Megan Kipper

Dr. Byrd

English 5533

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Diversity within Graphic Novels (Rough Draft 1)

**Introduction**

Until recently, graphic novels were primarily referred to as comics and were typically associated with superheroes or the Sunday morning paper. It wasn’t until recently that they began to be recognized as a legitimate form of literacy. As the appreciation for graphic novels has grown and their popularity has increased, they have expanded from primarily superhero and Sunday morning comics to include a wide variety of genres and stories. Additionally, they have begun to be regarded as a unique and valid form of literacy and a valuable part of school curriculum. As their popularity and prevalence has increased, graphic novels have a unique opportunity to present and express diversity in ways that traditional literature isn’t always able. The combination of words and text can portray diversity in a way a book comprised of only text cannot. This, in turn, allows them to tell stories about diverse characters that otherwise might not be told which gives minority readers the opportunity to see themselves in stories and adventures, just the same as everyone else.

**The Rise & Importance of Graphic Novels**

When it comes to graphic novels, Gretchen Schwartz provides the best explanation for why they have begun to be recognized as a valid form of literacy. “Graphic novel now offers English language arts teachers opportunities to engage all students in a medium that expands beyond the traditional borders of literacy” (Schwartz 58). In the digital age that we live in, so much of our literacies revolve around media and a combination of images and sound. Being able to read, understand and interact with social media is becoming a necessary skill. It’s a skill which typically involves being proficient with media literacies. With the digital age and social media, no longer is literacy tied to a traditional book or pen & paper. It expands far beyond that. “Increasingly,” Schwartz states, “scholars and teachers realize that in a media-dominated society, one traditional literacy-reading and writing of print-is no longer sufficient. Today's young people also have to read films, TV shows, magazines, and Web sites. Both practical information and the stories of our culture come from many media, especially those made possible by current technology.” (Schwartz 59)

There is no question that that we live in an age of media: television, phones, computer, etc. We are constantly being bombarded by it everywhere. As the internet has become the norm, many forms of entertainment and literacy have had to adapt. Stephen Tabachnick presents the idea that “the graphic novel represents the answer of the book - and people who love to read and make books - to the challenge of the electronic screen, including film, television, the Internet, and video games” (Tabachnick 24). It’s very true that a graphic novel could be considered the child of books and television/video games/internet. “Whereas the graphic novel cannot include sound, it provides many of the advantages of both print and electronic media while creating a unique and subtle experience all its own (including strikingly lettered indications of sound).” (Tabachnick 25)

And while graphic novels may adopt more of a show rather than “tell” mentality, that doesn’t mean that they are the lazy form of a book. Even the most action-packed graphic novels still provide “blank spaces” that the reader must fill in themselves, and inferences are a part of reading a graphic novel. Additionally, graphic novels can allow for subtle details and clues in regards to a story that sometimes only the most perceptive readers pick up. Tabachnick suggests that the graphic novel “routinely manages to provide a powerful interactive experience that has something in common with the interactivity of even that most interactive genre of all, the video game” (Tabachnick 25).

With that being said, graphic novels do appeal to a growing readership that has a shorter attention span. With constantly evolving and fast paced world of the internet, attention spans appear to be getting shorter. This also applies to books. “It is only honest to admit that even the most motivated readers, whether they are twenty-five or sixty-five, can become physically exhausted when reading pure text in books and staring at those little black marks on white paper for long periods with no visual relief. A long, unillustrated text takes a long time to read, and many people don't quite have the stamina or, more importantly, the taste for that anymore. They just don't want to put in the time, no matter how fascinating the book... Also, despite all of the cliches written about purely textual novels allowing us to imagine characters and places, the truth is that most of us who are not visual artists cannot really visualize what a writer is talking about” (Tabachnick 26).

Tabachnick is alluding to the fact that graphic novels typically don’t take near as long to read as a text-only book and often keep the pace moving. For instance, the original *Moby Dick* was around 700 pages, whereas Laure Dupont Chabouté’s graphic novel adaptation only has 256 pages. In addition, graphic novel adaptations eliminate the need for readers to be as familiar with the time period the classics take place within. Rather than describing a setting or form of dress that the reader may not be familiar with, they can show exactly how characters are dressed and the way the setting appears.

