolution that calls on publishers and booksellers to increase publication and marketing of texts that represent the rich diversity of cultures in the United States, as well as reaffirming support for those authors, publishers, and booksellers who provide such texts to readers (NCTE, 2014). *English Journal* also published a special issue in September 2017, edited by Jaqueline Bach and Kelly Byrne Bull, titled "Multicultural and Multivoiced Stories for Adolescents." Although we often hear the views of teachers and teacher educators on these issues, this column will turn to the authors who write the types of texts that educators feel are in demand. Reflecting this issue's themes and the widespread interest in multicultural literature and issues, guest columnist David Macinnis Gill interviews three

well-known YA authors to get a glimpse into how they view matters of identity and how their views may or may not influence their work.

Writing across Identity Elements:

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The need for full inclusion of diverse voices in children's and young adult books is nothing new. Almost as long as there has been a field of study for books for young readers, there have been critics who have been frustrated with the lack of ethnic, cultural, ability, and identity diversity in the field. Like most conversations, it has waxed and waned over the decades, but in April 2014, thanks to social media, the conversation moved from informal discussions to the establishment of We Need Diverse Books, a campaign to raise awareness among readers, librarians, teachers, publishers, and writers of the need for all children to see themselves in the stories they read.

As an author of YA books, a past-president of ALAN, and a member of the faculty of the Writing for Children and Young Adults program at the Vermont College of Fine Arts, I have been part of the conversation on multiple levels, with a special focus on the role of the author in the creation of texts that acknowledge and include multiple identity markers. So that the conversation would be more permanent, I sat down with Cynthia Leitich Smith, William Alexander, and Kekla Magoon—three award-winning authors of

books for teens and children—to discuss those topics. Our friendly, random, and sometimes rollicking conversation took place over time and space, from a snowy day in College Hall at the Vermont College of Fine Arts to a sushi bar in Washington, DC, with multiple texts and emails in between. Our goal wasn't to find answers, but rather to continue the conversation.

The Authors

First, an introduction of our authors, all three of whom teach at the Writing for Children and Young Adults program at the Vermont College of Fine Arts.

Cynthia Leitich Smith is the *New York Times* best-selling author of the award-winning Feral series (2013, 2014, 2015) and Tantalize series (2007, 2009, 2011, 2012) and of several award-winning children's books, including *Jingle Dancer* (2000), *Rain Is Not My Indian Name* (2001), and *Indian Shoes* (2002). Cynthia is a graduate of the White School of Journalism at the University of Kansas and the University of Michigan Law School. She was named a Writer of the Year by Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers. She is also an enrolled tribal member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation and serves on the advisory board of We Need Diverse Books.

Will Alexander is a National Book Award-winning, *New York Times* best-selling author of fantasy and science fiction for kids. His honors include an Eleanor Cameron Award, an Earphones Award, and two CBC Best Children's Book of the Year Awards. His work has also earned Junior Library Guild Selection status, and he was named a finalist for the International Latino Book Award and Minnesota Book Award. He studied theater and folklore at Oberlin College, English at the University of Vermont, and creative writing at Clarion. Will is a second-generation Cuban American.

Kekla Magoon is the author of eight young adult novels, including *The Rock and the River* (2009), *How It Went Down* (2014), *X: A Novel* (2015), and the Robyn Hoodlum Adventures series (2015, 2016, 2017). She has received an NAACP Image Award, the John Steptoe New Talent Award, two Coretta Scott King Honors, the Walter Award Honor, and has been long-listed for the National Book Award. Kekla holds a BA degree from Northwestern University and an MFA in Writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts. Kekla is

biracial; her mom is white, and her dad is black. Her mom grew up in the US, but her ancestors came from Holland, Scotland, and maybe elsewhere in Europe. Her dad grew up in Cameroon, a country in western Africa.

The Interviews

What is identity? How do you define your identity as a person? As a writer?

Cyn: Identity is brushstrokes, side roads, highways: Destination you and your communities. Some identity elements came with you into this world; others are born of choices you made along the way.

Will: Identity is a story that we tell ourselves about ourselves, and it is also the combined, cacophonous narrative that everyone else will ever spin around us. It's as imaginary a construct as national boundaries and as solidly real as the ammunition nestled in the sidearm of every single border guard.

Kekla: Identity elements are everything that make up who you are. Identity is the sum of a lot of things we often point to—like gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, ability/disability, and age—as well as things we sometimes forget or that fall to the background—like socioeconomic status and upbringing, religion, geographical location, relationship status, family dynamic, or employment. Identity includes even subtle things like our name, our appearance, how we present ourselves (intentionally or inevitably) to others, and how we negotiate the world from within the physical body and body of experiences we've been given.

What is an identity element?

Cyn: A defining aspect of self. Possibly inherent, possibly chosen and/or earned, not necessarily permanent, but probably. Educational achievement, for example, can be steadily heightened but not retracted. Socioeconomic status is more fluid, either way.

