



# In the Pursuit of a Fuller Humanity: #BlackInKidLit and the Urgency of Humanizing Stories



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## PURPOSE

For years, the Humanizing Stories team has attempted to answer the following questions: What does it mean to become human? And more urgently, what are the consequences of remaining less than human? The purposes of this summer's projects are as follows: to provide a platform for Black educators, publishers, writers, illustrators, and readers to share their experiences as a Black person in children's literature; to draw connections across the persistence of anti-Black racism within society; to clarify and assess the urgent and immense changes needed in order to bring forth a social reality where all Black lives matter.

## PRECEDENT

Projects launched through Humanizing Stories this summer aimed to respond to 2020's civil unrest and racial justice organizing. #BlackInKidLit, inspired by the growing social media activism on Instagram and Twitter embodied by accounts like @blackivystories, addressed not only the lack of Black representation in children's literature but the prevailing anti-Blackness in the children's publishing and educating world. The curriculum integrating social justice and performance poetry is a direct response to the findings published by Gislaine Ngounou and Nancy Gutierrez in their paper "Learning to lead for racial equality," in which they postulate that "Professional learning about race and equity requires people to tell their stories."

## METHODS

The data gathered for the #BlackInKidLit testimony form was solicited via Instagram and collected via Google Forms. Responders were asked to describe their identities being conscious of their ethnicity, nationality, gender identity, sexuality, and ability. They were also asked to select their affiliation with children's literature as reader, writer/author, illustrator, publisher, educator, or other, and were allowed to select more than one.

## PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

A majority of responders to the #BlackInKidLit testimony form expressed frustration with the monolithic and often negative identities assigned to Black people in children's film and literature. Many of them made connections between this lack of holistic representation to an eventual disenchantment with reading and even education, doubly enforced by punitive education pedagogy and the criminalization of BIPOC in classroom settings.



SCAN FOR THE  
@BLACKINKIDLIT  
INSTAGRAM

## NEXT STEPS

One responder (self-identified as a reader and educator) observed that with the single stories of Blackness literally "the limitations of [his students'] world became more defined," harking back to the age-old adage "You can't be what you can't see." Another responder said of their role as a writer that "This, in combination with having been an educator purposely working in black/brown schools of ten years, has been the most important job of my life. I don't know where the world is going but I know I want to see our kids living and written into it."

This offers a framework for moving forward, and it is this framework that the "Social Justice and Performance Poetry" curriculum is based upon. This curriculum attempts to combat forms of despair proliferated by white supremacy by returning storytelling agency to young students of color.

When we consider next steps, it is important to emphasize that the impetus of change must not solely put on Black educators, teachers, readers, publishers, writers, and readers moving forward. It is the responsibility of non-Black people to examine the way schools criminalize and disenfranchise Black and Indigenous People of Color in classroom settings. It is the responsibility of Penn students to denounce the complicity of our institution in upholding a social reality that denies life and humanization to Black students, especially through the defense of the Penn Museum Morton Collection and the refusal to pay PILOTs (Payments In Lieu of Taxes).



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