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Systemic Barriers That Exclude BIPOC Authors From Literary Awards and the Proposed Solutions to Evoke Change

Devyn Yan Radke
Portland State University

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**Systemic Barriers That Exclude BIPOC Authors From Literary
Awards and the Proposed Solutions to Evoke Change**

Devyn Yan Radke

Portland State University

Book Publishing Graduate Program: Masters Thesis

Research Question

What are the systemic barriers that exclude BIPOC authors from major literary awards and, using the scope of the National Book Award for Fiction, what can literary committees do to eliminate those barriers?

Abstract

This research aims to 1) provide an in-depth analysis of the National Book Award (NBA), with a focus on Lisa Lucas, her commitment to diversity, and how it has impacted the awards, 2) identify the systemic barriers BIPOC authors may experience that are setbacks from being recognized in literary awards, and 3) the importance of diversity in book publishing professional executive positions.

I. Introduction

The first literary award dates back to Ancient Greece in the 6th century when Athenians would award playwrights during the Dionysia festival (English, 2005). Literary awards were created to recognize the achievement of great writing and, for centuries, have been a reflection of popular culture and politics that continues to transform the literary world. Literary awards have become prestigious in the modern-day literary world as they can “shape an author’s future income, career, and reputation” (Harper, 2013). Some of the major literary awards are notably: The Nobel Prize in Literature, The Pulitzer Prize, National Book Award (NBA), and the Booker Prize. These literary awards are prestigious and are seen as the benchmark of success. The issue is the lack of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) prizewinners in for these awards. This fact is an issue that stems from a history of systemic racism and the exclusion of minorities.

It’s no secret that there is a large racial gap between BIPOC publishing professionals and their White counterparts throughout the book publishing industry. In 2019, The Diversity Baseline Survey by Lee & Low Books showed that the publishing industry is about 76% White (Lee & Low Books, 2020). The data collection illustrates the lack of diversity that is indicative of the barriers and gatekeeping in the industry. These underlying socially and politically ingrained barriers inherently exclude BIPOC authors from being recognized in literary awards. This paper offers an in-depth case study of the National Book Foundation (The Foundation) and how its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts (DEI) has increased racial diversity in the

literary awards. This paper also addresses potential barriers that BIPOC authors might experience when being recognized for literary awards and how literary boards can dismantle those barriers.

II. Methodology

This paper uses deductive reasoning through in-depth research of archives and interviews. This research began with observing patterns in the book publishing industry and within The Foundation's award recipients to draw conclusions about the barriers of BIPOC authors in literary awards. The data presented and conclusions are not meant to be a critique of The Foundation, awarded authors, or their books. This research focuses on the NBA for Fiction prizewinners to see patterns in diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts made by Lisa Lucas.

The first step was gathering and analyzing qualitative data, such as archival research, that was provided by The Foundation. Archival research includes a master list of prizewinners, their prizewinning books, and the year awarded. After compiling a list of prizewinners in an Excel spreadsheet, the next step was conducting further research into the author's background with a focus on their education, profession(s), gender, and racial or ethnic identity. Each research section ties back to claims around gatekeeping and barriers to the awards. These sections, combined with the statistics about the publishing industry makeup, inform the progression of The Foundation's commitment to diversity and inclusion.

Other qualitative data includes a case study about The Foundation with a focus on Lisa Lucas, the previous chairwoman of The Foundation. The focus on Lucas stems from her mission statement to diversify the awards when she became chairwoman for The Foundation from 2016 to 2020, years that contained the most racially diverse set of prizewinners in a 4-year time span. The purpose of this research is to identify those barriers, how Lucas implemented her mission to diversity, and how other literary award committees can aid in eliminating or diminishing those barriers for BIPOC authors. Analyzing the NBA for Fiction prizewinners, the process of selecting finalists and prizewinners, and in-depth research about systemic barriers within the publishing industry, aids to inform conclusions about systemic barriers and solutions for literary award committees.

