

Dion O.

Berkeley, California

Untitled

Multimedia sculpture

In my research prior to making this piece, I dove back into five of my favorite books – *Inside Out & Back Again* by Thanhha Lai, *Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson, *On A Sunbeam* and *Are You Listening* by Tillie Walden, and *The Magic Fish* by Trung Le Nguyen. I make art because I see work by others that inspires me, so it felt right to focus my research on some of my favorite artists and writers. In addition to the authors and illustrators of these books I was also inspired by Candice Lin and Cathy Lu, specifically their textile and sculptural pieces. Originally this piece was going to have two sides, but I revised my plan and chose to create only one side so I wouldn't be stretching my time and energy too thin. The concepts and visuals from the artists and works I researched both influenced my process and helped me create a piece I'm proud of.

On Reading and Growing Up



Dion O.

The Oxbow School

OS48

Writer's Note: How much can another person's work affect you? How different would you be if you'd never found your favorite writer or your favorite artist? My writing talks about books that have been important to me in different stages of my life and how they've affected me.

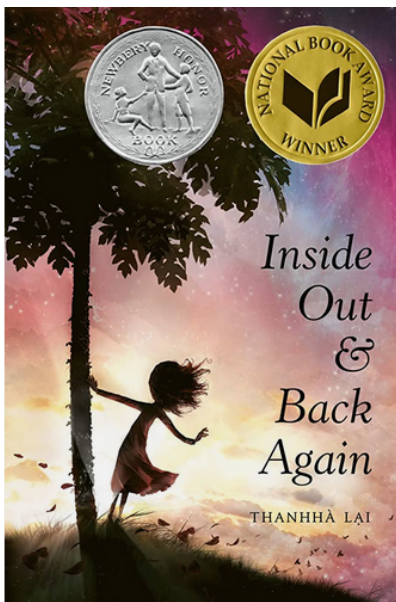
I.

This paper was originally going to be a summary of what I learned while researching Filipino art throughout different time periods, namely before, during, and after colonial times. Although I enjoyed the research aspect and learning about Philippine arts as well as folklore and mythology, when I reached the point where I needed to begin writing, I was hit with a wave of apathy and dissatisfaction. I realized despite the fact that I was passionate about the topic I'd chosen, I really didn't want to spend my time regurgitating what I'd learned onto a page. This was confusing to me at first because I enjoyed talking to others about my research and telling them what I'd learned. Was that not also just regurgitating information? But the experiences of talking and writing are different, and enjoying one doesn't equate to enjoying the other.

When choosing my topic for this paper, I'd thoroughly convinced myself that I didn't want the focus to be my personal experiences. I thought that doing research and writing about what I found would be easier and less stressful. I didn't want to have to put my own thoughts and feelings into writing, because that's what I do with art. With art I can express things in a way that's direct to me, but not necessarily to whoever is viewing it. With writing, at least in this form, what I write is exactly what someone will read, and there's less room for different interpretations. When writing poetry the same thing doesn't necessarily apply because the genre allows me to be less clear and still get my thoughts, feelings, and experiences across. In my mind, it acts as a kind of scale; prose

and visual art are on opposite sides of the spectrum, with poetry somewhere in the middle. It's uncomfortable for my experiences to be viewed so directly without the veil of images to blur them, which is why I prefer art as a form of expression.

After all of this reflection, stepping back and understanding why I was unable to go through with what I thought would be the simplest option, as well as understanding that I don't want to write directly about my personal experiences, I've come to the conclusion that what I want is to write about how the writing of others has affected me.



The cover of *Inside Out & Back Again* by Thanhha Lai.

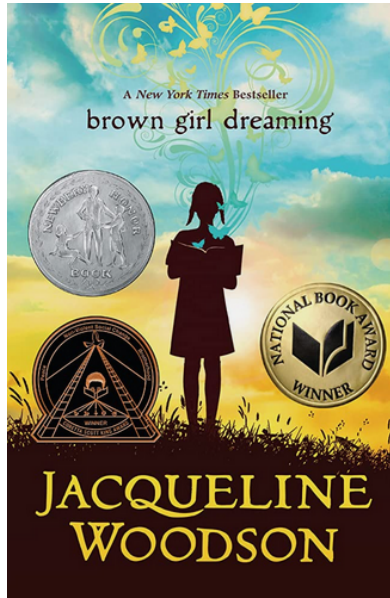
II.

I don't remember exactly when I picked up Thanhha Lai's *Inside Out & Back Again*, but I know it was sometime during elementary school. I hadn't read much, if any, poetry at that point, and this book was definitely my introduction to the free verse style of poetry. The book tells the story of a ten year old girl whose family is forced to flee to America from Vietnam. She has to leave everything she's ever known and navigate a new country where she doesn't speak the language.