**Why Diversity Matters**

As mentioned in the introduction, graphic novels have a unique opportunity to portray diversity. But, before we get into that, it’s important to go in depth about why diversity is so important in the first place. Some might say that it comes down to representation but it goes far beyond that. It’s not just about diversity as a concept but it’s about ensuring that we are not only seeing ourselves depicted in stories that we read but that we are also seeing others depicted in them as well. As children’s author Matt de la Peña states, “if we don’t see ourselves in books, we may not feel as connected to the human experience, the story of all of us” (“We Need Diverse”).

The Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC) is an organization that collects, analyzes and reports on children’s books. The CCBC has made the assertation that “diverse representations in children’s books are not reflective of the actual diversity found in society” (Moeller 2). “The Annie E. Casey Foundation estimated, based on the USCB’s annual census update, that 49 percent of children under eighteen years of age living in the United States in 2016 were youth of color. In contrast, the CCBC reported that only 22 percent of the books received at the center in 2016 featured characters of color” (Moeller 2).

When discussing diversity, it’s also important to take into consideration Critical Race Theory (CRT). Critical Race theory starts off by acknowledging that even through race may be a social construct and not a biological one, it still exists in our society (Moeller 3). There’s a tendency to try and pretend that race isn’t a thing, often in the “spirit” of inclusivity. You may hear people use the phrase “I don’t see race.” However, “failure to acknowledge that race exists leads to a kind of liberalism that affirms the notion of a “color blind” equality culture and fails to take into account how race factors into issues of privilege and status in everyday life” (Moeller 2). CRT places value in storytelling because it allows people of color to describe their own stories based on their own experiences. It can also ensure stories are told that the dominant culture doesn’t often hear. “Without storytelling, people suffer from empathic fallacy.” (Moeller 3)

“As described by critical race theory, the kind of liberalism that advances the idea of “colorblindness” when it comes to approaching race in the United States does little to counter the effects of systemic racism. Many children are taught both in school and out of school that they shouldn’t take into account another person’s skin color and that they should strive for “colorblindness.” However, to do so is to ignore social and historical context and to deny the ways in which race plays a very real role in the lives of all people. In short, it is important to acknowledge that race exists and to explore the implications of race in the lives of Americans” (Moeller 10).

Blogger Kayla Whaley describes that diversity is important because it creates a more authentic story. She particularly advocates for diversity by diverse authors. “Even when portrayals of diverse characters by majority-group authors *are*respectfully and accurately done, there’s an extra degree of nuance and authority that comes with writing from lived experience…The author has the deepest possible understanding of the intricacies, the joys, the difficulties, the pride, the frustration, and every other possible facet of that particular life — because the author has actually lived it” (Whaley).

She argues that it’s not enough for authors to just write about diverse characters when they’re not diverse themselves. “For instance, I’m a wheelchair user. I’m intimately familiar with enduring and combating ableism, navigating an inaccessible world, exploring disabled identity, and embracing disability pride. I know not only which tropes to avoid, but how much those tropes hurt — because I’ve been hurt by them before. I can list a whole host of tiny everyday details about the physical and emotional reality of my disability that secondary research is unlikely to surface.  I have a lifetime of experiences — positive, negative, neutral, and complicated mixtures of all of the above — to draw from when I write a fuller, more authentic wheelchair-using character” (Whaley).

In Grace Lin’s very powerful TedTalk, she compares books to windows and mirrors. “When the light hits it just right, you don’t just see the world outside, you can also see your reflection. So the window becomes a mirror. That’s also what a book does. A book can show you the world but it can also show you a reflection of yourself” (Lin). She is an Asian American woman and discusses how growing up, there was nobody that looked like her and she never saw any Asians in the books she read.. She also describes wanting to audition for Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz and being told she couldn’t by a girl because she was Asian. She was devastated. She loved books and made them as a child but she never ever made the protagonists Asians. It wasn’t until she was an adult that she realized how much she had alienated her culture. “As much as kids need to be mirror, kids also need books to be windows. Kids who always see themselves in books need to be able to see things from other viewpoints. How can we expect kids to get along with others in this world, to empathize, and to share, if they never see outside of themselves? (Lin)”

Brynn Welch comes from a different stance as a mother of a black child. In her TedTalk video she reiterates over and over again that “white is default.” She also brings up the problem with stories about black characters needing to focus on specific stories or angles. She actually the 2014 re-release of Annie. Tt was hit with terrible reviews because it missed the “black” angle as though it was insinuating that black people couldn’t have normal adventures. “Usually if we tell a story about a person of color, the story is about the person’s color and the person becomes a mere vessel” (Welch). “Children of color deserve to imagine themselves having the same range of ordinary and extraordinary experiences that white children get to imagine themselves having 90% of the time. White children deserve to see children of color having those experience. Children do not deserve to have the stereotypes that we hand down to them. They deserve to start fresh” (Welch).

