

# I Am Not Beyoncé

## Tackling the Issue of Race Representation Head On

ZETTA ELLIOTT

*You don't have to be perfect or already successful.*

*You don't have to be Beyoncé!*

**O**n my last night of a six-day sojourn in the Twin Cities, I gave a reading at The Loft Literary Center and shared this statement made by a young Black woman, Ysa, whom I had met at Juxtaposition Arts earlier in the day.

Ysa and two of her fellow artist-apprentices shared with me the creative process behind the impressive mural they recently painted on their block. My morning presentation at the arts center was sponsored by Umbra Search, a free digital platform that provided research assistance when the young women needed to study graphics from the Black Panther Party's newspapers. The mural features a mother and child in the traditional sacred pose, but the child in this scene is female and these haloed figures have brown skin and Afros. Beams of light radiate outward, made up of hundreds of small black-and-white photographs of Black women who have made a contribution to the community as well as those who have lost a loved one to violence.

Ysa and her peers stressed that they wanted their mural to show that *everyone* has the potential for greatness, but we're all at different stages in our journey so we shouldn't hold ourselves to the impossibly high standards of our icons. Their goal was to promote healing while increasing the visibility of Black women and girls who are so often overlooked even as they protest against violence in their communities and mourn for those taken too soon.



"Who We Are," a mural designed by youth and adult artists in Juxtaposition Arts' Public Art Studio. Located at 1100 West Broadway Ave. in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

After a full week of public talks, workshops, and school visits, I was running on fumes that evening. Fortunately, this last event only required me to give a twenty-minute reading before joining five other artists and activists for a panel on elevating absent narratives.

I wanted to share my latest picturebook, *Milo's Museum*, but all I had were pencil sketches from my illustrator in Hong Kong and a story still in need of revision. With Ysa's wise words fresh in my mind, however, I decided to share the incomplete, imperfect book anyway. The audience responded warmly to the tale of a Black girl who sets up her own backyard exhibit after seeing no one from her community represented in the museum visited by her class.

My decision to share that draft may not seem particularly daring but as an indie author, I'm very aware of the stigma associated with self-publishing; I know that my books will be closely scrutinized for flaws—if they're read at all. I am an award-winning author and an award-winning scholar with a PhD in American Studies; I've taught at the college level for close to a decade and I've worked with urban kids for close to thirty years.

But like many writers of color in the United States, I struggle to get published and regularly fight against invisibility within the children's literature community. As a Black feminist, I'm

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able to theorize my experience of exclusion, and I've written extensively about the many barriers placed in my path to publication. But even as a middle-aged woman, I still recall painful moments from my childhood when it became apparent that the world didn't value little Black girls like me. I know just how Milo feels when she peers into a mirror at the museum and sees nothing that reflects her culture or history.

Perhaps that's why I was so moved by the young people I encountered during my week in the Twin Cities. In addition to the artist-apprentices I met at Juxtaposition Arts, I visited five public schools and spoke to students from the second grade up to the twelfth. Three young Black men from the High School for Recording Arts attended my public workshop on community-based publishing sponsored by Ancestry Books and the Center for Earth, Energy, and Democracy. I developed this particular talk in order to demystify the publishing process and encourage "everyday people" to (re)consider their potential to *produce* and not only consume books.

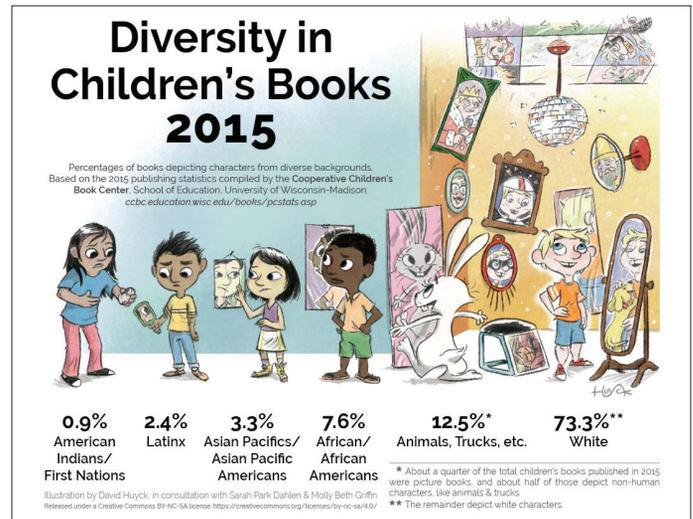
Those three teens were the youngest participants; all were poets and they had plenty to say about the voices in their communities that are silenced or simply go unheard. Terrence told the group that he wrote poetry to show that he didn't mind being vulnerable in front of others. Impressed and somewhat amazed, I asked him to consider writing a letter or poem to a young brother explaining the value of vulnerability in a society that urges/forces black boys to be "hard" rather than reveal the sensitivity and fragility that makes us human.

Whether or not Terrence takes up my suggestion, I was heartened by all three teens' determination to make their voices heard. This particular workshop has become increasingly popular and I will be offering a slightly different version, "Students and Self-Publishing," at the Brooklyn Public Library. I believe that when someone who has been marginalized decides to self-publish, they're ultimately saying to themselves and to society, "I matter. My story matters."

Community-based publishing allows those excluded by the traditional publishing industry to use print-on-demand sites like Lulu, Lightning Source, or CreateSpace to produce culturally specific media in a timely and inexpensive way. The fourth-grade students I met at Vadnais Heights Elementary School were shocked when I told them that many editors rejected my stories because they believed there was "no market."