Her experiences are very specific to her own life and story, but they also encapsulate the general feeling of not fitting in.

I did not experience the things described in *Inside Out & Back Again*. I was born in America and speak only English. At the point in my life in which I was reading the book, I don't think I'd even comprehended that my dad and his family had experienced a similar process when he was just three. But nonetheless, I loved the book. Years later I would talk to my dad about his experiences, such as how he grew up as the one of the only people of color in his Virginia high school. I would also analyze my own experiences with my predominantly white friend group in middle school. But even before I began to make these connections, *Inside Out & Back Again* was still meaningful to me.

Things like this help me see how important it is to represent all kinds of people and experiences in media, because even if the person reading doesn't understand the full extent and significance of the story, it can still be meaningful to them. I think this is especially important in children's media because kids should be able to see themselves represented in the things they watch and read.. It's also important for them to see representations of people different from them because it helps them learn to be accepting of others. Being exposed to different backgrounds and experiences is important both as a child and an adult. Media can be a powerful tool in teaching people respect or close mindedness.



The cover of *Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson.

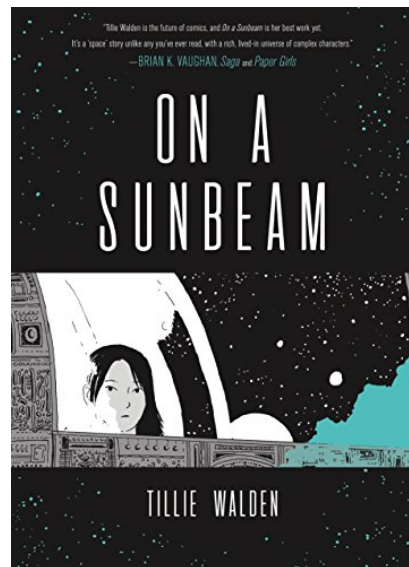
III.

The first favorite book I remember having was Jacqueline Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming*. It tells the story of Woodson's childhood through free verse, talking about her family, places she lived, and how she discovered her love for writing. It's a description of her personal life, but also a description of how it felt to grow up as a Black girl in the 1960s in both South Carolina and New York. Although she and I had very different experiences, I saw pieces of myself and my life described in her book.

For a very long time, I didn't think of myself as brown. I didn't necessarily think of myself as white, but brown wasn't a word I'd use to describe myself. When I was around 11 years old, my mom's friend gave me a pin that said "She's brown, she's smart." I really admired the person who gave it to me and appreciated the gift, but I never put it on a jacket or bag. I felt like I wasn't "brown enough" to wear it, whether or not I knew the exact reason at the time. A year or two later I would think back on it and come to the conclusion that I wouldn't wear it because she/her

pronouns weren't right for me, which isn't incorrect, but isn't the real reason I felt uncomfortable wearing the pin.

I am genuinely happy with the way I grew up, and I wouldn't change it. But I lived predominantly with my white mother and grandparents, which probably contributed to me not identifying with the word brown. I saw my dad every week and visited relatives on his side of the family every year or so, but I don't remember talking to him about being Filipino until much later. Eventually, he told me that his parents had purposefully not taught him or his sister Tagalog because they wanted them to assimilate when they moved to America. My dad describes Tagalog as feeling like his parent's secret language, something they used to speak about things they didn't want him or his sister to hear. It makes me a little sad that I didn't get to grow up speaking Tagalog because my dad's parents consciously chose not to teach it to him, but I can't change that and I've made my peace with it. I plan to try and learn the language eventually, but for now just hearing people speak it in the Filipino market I visit is enough to make me feel content.



The cover of *On a Sunbeam* by Tillie Walden.

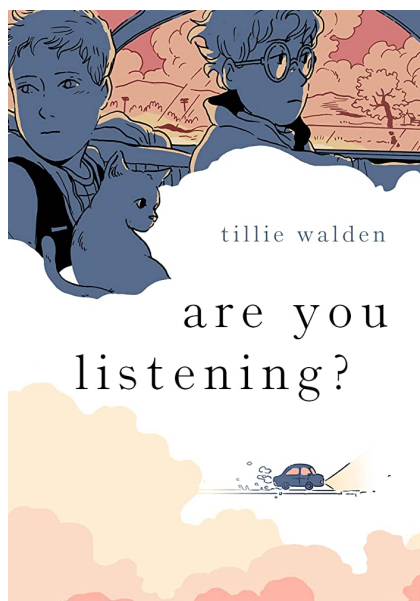
IV.