Finally, Carlotta Pen discusses the issues that black children especially face when it comes to trying to find literature that’s for them. She describes a time in school when her teacher told her that she read too many black books and needed to read outside the scope. She says, “I wonder if my teacher had gone to parents of other students in the class who very likely had a predominantly white reading diet and encouraged them to include more black books in their selection” (Penn). She also points out that “According to Cooperative Children’s Book Center, in 2017 just 11% of children’s books published featured significant black charaters” (Penn). Just 100 or so were created by black authors. The vast were told through the voice of a white storyteller.

“We cannot underestimate the power and the position of storyteller or the relevance of perspective. When we write stories, we create worlds, establish norms and expectations, and decide what beauty, brilliance and belonging look and feel like” (Penn). Penn also discusses why it’s so vital that there are affirming stories being told about non-white characters. “Have you ever been told something that takes up space in your mind and refuses to let go? Now if that’s an affirmative thing then great. But if it’s a message of deficit, defeat or doubt, it can be quite a curse to your joy.”

**Graphic Novels and Diversity**

Graphic novels allow for an aspect of show don’t tell. You can depict events, ideas, situations, etc. without having to specifically state something is happening. In the same vein, you can depict characters’ appearances without having to specifically describe them. Hair color, posture, height, and race can all be shown without it being necessary to narrate those details. This is why graphic novels have the best potential to depict casual diversity. You can portray your characters as racially diverse without having to stop the story to talk about it or make a big point of discussing it in a description of the character. And when you don’t have to worry about describing a character, you can spend time on the story.

There’s another benefit to being able to easily portray ethnicity and skin tone. Readers aren’t going to forget. Sometimes when we read books, we have a tendency to read or envision characters the way we want to envision them. So, if we’re a white child who is used to growing up in a white neighborhood and we read a book that doesn’t specifically state that the characters are other races, we may have a tendency to envision all the characters looking like us. Graphic novels don’t allow us to do that. We are always aware of what the characters look like. If a character is depicted as black, we are not going to accidentally envision them as white. It’s a way of making sure that readers are exposed to characters that don’t look like them. In children’s graphic novels this is especially important.

It also means that when we’re reading, we’re not taking away from a minority group’s experience. There is a tendency for stories about black characters to focus on race or lower class characters. Because graphic novels can easily cast characters as other races, authors and artists can tell stories about other experiences while ensuring that readers know those experiences are not just white ones. Bingo Love is a graphic novel about two women of color and their relationship with each other. What happens is you’re reading this story, which is entirely about their relationship and their struggles but by being constantly aware of the characters race, you’re also aware that this is an experience that women of color can have. This story or experience is not solely one that white characters can have. There’s something very powerful about that.

Even though graphic novels have this great potential, however, it doesn’t necessarily mean that they’re living up to it. Graphic novels run into their own kinds of issues. While there’s some indication that they are more diverse than regular children’s books, they’re still not as diverse as they should be. Additionally, sometimes graphic novels fall prey to caricatures or stereotypical appearance of their minority characters. It’s important to be able to depict characters of color without falling into typical racial stereotypes. At the same time, it’s also important to actually try to depict characters correctly. One YouTube reviewer pointed out that in one of the books she was reviewing, the artist had colored a character as brown or black but the reviewer pointed out that just because someone is “colored’ a specific way, doesn’t mean they’re really portraying that race. Bone structure and hair texture is a necessary to portray. It brings to mind the idea of blackface. While diversity as normal should be something that everyone strives toward, putting black ink on a character that is otherwise white and calling it good isn’t acceptable.

