

Ashanti D. McKnight

Advisor: Jess Roberts

Summer Report

### **Reading Black Girls: Racial Equity & Young Adult Literature**

The initial aim of my FURSCA project, titled “Reading Black Girls: Racial Equity & Young Adult Literature” was to analyze and annotate 12 different pieces of literature, authored by 4 Black women writers (Toni Morrison, Renée Watson, Bethany Morrow, and Amber McBride). The main objective was to highlight their works on a social platform or website that would bring visibility to their pieces, subsequently with the goal of creating a more equitable landscape for Black authors and books. The ultimate end target was to help close racial gaps in accessibility in literature by highlighting works by authors and about characters/topics typically not distributed in schools, etc. As a Black woman growing up in a predominantly White community, I noticed Black literature was scarcely offered to me as a child, so this became my focus for the project.

I achieved most of my goals with this project. I read 13 books (one more than my goal), and spent the 8 weeks deeply analyzing various facets of the literature I was reading and what I wanted to convey to audiences. Me and my advisor’s ultimate intention of creating a website was pushed back, as we both realized that from the books I read, I needed more time to process and gather details to eventually add to a platform. Something me and my advisor began to look at in depth was how historical figures play a key role in the development of the many characters I read

throughout my books. I am currently working on analytical work to share these ideas. I also looked at how authors explored various themes relating to a multitude of social issues, including but not limited to gentrification, racism, institutional racism, colorism, etc. I grew interested in how authors utilized language uniquely to convey these ideas to readers, and how that differed from genre, author, and age group (for example, Morrison's depiction of racism and the depth in which she explores these ideas differ from that of the other author's, whose works are geared towards younger audiences).

Ultimately, this project is important to Albion College and beyond because it tackles an issue that I think is predominantly prevalent globally, but most especially nationally, which is racial inequity. Racial inequity impacts opportunities and outcomes of not just some, but all. We all as individuals have something to offer, and perpetuating a system that only prioritizes the contributions of a select few is not only a disservice to some, but all. Accessibility in literature that showcases a diversity of experiences and perspectives is pivotal in broadening our understanding of other cultures and allows us to be more empathetic and understanding, which is key in creating a more racially equitable society. This project, to me, goes beyond viewing reading as a simple pastime or even a tool for comprehension, but a pivotal part in the social and racially equitable development of our country.

My next steps involve creating an expansive social platform (most likely a blog/website and an instagram page) highlighting these books and authors. Currently I am formulating ways in which I can make this platform engaging to all audiences (drawing inspiration from other book platforms, and educational platforms such as Crash Course and PBS). I additionally plan on interviewing three of the authors I read (Renée Watson, Amber McBride, and Bethany Morrow)

to gather their insights on these projects and provide visibility to them and their work, which is very important to the crux of this project. I also plan on continuing to add to my content by reading more books by authors who I want to highlight (such as Jezyne Ward, for example, and James Baldwin). I plan on building my ideas from the books I read and creating more analytical content (in the form of essays, most likely, and short think pieces) and sharing them online. Lastly, I plan on presenting the result of my work at Elkin Isaac.

This experience made an immense difference in my life, one that in many ways touches me beyond words. I cannot entirely verbalize the psychological impacts that come with consuming media that does not represent you. Growing up, this had a large impact on my psyche and made it difficult to imagine and see myself in different spaces as a kid. Reading books for this project unearthed to me all the beautiful ways Black girls can be represented within literature. This revelation shouldn't be surprising, but is a testament to what representation can communicate to an individual. Actually being able to *see* facets of my culture and experiences being vocalized and represented in books was deeply touching during this program, and I am forever grateful to my advisor, Jess, for granting me this opportunity. I also deeply thank the Provost's Office for funding said opportunity, as it has opened my mind and my heart to a world I didn't have the privilege of being a part of as a young girl. I now see myself on the pages of books that I love to read, and am looking forward to reading and exploring the works of more groundbreaking authors.