"That means they don't think enough kids want to read books like mine," I explained, to which the children—most of whom were White—responded: "I want to!" As an indie author I'm able to put people (specifically children) ahead of profit by prioritizing the needs of those within my community rather than relying upon the judgment of cultural and community outsiders.

I'm grateful for every invitation I receive as an indie author because I recognize the risk a professor, librarian, or educator takes when he or she opens the door to someone deemed by



many to be "not quite legitimate," "unaffiliated," and/or "too provocative." The invitations I do receive invariably come from people who share both my commitment to social justice and my love for children from underserved communities who are also underrepresented in children's literature.

Professor Sarah Park Dahlen is one such individual, and she hosted my first event in Minnesota; together we formed a panel at St. Catherine University co-sponsored by the Master of Library and Information Science Program, the ALA Student Chapter, Progressive Librarians Guild, and Student Governance Organization. After reviewing the data she compiled for Lee and Low's 2015 Diversity Baseline Survey (DBS), Sarah unveiled the new graphic she commissioned to illustrate the statistics compiled annually by the Cooperative Children's Book Center.<sup>1</sup>

The DBS proves what many of us have always known: that the US publishing industry is dominated by straight, White, cis-gender women who are not disabled. The graphic designed by Sarah and her kid-lit colleagues reveals that animals and inanimate objects are better represented in children's literature than Native American children and kids of color. That kind of data made it easy for me to begin my talk by asserting, "We need to talk about white supremacy in the kid lit community."

Children may not be ready to join that conversation, but they nonetheless demonstrate a keen sense of what is and is not fair. I used the graphic in the slideshows that accompany my book talks, and it was interesting to see how students in the Twin Cities eagerly engaged with the data and the clever way it's presented. They immediately noticed that the White child is surrounded by mirrors, all of which reflect him in different heroic roles: king, superhero, firefighter, astronaut.

By contrast, the Native child and kids of color have only one mirror each; their mirrors diminish in size and only reflect the child's image, indicating that the few books about them don't represent them in anything other than realistic narratives. I'm able to address this representation gap by self-publishing books that show kids of color traveling through time, meeting ghosts,

and discovering magical creatures in their own urban neighborhoods.

On the third day of my tour, I went to Lucy Laney Elementary School with Chaun Webster, owner of Ancestry Books. Two of Chaun's children attend the majority-Black school, and his son was in the first of two second-grade classes that I visited. Literacy specialist Faye Wooten insisted that I make a grand entrance, and the children were clearly excited to be meeting an author for the first time. I told them that I started writing for children after meeting a girl who was bullied at school because her mother was in prison; the slide showed the cover of my novel alongside a bullet point stating that 2.7 million children in the United States have one incarcerated parent.<sup>2</sup> When I revealed that my older brother had spent time in jail, almost two-thirds of the students raised their hand to tell me about a family member who was also (or had once been) incarcerated. A recent blog post by Mitali Perkins reveals just a handful of books for young readers that address mass incarceration in this country—a crisis that disproportionately impacts children of color.<sup>3</sup> We don't have enough mirror books to adequately reflect the varied realities of our children, and yet one prominent editor rejected *An Angel for Mariqua* on the grounds that she felt children couldn't identify with the lonely, angry protagonist. Clearly the children she had in mind were not the children at Lucy Laney Elementary School.

As Sarah crisscrossed the Twin Cities that week, shuttling me to and from schools, public events, and my hotel, Beyoncé's *Lemonade* album played softly on the stereo. I'm not as ardent a fan as Sarah (who ventured out on a stormy spring night when the Formation World Tour arrived in Minneapolis), but my respect for Beyoncé certainly increased with the April 2016 release of her visual album and its unflinching images of Black women's suffering, resistance, and healing.

Embracing the feminist adage, "the personal is political," Beyoncé sings of betrayal within her marriage against a backdrop of images representing the nation's betrayal of African Americans: the abandonment of New Orleans's Black residents following Hurricane Katrina, and the killing of unarmed Blacks at the hands of the police. When I was asked by a homeschooling mother to develop a *Lemonade* syllabus for children (an adult syllabus had just been published by Candice Benbow), I turned to Sarah and academic librarian/blogger Edith Campbell for assistance. We published three age-specific lists on my blog

in May, and our selections reflect some of *Lemonade*'s themes: self-love, African roots, spirituality, New Orleans, the history and culture(s) of the South, Black women's activism, police brutality, and "Daddy Lessons."<sup>4</sup> That post has been viewed more than 4,500 times and continues to circulate on social media, even inspiring a pop-up library #Lemonade stand at the Newark Public Library last summer.

When my week in Minnesota ended and I returned to Brooklyn, I sat down to write and put "Formation" on steady rotation. I am not Beyoncé; I will never have her fame, wealth, or influence, and I am definitely not "flawless." But as Ysa explained, one doesn't have to be perfect to make a difference. I'm still learning how to publish quality books independently and through an industry that I experience as hostile or indifferent. But when I walk into a classroom or library or auditorium, I know that I embody possibility and I hope my twenty-five books inspire other writers of color to persist despite all the obstacles placed in our way.

We don't have to wait for the publishing industry to change its ways and become more inclusive. As Black feminist poet/activist June Jordan reminded us, "We are the ones we have been waiting for."<sup>5</sup>

## References

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