Robin A Moeller and Kim Becnel performed a study of the books listed in the 2015 edition of the “Great Graphic Novels for Teens” (GGNFT) booklist produced and promoted by the Young Adult Library Services Association. After eliminating any titles that were manga or focused solely on animal characters or fantastical character’s whose race couldn’t be identified, they were left with 57 graphic novel titles (Moeller 6) They then went through these titles several times and noted which ones contained characters of color and whether or not these characters were main, supporting, or background characters. Of these 57 books, only 15 featured characters of color as a main character and only seven contained black or African American main characters (Moeller 7). However, 36 of these titles did contain a character of color as a supporting character. Of the 57 titles, only 12 were written by authors of color (Moeller 8).

“While not an inherently negative thing, white authors’ writing about people of color—rather than people of color writing about themselves—has historically been a pattern in the publishing world. This circumstance suits the interests of members of the white middle class profiting from telling stories from perspectives that don’t arise from the storytellers’ own experiences.” (Moeller 9) What Moeller and Becnel did find positive however was that “the majority (64 percent) of the books portrayed an important supporting character who was a person of color suggests that characters of color play a significant role in these stories, even when theirs is not the primary story being told” (Moeller 8).

Moeller and Becnel believed their study was important because “Images have the power to make something more real, more visceral, and more representational. At a period in United States history in which the nation struggles with issues of segregation, migration, racism, and violence based on skin color and ethnicity, it is important that through multi-racial representation children see both an accurate reflection of the diverse population of this country and the potential for understanding. To that end, the purpose of this study was to understand how people of color are represented in graphic novels marketed to teens” (Moeller 7).

**Specific Examples**

*Hot Comb* is a great example of a graphic novel that focuses on the character’s experiences as a young black girl without the focus being specifically on her race. While the overall premise of this graphic novel centers on the girl’s relationship with her hair, it goes far beyond just that. It also centers on her bonds with her family, specifically the women in her life. The author also utilizes AAVE within the work, giving the characters an authentic voice that you would hear while out on the streets. In one short story, the focus, at least on the surface, is on the protagonist’s mother having her hair styled. However, the story is really about the complicated relationship between the two of them. The protagonists short story about her first perm, is also a story about poverty, her relationship with her mother and sister, and the beauty standards for black girls. There’s a story in which her mother is doing her grandmother’s hair but it’s also a story about addiction, grudges and inter-generational relationships.

What I think sets this book apart so much is it’s showcasing unique experiences that black girls and women might have that white characters never would. It’s important to demonstrate characters having the same experiences that white characters do, but it’s also important to make sure you’re not whitewashing everything. You have to acknowledge that while we have shared experiences, we also have experiences that are unique. And these unique experiences are also important to portray so that readers are seeing the situations and things they experience as normal and have something they can connect and relate to. *Hot Comb* portrays this.

*Bingo Love* is a story about two women who meet and bond over Bingo as young girls, their relationship and the struggles that follow. Both characters are women of color from different racial backgrounds. This is a situation where race is accurately portrayed in the details but is not ever the main story. Instead it’s about their complicated relationship. Black, lesbian, women are one of the most underrepresented groups anywhere you look. And this graphic novel is ensuring that they are being represented in all aspects. What is so unique about this book is that it defies so many stereotypes associated with black characters. The story is about a protagonist who appears to be middle class and the story focuses on a romantic relationship with the white characters being background characters. And while the characters have their struggles, it’s a happy story. It speaks to an important idea which is that if we only ever tell stories focused on bad things for certain kinds of people, then their becomes this conception that only those kinds of things happen to those people. They don’t get happy endings or situations where everything works out. This can affect a person’s outlook on life. What Bingo Love creates is a story with a happen ending where everything works out at the end. These kinds of stories are necessary especially for underrepresented characters.

The *Princeless* series is a series of graphic novels that focuses on a black princess whose destiny is to remain locked in a tower until she is rescued by a prince. She chooses to defy this destiny and go on her own quest to free her sisters that are locked into similar situations. What makes this series great, is that normally the heroes of stories and princes and princesses are typically white which can create the idea that only white children get to have adventures and be heroes. This series defies that. What I also love about it is sometimes there is a tendency in artwork to caricature characters of a certain race so they all look the same. *Princeless* doesn’t fall into that. Each of the different princesses is uniquely portrayed while all of them still read as black characters. It’s very refreshing and an example of the way that if graphic novels are done correctly, they can portray diverse characters without taking away from the story or becoming the focal point.

**Conclusion – Work in Progress**

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