I see myself as a middle class, cis-gendered, mixed-blood Native woman, a Mid-to-Southwesterner, an only child, a Protestant, self-employed

and traditionally employed, among many other qualities. I'm a writer of realistic and fantastical worlds wherein the heroes reflect identities that are underrepresented in books for young readers.

Will: My identity is that of a disabled, cis-gendered, white-passing and mostly assimilated second-generation Cuban American immigrant to the United States. I have preexisting conditions, but my existence intends to go right on persisting. I am also a novelist of several unrealisms for middle grade audiences. In moments of grand and outrageous ambition, I imagine that my words will make walls come tumbling down. In other, quieter moments, I hang mirrors on that wall and strive to chisel out a few small windows so that my readers will see both familiar reflections and neighboring, unfamiliar selves.

Kekla: It's hard to define my identity as a person, because there are so many facets of identity. If I try to list them all, will I exclude some? Will I appear to give more weight to some and less weight to others? Will I fail to define something that would be very important to someone else? I often define myself as a biracial woman, raised in the Midwest, now living on the east coast, who is a writer and teacher. As a writer, I'm known for writing books that deal with black American teenagers and their struggles in a historical and contemporary context. In many ways, my identity as a writer is more narrow than my identity as a person, because it's as much about how people perceive me as it is about who I actually am and what I actually write. Engaging with how I am perceived affects my identity on personal and professional levels.

What obligation does a writer have to a reader? To her identity and the people who share it?

Cyn: The writer owes the reader respect and a best-possible effort. As for everyone else, including those who share identity elements, the writer has not so much obligation as opportunity. For example, I am well positioned to offer Native/POC writers help and insights and serve as an ambassador in the related conversation of books. Sometimes

I choose to use that opportunity; other times, I signal-boost the insights of someone more qualified in a specific case.

Will: Identities are myths. Some we get to choose, like clothing and bottles of hair dye. Others are chosen for us. But the combination cuts through the noise of every stereotype to become something genuinely mythic, a tale of self-creation that will either kill us or save us. Or both. Our obligations to readers and to our own identities are, in practice, exactly the same: to tell the story as well and respectfully as we possibly can.

Kekla: A writer doesn't have any particular obligation to a reader, in general, although this claim becomes extremely murky when you talk about writing outside your culture. I'd like to hope we all strive for accuracy, in both facts and emotions, when we portray people different from us. The problem is that we can easily create "diverse" characters that are believable to many readers, but that do not actually reflect reality. This is not an inherent problem with fiction, but rather with our seeming tendency to equate the experience of any single fiction text to reality. We want to believe the deeper truth of the books we read, so when that truth fails to reflect reality, we are teaching and learning false lessons. I feel a sense of responsibility to capture a truth about the subject matter I'm dealing with and to represent my characters in realistic (not only believable) ways.

The responsibility of writers who write about characters of color, for example, is heightened because there are fewer books that represent these characters. Each of these books is received as true and broadly universal in a way that books about white characters are not. And because there are many more books in the world about white characters, no single one is tasked with carrying so much weight. Space has been created to allow for many experiences of whiteness to exist in fiction, but each book about a black child is expected to adhere to some universally accurate and mythical truth about blackness. So when authors get it "wrong," it creates a different kind of damage. Placing such heightened expectations on books about children of

color has the potential to urge better books entering the marketplace, but it also potentially limits what is acceptable in “diverse” literature and creates parameters that are too narrow for what the lives of characters of color look like in reality.

When you were a teen, what did you feel was missing from the books that were available for you to read?

Kekla: Intersectional stories, meaning books in which characters displayed multiple layers of identity, and their identity was not the core issue or problem of the narrative. There were not a lot of books about biracial children that didn’t involve trying to find your place between black and white. I didn’t want to read that; I lived it. I also don’t recall reading any black lesbian teen characters or discovering books in which a character had a disability that wasn’t the core storyline and “problem.” It would have been nice to see more diversity in the characters and their experiences because I loved “issue” books as a teenager; I gravitated toward them as a way to learn about different kinds of struggles, so I believe there’s value in that type of reading for teens. But it would have been nice if those books could have avoided reinforcing the message that a non-white, non-straight, differently-abled identity was inherently problematic.

Will: As a kid, I never found a work of realism that actively spoke to my third-culture, borderland understanding of the world. Only books set in other worlds felt familiar to me. Only speculative fiction offered a paradoxical combination of escape and homecoming. No regrets. I’m still devoted to unrealisms and the ability to imagine that the world could be otherwise. But it might have been comforting to recognize myself in a book set on *this* planet.