In 2019, I was in Harrisonburg, Virginia for a memorial service for my Lola and Tita.¹ While I was there, I picked up a copy of *On a Sunbeam* by Tillie Walden in a Barnes & Noble. When I got back to the hotel my mom and I were staying at, I sat down and started reading it. I finished the book in one sitting.

I'd always liked the idea of sci-fi but I was more often drawn towards fantasy because there seemed to be less rules. In sci-fi things needed an explanation, whereas in fantasy anything could happen and the explanation could just be magic. *On a Sunbeam* challenges that, creating an engaging sci-fi world without feeling the need to have an explanation for everything. It helped me realize that rules imposed onto art and writing can and should be broken, as it can often make the work better.

This informed my own artwork and made the process more freeing and enjoyable to me. I started working on a project I wanted to eventually make into a webcomic that shared a similar style of sci-fi world. I put in all of the things I thought were cool and didn't worry so much about how they worked. I just enjoyed the creative process. I drew different fantastical planets, designed characters to explore them, and more. It never became a webcomic as I hoped, as I worked on it during the height of quarantine and eventually became too busy coming back to "normal" life to devote as much time to it. But I credit this project for a lot of my improvement in digital art, and I credit *On a Sunbeam* as inspiration for the project. Not only was the book meaningful to me as a person, but also to me as an artist.

¹ "Lola" is the Tagalog word for grandmother and "Tita" is the Tagalog word for aunt.



The cover of *Are You Listening?* By Tillie Walden.

V.

After discovering *On a Sunbeam* and lending it to all of my friends for them to read, I started looking to see if Walden had published any other books. When I found out she had, I ordered all of them. I read all of them as soon as they arrived, and although I was still enamored by Walden's art, none of the stories impacted me as much as *On a Sunbeam* had. I think this is partly because I related to them less, but mostly because of the time in my life in which I found *On a Sunbeam*. I'm sure if I'd discovered it sooner or later than I did I would still love it, but perhaps it wouldn't have had such a powerful effect on me. I was still grappling with my sexuality and gender at the time, and seeing both openly queer people and a character explicitly stated to be nonbinary was incredibly meaningful to me.

Not too long after, Walden published *Are You Listening?* I ordered it as soon as I heard about it, and started reading it as soon as it arrived. I ended up reading it in one sitting, just like *On a Sunbeam*. I had a strong sense of déjà vu after finishing the book, although the stories were very different and Walden's art had changed and grown. *Are You Listening?* was still second to

On a Sunbeam to me at the time, but after rereading it again and again, it took the place of my favorite Tillie Walden book.

The more I think about Walden's work and the effects it's had on me, the more I see the importance of the time in your life in which you discover things. I also see that even though the books never changed, the changes I went through gave new meaning to them each time I read them. I'm forever grateful that I discovered Walden's work, because not only did it impact me as a person, but it also impacted my own art. I look up to Walden's style of illustration and the masterful way she used limited color palettes, and I don't think I'd be nearly as passionate about art if I hadn't found her work.



The cover of *The Magic Fish* by Trung Le Nguyen.

VI.

While visiting my dad in Truckee last year, we went to a bookstore where I bought Trung Le Nguyen's *The Magic Fish*. Like with most graphic novels I pick up, I was drawn in by the art style and colors. The book is about a second generation Vietnamese boy who helps his mother learn

English through fairy tales. He struggles with coming out to her and his father, unsure if there's even a way to describe what he's feeling in Vietnamese.

I didn't have this experience. As I talked about before, not only do I not know Tagalog, but neither does my dad. I didn't have this language barrier when coming out to my parents, nor did I really have anything to fear in their reaction. But it was difficult nonetheless, and although these experiences are different, neither is more or less "real." This comes back to seeing and understanding other people's experiences, because even if two people have had to do the same thing, that doesn't mean the outcome will be the same. Coming out can be freeing for some and dangerous for others, for some people it seems necessary and for others it doesn't. I don't think there should be shame in experiencing different things, just respect and acceptance and love.

VII.

There's no doubt that many pieces of media have greatly influenced me as a person and as an artist. I absolutely wouldn't be as passionate about art if I hadn't been exposed to the art of others. I focus on books in this paper, but everything from paintings, music, films, and podcasts have impacted me throughout my life. I'll always be grateful to everyone out there creating things that they're passionate about. They're the reason I'm able to do the things I love.

Works Cited

- Lai, Thanhha. *Inside Out & Back Again*. HarperCollins, 2011.
- Nguyen, Trung Le. *The Magic Fish*. Random House Graphic, 2020.
- Walden, Tillie. *Are You Listening?* First Second, 2019.
- Walden, Tillie. *On a Sunbeam*. First Second, 2018.
- Woodson, Jacqueline. *Brown Girl Dreaming*. Penguin Group, 2014.