



Healing on His Own Terms

Using Diverse Genres of Expression to Support Boys and Young Men of Color

Keith F. Miller, Jr.

“Keith, he just shut down on me,” the teaching artist said, shaking his head, defeated. “I don’t know what to do. He said he won’t do anything.”

His voice was calm but disappointed; his eyes said he was trying to solve a problem that felt unsolvable.

At the Deep Center, we support young people in Savannah, Georgia, to thrive as learners, community leaders, and agents of change. Through creative writing, cultural production, and art, we create platforms for the city’s youth and the village of support around them, including their families and adult allies, to share stories, engage in debates, and make Savannah a more just and equitable place. As both a teaching artist and director of youth programs, I work with Deep Center teaching artists and staff to find unique, innovative ways to support all of our youth, especially boys and young men of color, in using their stories and art to heal, grow, and thrive through trauma.

When this staff member came to me, I was taking

dictation from one of our other young artists. The young man next to me was describing his experiences of being racially profiled and criminalized due to his record. He was now attending a new school, but the same problem popped up. Teachers saw what was on his record, not the real person in front of them asking for help, asking to be heard, seen, or, at the very least, given a chance to learn. We had been putting together quotes for a poem he wanted to write when the teaching artist walked in from another room.

“Oh, okay, what’s going on?” I asked the other teaching artist. “Who are you talking about?”

He said a name I never expected to hear. Max (a pseudonym), an Afro-Haitian young man, was often

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the quietest voice in the room, with one earbud in as he listened to scenes from his favorite anime. Max was the one who was refusing to write.

No explanation was given. He simply said he wouldn't do it.

I traded spots with the teaching artist. As I headed into the other workshop space, the familiar Max I'm used to seeing as the embodiment of sun-kissed joy sat staring off into the distance. His square-rimmed glasses pointed away from the group; his jaws were clenched.

I gestured for him to join me outside. He got up and followed me out the door.

We sat on a curb in silence, listening to the faint whoosh of passing cars before I spoke. At the Carnegie Branch Library, a historic safe haven and site of history for Black residents, the weight of the need to get this right weighed on both of us.

"What's going on?" I started, gently. "I hear you refuse to write or revise any of your pieces. That's never happened in the past two years I've known you."

No words. He just shook his head, staring down at his feet and then at the brick wall in front of us. The blanket of silence began to fall, slowly.

I continued to wait.

If I'd learned anything over the years, especially when it came to supporting my fellow boys and young men of color, it was that anything

“ [I didn't write in the nonfiction form like everyone else because] I didn't want to be stuck. I didn't want [the personal things that were happening to me] to be something that people would feel comfortable to bring up.

Sometimes I like to let stuff go. But when someone brings it up, it's like, 'Oh...'. I don't think writing about that in that way would have helped me. It would have just made me mad. I don't want to bring that up and write angrily. I want to keep my writing chill. I don't want that out there.”

— Max

could happen, but it must happen on their terms and in their time. The world yells its demands, saying what they should do, who they should be, and why they should be that. But at times like this, I've learned that it's best to stand still and wait.

"They won't let me write what I want to write," he said, just above a whisper.

"What do you mean?"

"They said I have to try writing something else, but I don't want to. I want to write what I want to write. I don't want to write like that."

I understood. Max was our resident science fiction and fantasy writer. But our high school

program, Block by Block, had a community research (ethnography) focus. Our program goal was not only to help some of Savannah's most fearless young artists discover their own voices, but also to uplift the voices of people in their community who are often silenced, ignored, or erased altogether. Because of this focus, the

most common forms of expression in our program were passionate poems about social injustice, essays about institutional racism, and short stories about the harsh reality of our participants' lives and their hopes and dreams of changing that reality.

The year before, Max had written a beautiful sci-fi piece about gentrification in the form of a nightmare in which the houses talked to each other and a little boy was chased from his old neighborhood. Knowing he had done

“ That year, with the specific nonfiction and ethnography focus, to me, I felt like, 'No. I can't do that. Don't expect this.' I have my own way of writing and that's how the program is supposed to be. [That's how you said it would be.] It's supposed to be a place where you express your own mind, instead of just expecting only one thing.”

— Max

that, I was sure he could do it again. But I quickly realized it wasn't a matter of *could*, it was a matter of *want*.