Cyn: Me. I was missing. American Indian teen girls are still almost entirely missing in the body of YA literature. I’m trying to correct that now through my own writing and mentoring of other Native writers. What else was missing? Stories of people of faith, stories of the Mid-to-Southwest, stories that

didn’t water down my everyday reality—that is, stories that fairly reflected the free-flowing profanity, the degree of sexual activity and related pressures, the fact that I had LGB friends, and that not everybody’s family was financially secure, despite desperate posturing to the contrary. And the weaknesses of grown-ups—the ego and intrigue and, among certain parents, vicarious competitiveness. Books when I was a teen didn’t reflect the depth of our emotions or how confusing they were to navigate or the fact that life and death stakes were absolutely part of daily life.

How can teachers include more diverse voices in the books their students read? How can librarians expand their collections in the same way?

Kekla: This question is easy to answer in theory, but proves challenging to execute in reality. The deceptively simple answer is: buy more diverse books for the classroom and incorporate more diverse books into the curriculum. The challenge comes because we operate in an inherently biased system. It’s structurally difficult for teachers and librarians to become aware of new diverse books because those books get less attention, and it’s structurally complicated for readers to view these books as having merit beyond their diversity. I would like to challenge teachers and librarians to think about diversity in the second place, as well as in the first place. When you think, “I need some more diverse books for my library,” and you go out and order several titles by authors of color, that is thinking about diversity in the first place. When you think, “I need some new, lyrical picturebooks,” and you go looking for lyrical picturebooks *written by authors of color or with characters of color*, that is thinking about diversity in the second place. Can we all learn to think of books by and about diverse people as an integral part of the fabric of literature? Can we begin to recognize the broader merits of these texts, beyond their contribution to the diversity of our shelves?

Will: Remember that reading itself is an absurd, telepathic, practically impossible and joyful act of vicarious experience. Diverse books are not veg-

etables. They are not tasteless, nutritious, difficult-to-swallow, multicultural multivitamins. They are not here to build character. Mirrors and windows are vitally important, but that importance isn't why we read them. Foster the joy. It will be contagious.

Cyn: Make diverse books available in classroom libraries, the school library. Set aside time for free reading. Create engaging thematic displays (not necessarily framed around diversity-driven topics). Be subversive. Question systematic roadblocks and those in your own mindset. Read diverse books to students as often as possible. Open lessons with picturebooks, including diverse picturebooks, no matter if the kids are in middle or high school. They're visual thinkers, so integrate texts and illustrations into your lesson plan. Realize you're probably underestimating the diversity in your students' real lives. Would you have recognized this mixed-blood girl as Native?

By way of example, I was visiting a school in Houston, and a girl came up to me after her presentation. She was Oklahoma Cherokee, her family from Tahlequah. Come to find out, her grandparents owned the ranch next door to my great auntie's. She sailed out the door afterward, proudly proclaiming her tribal citizenship to her friends, because that day I had somehow made it okay for her to share that. The teacher said, "It never occurred to me she was Native American. I assumed Latino." I replied, "Maybe both."

Bring in diverse authors to role model, to reinforce that we all belong in the world of books, to spotlight that any kid can be a hero everyone cheers. Choose authors who can supplement the visit with Saturday writing workshops for the kids who choose to be there. Empower those young voices. If budget is an issue, begin your search with local talent.

Gah! I know not all of this will work in certain schools and classrooms and that you face demands I can't imagine. Teachers and librarians know their jobs infinitely better than I do. So if anything I said resonates, great. Do it. And if not, figure out a way. Don't give up. I was a child, then teen, saved by books. By teachers, librarians, school, stories. All the kids need you, look up to you, whether they admit it or not.

All: We are happy to help brainstorm, but we are not here to tell you how to do your job. We will just say it's important, critical, maybe now more than ever. Please know that we all support and believe in you.

Thanks to Cyn, Kekla, and Will for joining me in conversation. Our dialogue here represents one small piece of a broader discussion to which we all hope more and more voices will be added in the coming days, months, and years. As conversations about diversity and inclusion intensify, we seek to invite and celebrate a broad range of perspectives. Our community will be richer for it. Making room at the table does not mean giving up anyone's place; together we can build a table big enough to fit us all.

Victor Malo-Juvera is a former middle school English language arts teacher who is now an associate professor of English Education at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, where he teaches courses in young adult and multicultural young adult literature. He has appeared on NPR's All Things Considered to discuss his research on young adult literature and rape myths. His work has been published in journals such as Research in the Teaching of English, Teachers College Record, Study and Scrutiny: Research in Young Adult Literature, Journal of Language and Literacy Education, and SIGNAL.

David Macinnis Gill is the author of the YA novels Uncanny, Soul Enchilada, and The Black Hole Sun series from Greenwillow/HarperCollins. His stories have appeared in several magazines, and his critical biography, Graham Salisbury: Island Boy, was published by Scarecrow Press. He holds a bachelor's degree in English/creative writing and a doctorate in education, both from the University of Tennessee, as well as an MEd from Tennessee-Chattanooga. David is the Past-President of ALAN and an associate professor at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. He is represented by Rosemary Stimola of the Stimola Literary Studio.

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