Author Identity

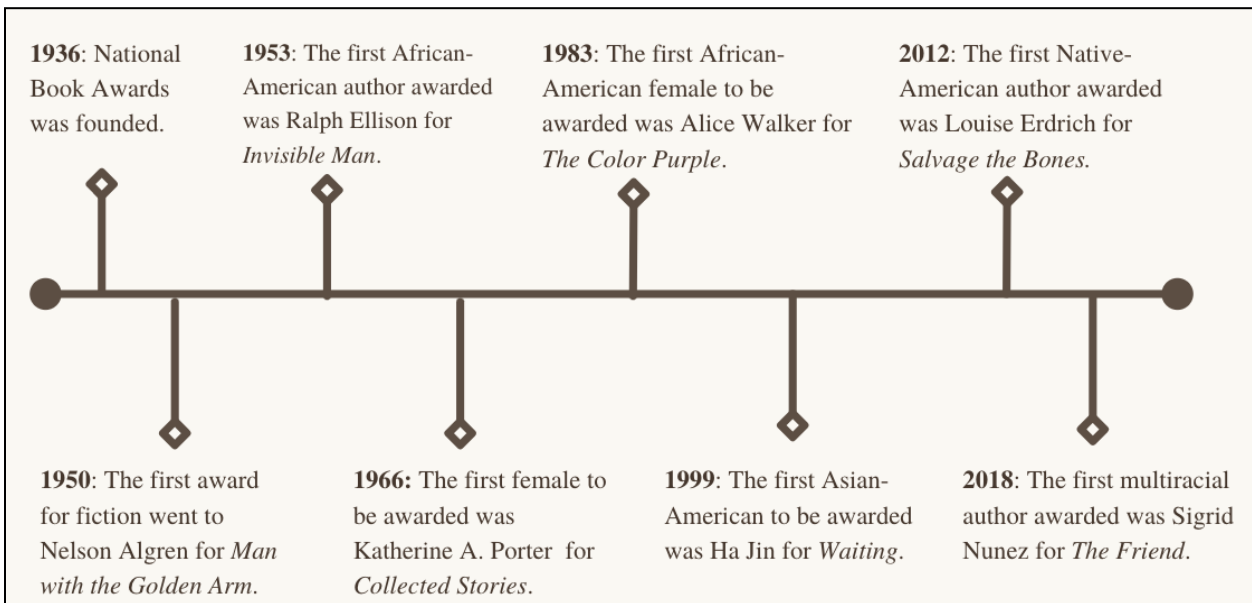
To avoid presuming an author's identity based on names or perceived skin color, the background information is provided by The Foundation, personal websites, and printed biography books. As per their guidelines, The Foundation only awards authors who are American, meaning authors who are permanent residents of the United States. All authors are listed as American, but some are immigrants, first-generation immigrants, or have a family heritage that points to racial identifiers. For instance, Sigrid Nunez, author of *The Friend* (2018), was born in New York to a German mother and a Chinese-Panamanian father, both of whom are immigrants. In the research, Nunez is listed as "multiracial" due to her family heritage, despite being born in the United States. In the same scope, to avoid assuming how an author identified themselves when it came to gender, the research recorded gender based on the gender pronouns used in author biographies or interviews.

III. National Book Awards Foundation: A Case Study

Historical Overview

The NBA was established in 1936 by the American Book Association with the fiction category first being awarded in 1950. Its mission statement is to "celebrate the best literature in America, expand its audience, and ensure that books have a prominent place in American culture" (*How the awards work*, 2019). This has been in The Foundation's mission statement since the beginning of its website in 1998. The Foundation currently awards for the following genres: fiction, nonfiction, poetry, translated literature, and young people's literature. They have honored over 2,7000 titles and authors throughout their genres. Since the fiction award's creation, there have been 70 different prizewinners, nine repeat prizewinners, and 376 finalists. In regards to racial diversity, The Foundation has experienced some significant milestones.