In talking with Max now, I used that story as an example of how he could do both: write the way he wanted but also critique the real world around him. But there was a problem: I had it all wrong. From his perspective, he didn't write a story about gentrification. It was just a story about a boy having a nightmare where the houses talked. He didn't create it for us based on the themes we were covering; he created it for him simply because he wanted to. He told me so point blank.

"Okay," I said. "I see what you mean, so how about this: Tell me what you want to write about and we can figure out how to meet somewhere in the middle."

He nodded, slightly, and then explained the fantastical story he wanted to explore. His face lit up, his jaw relaxed, and he leaned in as he spoke. Although I was listening to everything he said, it wasn't his words that caught my attention; it was his eyes. They were on fire, dreaming in real time. They were desperate to tell a story that only he could tell and in the only way he could tell it.

"I like that. I think you're onto something. But can I ask you a question?"

The light in his eyes dimmed a little. He'd worked with me long enough to know that Mr. Keith, as he affectionately called me, had a habit of asking the hard questions. He knew he didn't always have to answer them, but they would require deep thinking, regardless.

"Yes?"

"Why don't you want to write about what's going on—"

"I just don't want to write about that kind of stuff. I don't enjoy it. I want to write about what I want to write

“It’s not necessarily if you can’t write nonfiction, you should write science fiction. It should be a choice. In writing sci-fi, [youth] are trying to write what they want to say and what’s going on with them in their way, so they can get it off their chest. But in reality, they can’t really say it how they want to say it [because it may be too difficult]. But when they are forced [to write nonfiction], they are being forced to say it how the other person wants them to. Say for instance a person is having trouble in school. It’s like saying, ‘Tell me what’s going on but don’t tell me the reason for the problem.’ And it doesn’t have to be a teacher, that goes for anyone.”

— Max

about. I don't want to be made to do something I don't want to do."

He sat there shaking his head softly. He wasn't yelling. He wasn't arguing. He was simply stating how he felt.

And I had two choices: hear him or hear him.

"I get it. And I think that's fair," I replied, softly. "I don't want you to write about anything that you don't want to write about. But can you make me a promise?"

A smirk appeared. He looked at me, wondering. "Maybe."

"I'll let you write about whatever you want to. And if I have any say in what you choose, I think you should definitely write about the story you just shared with me. If you want me

to, I'll become your personal editor and make sure we get it over the finish line to get published."

"Okay," he replied, waiting for the "but." This was a negotiation and he knew it.

"But," I laughed, confirming his suspicions, "I still want you to push yourself. You have a gift with words, and I honestly believe if you experiment with other genres, it'll only strengthen your sci-fi and fantasy work. But you don't have to do it alone. I'll be there to help you, if you want me to."

He stared back, deliberating. There was enough trust and curiosity for him to nod. "Okay."

I quickly pulled out a pen and asked him to tell me the names of the books he'd been reading recently and the anime he was currently watching. I promised I would watch at least one of the shows that weekend.

When we returned to the workshop, I instructed him to write as hard and fast as he could, bringing to life the story he had just shared. As I debriefed with my fellow teaching artist about our conversation, we both watched as Max's fingers sped across the keyboard,

every keystroke bringing something new into being: a world of his own making.

In the following weeks, Max would write a beautiful science fiction piece about the glorious battle of an underdog triumphing against nearly impossible odds. Max invented a character who had to engage with forces perceived to be more powerful than himself—as Max himself did. Through willpower, this character would always find a way to win, or at least keep standing.

During this time, Max also produced a poem—proof that he was willing to challenge himself and step out of his comfort zone. This development reminded

me that, when we challenge our young people to produce across diverse genres, they not only find their collective and individual voices but also discover the unique ways they can tell stories and explore topics of significant value to them. For example, the poem Max ended up writing was about greed and how it changes us—how it forces us to value self over others, warping and distorting us from the inside out, until we no longer recognize ourselves. This was the first time Max vocalized to others his personal values and how he believed we should move through the world. But it was also an opportunity for Max to realize that he could experiment, flexing his creative muscles while stepping out of his comfort zone.

In the youth artist showcase that year, Max performed his poem on a stage in front of nearly 400 of his peers and members of the community. That year's program publication featured both his science fiction piece and his poem.

