DAY 16: The Power of Representation

“You can’t be what you can’t see.” – Marian Wright Edelman, Founder and President of the Children’s Defense Fund

By 2060, the country’s racial makeup is expected to change dramatically, with one in three Americans—32 percent of the population—projected to be a race other than white. And yet portrayals of our country’s demography – in the media, among our elected officials, and within the business community– do not square with the increasing diversity of our populace.

Representation refers to the basic idea that if people see those like them reflected in a given space, they are more likely to identify with and be able to imagine themselves as belonging there. Importantly, the reverse is also true.

Historically, Black people and marginalized groups– Native Americans, people with disabilities and women– have been both underrepresented and misrepresented on-screen. What we do or don’t see– has a unique power both to inspire us to achieve our goals and to perpetuate harmful stereotypes that keep historically excluded people from reaching their full potential.

Why does this matter? Whether and how people and characters carrying our identities are represented are indicators of our values and the stories that we tell– about ourselves, about groups of people, about our society (see the visual below). What if those representations were inaccurate, or harmful?

About this image: Kyra Harris Bolden, the first Black female Michigan Supreme Court Justice.

Share your reflections on today’s topic on social media using the hashtag #unitedforequity or #uwwcequitychallenge and tag @uwwashtenaw.
Today’s Challenge:

Listen:

- Listen to this segment of Washtenaw United on WEMU, featuring Iman Grewal of HOPE Scholars at Eastern Michigan University, where she shares how they are leveraging the power of representation to recruit and retain a more diverse generation of teachers.
- Listen to this episode of Both And, where hosts Beth and Leila define “representation,” talk about the research behind the importance of representation, and wonder what a recognized and represented multiracial community would look like in the media.

Read:

- Did you know that as a result of the 2022 midterm elections: 1) Ypsilanti voters made history by electing Nicole Brown, a Black woman to serve as the city’s mayor for the first time. 2) Ann Arbor’s new city council is the most diverse in the city’s history.
- Learn about the unintended consequences of Michigan’s 2020 redistricting efforts, which gave Democrats the key to take over the House and Senate after winning the majority in both chambers, but subsequently stripped down the political power of Black residents.
- Has the emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion by American companies resulted in actual leadership changes? Read this piece which details progress on corporate leadership by race and gender.

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Watch:

- Watch this video featuring young people sharing the power of on-screen representation and how impactful it is to see people and characters who share their identities.
- Watch this short film in which nonspeaking autistic people talk about how nonspeakers are represented in books, theatre, and film. They provide guidance for changing the narrative.
- Watch Aisha Thomas's TEDx talk, which challenges us to imagine a world where all races are represented in all aspects of life.

Act:

- Journal, reflect and share:
  - How does it make you feel to think about the representation of people in power and the media versus the people you see in your day-to-day life?
  - Why is it that so often, the people we see on screen are not like us? (Or, if they look like us, they are often stereotyped and not complex like we are.)
  - What's something you will carry with you based on what you learned today?

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