NBA for Fiction: Milestones



Source: See Notes Section

Award Logistics

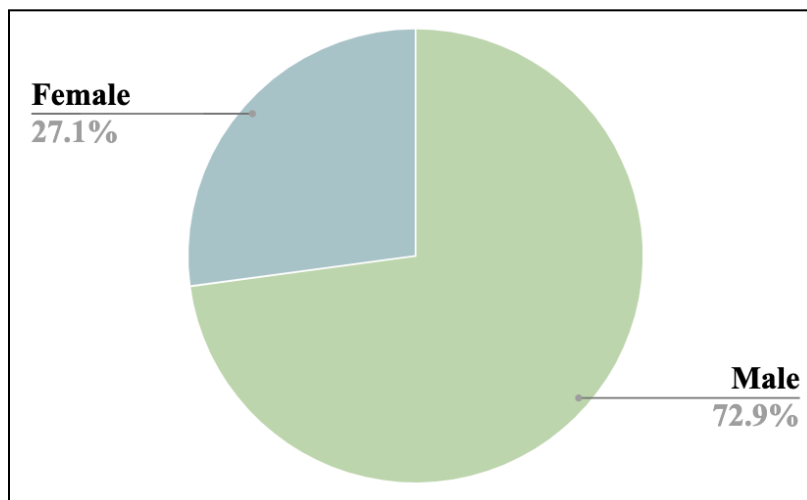
Books are submitted by publishers only, but the Executive Director and any judging panel can request that a publisher submit a book for consideration. Books must have been published within the year of the award cycle and self-published books are not considered. Each awarded category has a panel of five judges who are deemed as “experts” within the genre. Judges are nominated by previous panels and then chosen by the Executive Director of The Foundation. They are a combination of distinguished writers, translators, critics, librarians, booksellers, and past winners in their respective categories (*How the awards work*, 2019). Each panel creates a set of criteria that they must follow when reviewing awards. The criteria are different every year and judges must come to a consensus of the criteria. It is unknown what the criteria look like or how they decide on a prizewinner within their circle as it’s meant to be highly secretive. Judges must read every submission in their category in its entirety, which can be upwards of 150-500 titles in a span of a few months. From those titles, the panel must decide on a shortlist of 10 books to focus on and further discuss. The Foundation’s executive board is not involved in the decision-making process, nor do they have any influence on the decision. To determine the prizewinner, only the panel judges meet to discuss and it’s revealed on the day of the awards. Out of the finalists, one

is chosen as the prizewinner and they receive \$10,000, a crystalized statue, and an honorary award title. Other finalists are awarded \$1,000 and the opportunity to market their book as an NBA finalist.

Diversity within the Awards

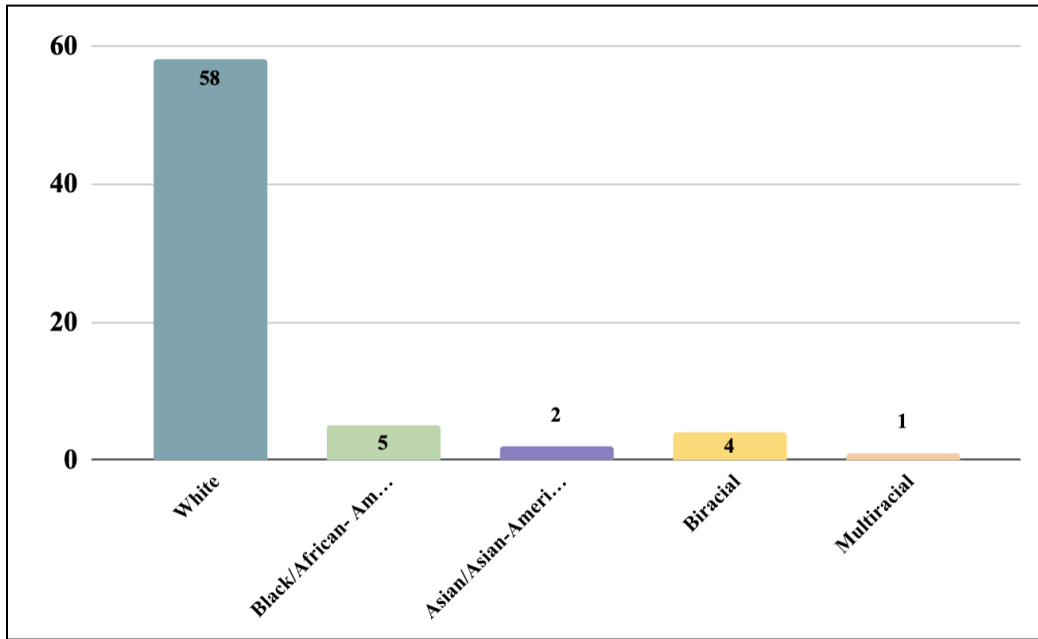
Out of the 70 different prizewinners, research showed a significant differentiation in demographics from gender to race. Up until 2011, the NBA lacked overall diversity in award winners of this genre. From 1950 to 2010, 59 authors were prizewinners. At the time, out of those prizewinners, only 15 were female and four were BIPOC, all of whom were male-identifying. Since 2011, out of the 10 prizewinners, eight of them were BIPOC and four were female-identifying.

