

Taylor Harris

Dennis L. Winston

Eng. 104-003

4 December 2015

A Journey through Reading

I was introduced to reading with Hooked on Phonics. It was approximately the summer after kindergarten and my mother had insisted that my high school aged sisters spend at least an hour a day working on phonics with my younger brother and me. Even though it was relatively soon in my literary career, I can remember being incredibly bored. I would have preferred to be doing things much more important; things like convincing one of my older sisters to give me a “make-over” or playing and then subsequently fighting with my younger brother. I could not have known that this activity that I so despised would aid in my becoming an exceptional reader. Nor, that such a feat would follow and be of great aid to me throughout my years of schooling. Not only did this exceptionalism follow me throughout my academia, but into my personal endeavors as well. The effects of my plentiful Hooked on Phonics lessons, aided and continues to aid me in my reading and writing to this very day.

Reading became an outlet for me. I was identified as advanced in school not long after school began for the next year. At the time there were not many programs in my inner city school to aid the advanced, so this was not of much consequence to me. Being “advanced” was the reason I was always so bored in class as far as I was concerned. My teachers began to toss me books in order to keep me from being a trouble maker. Their tactics worked. Reading became a viable alternative to absolute boredom. The practice began to extend outside of school. My

older sister was soon to graduate and ended up giving me a hefty bag filled with her books. I read them, though they were out more than a few years out of my age group. I read at school, and, because my family traveled often, I read on the road as well. Even with the large donation, it became clear to my mother early on that she could not support my new habit, though she supported it whole heartedly.

My mother now gave my older sister a new task; she was to take my brother and me to get library cards. This sounds like a small feat, but to me it was like had a one way ticket to Disney Land. Walking through the aisles of the library was the equivalent of walking through the toy aisle to me. The only major difference, was that in the library I knew I would not be told no or that I should wait. I delved into readings like Junie B. Jones and Judy Moody. They were of no challenge to me at this point, but I enjoyed their simplicity. It did not matter what the material was. Time flew when I read. Like Pearl Cleage my parents did not put restrictions on the things that I read. She truly speaks to my reality when saying that such freedom is a gift that leads to the world being a bigger and more dynamic place (89). My parents, like James L. Lewis, were both theologians that completed their graduate work at a historically black seminary. They were doing so at the peak of my interest in reading. They required texts became branches of my reading adventure. The books not only expanded on my view of what it was to be black, but introduced me to the idea that to be black was to be different. The development of these ideas in my young mind was the biggest gift my parents could have ever given me through literacy.

I was just a child at this time; I was not even out of primary school. I continued to read across age and color barriers. I believe this had the largest of impacts on the way I viewed the world and myself. Many of the accounts of childhood reading that I have come across, lead me to believe that the reading of singular perspectives leads to a singular perspective in one's

writing and their sense of self. The diversity that I was emerged in was what inspired me to write. There was a point in which I felt as if I was drowning in the realities of the characters, real and imagined, that I was continuously becoming infatuated with. As a result, I turned to writing as a new and this time emotional outlet.

I was given a journal. I have no idea when or why, because at that particular time I had no use for it. A time came where I realized that I did not have to be famous, or have my books in a library to be able to write. So I dusted off this journal, and I made my attempt to write. Whenever I wrote, it seemed to always be about the way that I felt. I am sure this has a lot to do with the fact that diaries were extremely romanticized to me. It could have also had a lot to do with the fact that I had shifted my readings to that of teen fiction and these tend to be very emotional stories. As Cleage so clearly states in her interview, “I think they both [reading and writing] do the same thing for me, which is to make sense of the world” (90). It was making sense of the world that came to be my general purpose for writing. Cleage again shares my sentiment, saying that she understood that somethings she was just unable to comprehend if she did not write them down (83). No matter the issue, if I was to write about, it made sense and I was able to come to a rational conclusion. This was an amazing feeling for me and a practice I probably should have kept up.

