

# “Why Keisha Can’t Write”: The Marginalization of Black Student Writing

A writing teacher responds to the famous essay “Why Johnny Can’t Write.”

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BOOKMARK “WHY KEISHA CAN’T WRITE”...

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Topic: Race & Ethnicity

They say Keisha can’t write.

More than 40 years ago, Merrill Sheils wrote the infamous “Why Johnny Can’t Write,” a classic opinion piece vehemently blaming creativity and culture for every flaw and shortcoming in young Americans’ writing—and for the alleged impending scholastic doom.

His proof? Test scores and statistics of the time, indicating increased failure rates for introductory college writing courses and the increased need for remedial writing classes to help students. Sheils said the numbers say it all, but I say that they don’t account for everyone. They don’t account for students who look like Keisha.

Keisha is a precocious black child, just starting eighth grade. She loves reading, writing and creating. At home, she writes poetry in a little blue notebook under her bed just about every day. On some days, she writes about the sun and the clouds, and on others, she writes about her thick wooly hair, how it feels between her fingers and how her mother says it’s like the hair of Jesus himself.

She listens to old Jesse Jackson speeches with her mother, and she totes around her daddy’s copy of the Malcolm X autobiography. Although she doesn’t understand everything in the book, its mere presence makes her feel special. Sometimes, her mom tells her stories about “Lil’ JoJo and them” and how they used to run together back in the day, when they were Keisha’s age. She hears about how this one “won’t no good” and how that one “sho ‘nuff told it” and how she didn’t fool with so and so “like talkin’ about.”

This slang, this culture woven somewhere in between her homework, her blue poetry notebook and her conversations at home, is normal. It floats effortlessly throughout the halls of Keisha’s home, adorned with family photos, African artwork and college degrees.

This is comfort.

It’s all good, until comfort escapes the confines of the house.

When Keisha enters the school, discomfort pervades her body. All of a sudden, her wooly hair weighs down her head. It’s a burden. It means non-black classmates asking, “Why isn’t yours straight like mine?” and “Why is it so oily?” Her Malcolm X book makes her hands sweat. The embarrassment burns. The stares do too. School and black pride just don’t mesh. She can’t relate to the Shakespeare or the Mark Twain forced down her throat in English class, but she still throws Malcolm X in her locker in exchange for Mark Twain. There is no room for both. But some days, walking around with Mark is even more embarrassing than walking around with Malcolm. At least she sees herself in Malcolm.

***“The subjective, intimate, contextual exercise of writing has been forced into a box many sizes too small, only to then be watered down and force-fed to students.”***

We’re more than 40 years removed from Shiels’ essay, and here we are. “Why Johnny Can’t Write” helped to speed education standardization, and today we’re left picking up the pieces. Writing is tested and standardized.

The subjective, intimate, contextual exercise of writing has been forced into a box many sizes too small, only to then be watered down and force-fed to students. As a result, standardized test scores for writing continue to fall for students of color. Last school year, in my Virginia hometown, only 61 percent of Black students passed the state-required writing Standards of Learning (SOL) Test, compared to almost 90 percent of white students.

Keisha sits down to write an essay for class. Her writing voice is descriptive and rich with culture. Her writing has its own flavor. It has a particular cadence to it too; it reads almost like a ballad. She writes about her wooly hair and how kids tease her about it. She writes about her love for herself and describes it as a constant battle. When her mother reads it, she can smell the sweet cocoa butter used to moisturize her hair, and she can taste the bitter pain her daughter regularly feels as her classmates react to her blackness. It is clear: The child has a way with words.

As a college writing instructor, I’ve had the pleasure of meeting many students of color who excel in writing. Some use description so vividly that their words come to life on my desk as I grade. Others produce work so concise that I know every word was hand-picked. Ironically, these same scholars often share how they’ve been told that they can’t write, how in high school they were told they should take remedial classes. The essence of “Why Johnny Can’t Write”—an intolerance for diversity and creativity and an inclination toward standardization and the rote—has the power to stop brilliant writing before it even starts. Students like Keisha must be given a chance to see their potential before the dream-crushers convince them to believe otherwise.

So Keisha turns in her essay. She and her parents have high expectations. To their surprise, the teacher gives the paper a C. Keisha is stunned. All of her T’s are crossed, all of her I’s are dotted. Her subject-verb agreement never falters. She did not receive a C for missing the rudiments of eighth-grade writing. Keisha received a C because she refused to give her teacher a regurgitated version of what was dictated to her in class; her essay did not flow like the tired, watered-down, standardized templates and examples. She gave her paper some flavor, for which her teacher’s palette was not prepared—and may possibly never be.

“If your children are attending college, the chances are that when they graduate they will be unable to write ordinary, expository English with any real degree of structure and lucidity,” claims Sheils.

In my experience, Sheils is right, to a certain extent. The Keishas I’ve come across can’t write *ordinary* expository English. The students I know have the literary canon of James Baldwin, the poetic spirit of Maya Angelou and the fierce passion of Toni Morrison and Ta-Nehesi Coates. The students I know write *extraordinary* expository English.

Thanks to standardized education, closed minds and limited worldviews, extraordinary may never be enough.

There’s still not enough room.

This is why Keisha can’t write. This is why we educators must make room.

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