

My Esperanza Rising

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When I was younger and money was tight, Mami could not afford to buy me the extensive collection of blonde-haired, slim-hipped Barbie dolls that my best friend owned, but she always found money to buy me books. She would spend whatever dollars she had left at the end of the month at a tiny department store where kids' books were as cheap as a dollar. My favorite was *Esperanza Rising*, a book about a young woman who moves from Mexico to California, because the fluid curls of the girl on the cover and the shards of Spanish embedded within the pages reminded me so much of myself. When the kids at school decided to ignore me, the new girl who cried too easily, I had the refuge of my books. And in those moments of solace, I first began to realize the immense power of storytelling.

Today, I still fall in love with stories, but storytelling faces a serious problem. Only three percent of all children's books have Latino protagonists, greatly reducing the chances that a little brown girl somewhere will find the *Esperanza Rising* of her own. Stories in television and films are the same. Despite droplets of diversity on television networks, writers still fall into potholes of tropes or stereotypes. Most glaringly, Hollywood's silver screens leave no room for brown anywhere. This year, not a single actor or actress of color has been nominated for an Oscar.

People have argued that there are more important problems than the Academy Awards.

It's true. There are so many problems that keep people of color in the United States awake at night: police brutality, income inequality, the myth of the meritocracy, and respectability politics, among others. But the Oscars still matter.

Having no people of color nominated this year is a symptom of an epidemic of storytelling where we are nothing more than brown phantoms. The Oscars remind us that the formulaic route to success is as narrow as ever and refuses to include us. A brown face is not universal or marketable unless we are willing to be Sofia Vergara rotating like an Emmy statuette or El Frito Bandito stealing jewelry and jobs. We cannot find our own reflections anywhere; in the words of Junot Díaz, we are cultural vampires.

It is easy to dismiss concerns of not being able to see yourself reflected in stories as shallow if you have never felt it. But I can tell you that growing up when you are everywhere and nowhere is hard. It starts with something as little as a sleepover where everyone laughs because you are too dark to try on your friend's make-up. But slowly, it grows into shame that you are the darkest one in your classroom, and anger that your hair continues to frizz and curl, *pelo malo*, instead of falling to your shoulders in a waterfall like it's supposed to.

It hurts to realize that if you want to tell the stories that live in your soul about places where mangos drip off trees and rain falls like nickels on tin roofs, you will have to work twice as hard to be seen as half as good. It is painful to try and break the glass ceiling of

storytelling only to realize that there is one made of steel above it. It hurts to discover, as Rupi Kaur writes, that our backs tell stories that no books have the spine to carry.

How do we fix the crisis of storytelling? I like to imagine that Chimamanda Adichie is right when she says that stories can break the dignity of a people, but they can also repair that broken dignity. It is not something that any one storyteller can fix; it is work we must all do together. We must learn to tell stories, and we must learn to hear them. We must remember that until the lion learns to write, every story will glorify the hunter. We must become unafraid of stitching our stories together. We must step outside of our cultural zones of contact; and no, it is not enough to read a book by Junot Díaz and self-congratulate your efforts. We must listen to the words that we have tuned out and the tongues that we have silenced, beginning with those in our everyday lives. We must listen to stories as we would the crash of waves or the roar of thunder, remembering that there are always things out there that are bigger than ourselves.