On a different end of the writing spectrum, there was creative writing. The problem with this particular venture though, is that I never really felt quite creative. I always felt the books I read, however numerous, would seep through into the idea I was trying to get across. The idea that my writings were not my own, still has a large impact on the things that I am comfortable writing about today. In the context of what Royster calls my “voice”, I have a continuing dilemma of attempting to interpret what ideas are really derived from myself. As a black woman,

this dilemma can be extremely concerning considering the material I am continuously exposed to is channeled through what Royster calls the “other”. Frustration with this internal debate, and a close to the years of teen angst that I faces led to a drastic decline in my desire to write. Now I find myself generally unwilling to write down things as simple as grocery lists.

Currently, reading and writing only function in my life as a necessity or a requirement. In retrospect, this seems to be a result of “spirit murder”, an idea that Royster brings up in her essay only briefly (39). I cannot help but feel subject to a system that does not encourage a love for reading or writing, but the mastery of a standard set by the aforementioned “other”. An authority that knows very little of me or my circumstance. Royster also refers to a good intention that I agree is generally present, even in those that reinforce the standard (39). The standard crushes passion and interest in the practice of reading and writing, even in assignments meant to be engaging. This is at least the effect it has had on me. I have ever come across a term more accurate than spirit murder to describe the effects of continuing and higher levels of education have had on my perspective of myself in literature. Though I am sure it might shock some and cause others a fainting spell, I can actually admit that part of my problem is not the system in which “me and mine” have very little say in, but that I tend to have issues with authority. This has never been a problem of significant consequence, as I am very aware of how the world works and my place in it, but a problem all the same. It is quite possible then, that I don’t read or write anymore so as to stick it to the man, or my English teacher. This depends on the target of my indirect wrath.

While musing over the question of who I am to be as a writer, I was struck most by Royster’s observation that “..genius emerges from hybridity, from Africans who, over the course of time and circumstance, have come to dream in English..” (Royster, 37). I was inspired in a

way that had not been since I began to understand the alternate worlds that reading and writing provided. Especially in a time such as the one in which I currently live, where the word “appropriation” is hurled not only at those who have been taking land and culture as their own for hundreds of years, but also towards African Americans. As if we are not a people just trying to find out who they are and where they stand in this world. This is an issue that is extremely important to me as a young black woman. To step outside of the usual boundaries of one’s usual reading and be told that my “voice” matters, and not only that, but has the potential of a beautiful genius is grossly under-represented by the term inspiring. In the near future, I see myself returning to internal debate of what my “voice” is (Royster). I intend to test the waters of my creativity. To write not only to understand who I am, but also to see where my passion will take me.

I realize that as I have progressed, so has the world around me. Books are not really a thing anymore because people can get them on their laptops. Writing my feelings has become excessive, because I could just as easily condense it into one hundred and forty characters and tweet them. A practice in which I don’t have to validate myself because social media is set up so that others can do that for me. My lack of luster for the literary practices that used to bring me joy might be a result of any of these things or those mentioned throughout my analysis of how I came to be in the position that I am as of now. Yet still, having been influenced by the works of powerful women who are writers themselves, I can feel my desire return. I can feel the familiar need to absorb a book within hours. The need to gain all that I can, and then to read the material all over again in case I missed something. It feels great.

Works Cited

Golden, Marita. Interview with Pearl Cleage. *The Word: Black Writers Talk about the Transformative Power of Reading and Writing*. (2011): 93-79. Ebook.

Golden, Marita. Interview with David Levering Lewis. *The Word: Black Writers Talk about the Transformative Power of Reading and Writing*. (2011): 93-79. Ebook.

Royster, Jaqueline J. "When the First Voice You Hear Is Not Your Own". National Council of Teachers of English, 1996. College Composition and Communication, Vol. 47, No. 1 (Feb., 1996), pp. 29-40.

Williams, Patricia. The Alchemy of Race and Rights. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991.