As a result of what I learned from Max, and in partnership with an innovative graduate student at the University of Georgia, Stephanie R. Toliver, who was studying sci-fi and Afrofuturism as tools for promoting

“ At first, the experience of being expected to write nonfiction was agitating. It felt like they wanted me to change this and that because of what we were supposed to do for the program. But when the director sat me down and said, ‘Write what you want,’ I felt free. And even when I did write poetry, because I don’t like poems and I feel I suck at them, being able to write what I want to allowed me to make it more sinister, something different. I ended up liking that and expanding what I thought poetry was in my own way, which was inspired by an anime I’d seen mixed with some other things of my personality. ”

— Max

critical literacy in youth of color, my program created an Afrofuturism unit. This unit enabled our youth to strengthen their creative muscles and envision the worlds they wanted to exist, addressing social ills and injustices in all kinds of technological, psychological, physical, and even spiritual innovations and settings. We were opening our eyes to the many ways our youth could tell stories.

On top of that, when the movie *Black Panther* was released the following year, we were able to take all of our youth and their families to see the movie and enjoy popcorn, candy, and a beverage at no cost to them. For the first time, we were able to touch the lives of our

entire community through one of the most important pride- and culture-building points of the year. People could participate no matter where they lived or how much money they had. All of our youth and their families experienced the hope that sci-fi, fantasy, and Afrofuturism can bring: the ability to envision a new reality, no matter how harsh the present might be, and do so joyfully, together.

This experience taught me a valuable lesson that continually shapes the way the Deep Center supports our young artists across our programs. We had always encouraged young people—especially those in the Young Authors Project, one of our introductory programs primarily serving middle school students—to write in diverse genres. However, by the time participants got to our intermediate high school program, we had started, unintentionally, to privilege nonfiction and poetry as the most legitimate forms of expression. One reason was that those genres mirrored the expertise of our teaching artists. Another was the ethnographic lens and social justice focus at the heart of our programming.

Even though I was myself a lover of sci-fi and

fantasy short stories since middle school, I had never thought to champion this form of writing as a possible manifestation of our social justice and ethnographic focus. Admittedly, I never felt confident enough to teach the form, which is why it had always simply remained a hobby. I didn't realize that sci-fi and fantasy were by their very nature and creation acts of resistance. I didn't yet see the significance of the way Afrofuturism dared to envision a future free from the oppression many people of color have experienced over hundreds of years and continue to experience today. Learning the fundamentals of teaching sci-fi, fantasy, and Afrofuturism with

Stephanie's guidance opened up a new world for me and our staff. Then we opened this new world to our youth and, by extension, to our entire community.

Whether educators realize it or not, not all students want to write about the very real things around them that hurt them. In fact, to force them to do so is an act of violence. We risk retraumatizing our youth if we don't equip ourselves with the tools to facilitate expression in diverse genres so they can explore their healing journey in their own way and on their terms.

In Max's case, the truth was quite painful: A teacher bullied him for an entire semester. Even as his single mother tirelessly advocated on his behalf, he progressively shut down. He didn't want to write about the pain, anxiety, and stress he experienced every day as a result of this experience. Specifically, he didn't want to be forced to write about such traumatic events in his safe and brave space, Block by Block. However, through the power of his preferred genre, he could rewrite the battle into one where he won, where justice was served, and where he didn't have to feel like a victim but was instead the victor.

Afterschool educators sometimes encourage program participants to write heartfelt stories that

“ It makes me feel proud to know I was able to change something in our program. [Writing our stories the way we want to] helps us. It helps us let stuff go ... write down our problems and get it off our chest. When we do that—when I do that—you actually feel happy and excitement. It lets you let the weight go. That's how it is for me.... When I finish a piece and put down my pen and paper [after writing] the way I want, I don't just stop there. I'm thinking of part two. In my head, I'm thinking, 'Wow ... I'm proud of what I did, and I'm going to do it again and again and again. ”

— Max

make us feel better about the work we're doing. We want to feel we're making a difference, that we're empowering our young people to speak truth to power and win. In some cases, we might be. But we must respect each young person's journey and intentionally create space for cathartic storytelling without retraumatizing them.

Max taught me the power of listening. When we dare to push beyond our own limited perspective of what we think should be and the stories we think need to be told, we instead find ourselves on the cusp of transformative healing, radical hope, and limitless possibilities.

The possibilities inspire us as practitioners and the young people and communities we serve to live, love, think, create, and feel differently—together.