Gender of Prizewinners (1950 - 2021)



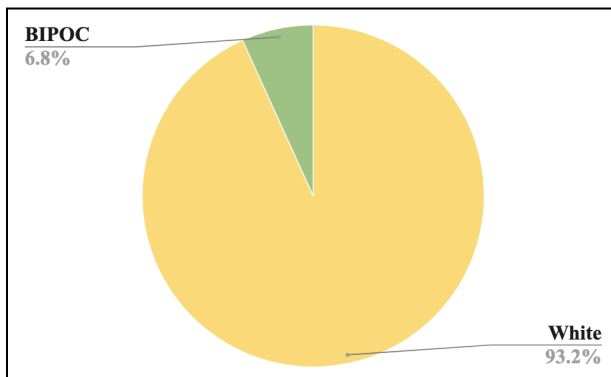
Source: See Notes Section

Race of Prizewinners (1950 - 2021)

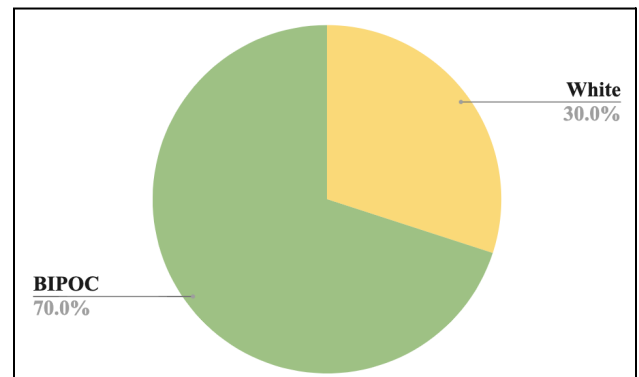


Race of Prizewinners: A Comparison

1950 to 2010



2011 to 2021



Source: See Notes Section

Splitting up the data analysis into sectioned years shows how diversity has changed drastically over a limited time frame. This data shows that more BIPOC authors were prizewinners in the last 10 years than in the 60 years before. The following chart illustrates a breakdown of the BIPOC authors and the year they were awarded.

Race/Ethnicity Breakdown of BIPOC Prizewinners

YEAR AWARDED	AUTHOR	RACE/ETHNICITY
1953	Ralph Ellison	*Biracial: African-American/White
1983	Alice Walker	African-American
1990	Charles Johnson	African-American
1999	Ha Jin	Asian (Chinese-American)
2011	Jesmyn Ward	African-American
2012	Louise Erdrich	*Biracial: Native-American (Chippewa) / White
2013	James McBride	*Biracial: African-American/ White
2016	Colson Whitehead	African-American
2017	<i>Jesmyn Ward</i>	<i>-Repeat prizewinner-</i>
2018	Sigrid Nunez	**Multiracial: German / Asian & Latina (Chinese-Panamanian)
2019	Susan Choi	*Biracial: Asian (Korean) & White (Jewish)
2020	Charles Yu	Asian (Taiwanese)
2021	Jason Mott	African-American

Source: See Notes Section

Influence of Lisa Lucas

Lisa Lucas was the first BIPOC and female to be appointed as Executive Director of the National Book Awards Foundation. She held the position from 2016 to 2020 and declared a mission toward diversifying The Foundation in various areas, starting with finalists and prizewinners. As a BIPOC Executive Director, she could instill more change than anyone in The Foundation. An Executive Director's duties are to compile the judges into panels, oversee the panels, and ensure that The Foundation's mission and visions are upheld to the highest degree. Executive Directors have an influence on the elected judges for each panel and the ability to request books from publishers.

Before Lucas took over the position, people were beginning to criticize The Foundation for its lack of diverse representation in prizewinners across all of their genres (Mims, 2020). Electing Lucas as Executive Director came at a poignant time of tense social and political developments throughout the country. Since the beginning, Lucas has made significant strides in expanding the list of diverse prizewinners. In 2019, the award recipients of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry were all writers of color (Mims, 2020). Lucas did not have a direct influence over who became a finalist or prizewinner, but she did have a say on diversifying submissions and judging panels.

Case Study Conclusion

The spike in racially diverse winners is accredited to Lucas and her commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The Foundation recognizes past mistakes and is actively making a change in the industry. If literary award committees and other publishing companies genuinely want to make a change toward racial diversity, it must start with executive positions.

It will require the effort of all publishing professionals to address and aid in dismantling barriers that BIPOC experience in the industry. Executive positions held by BIPOC allow for diverse nuances within the industry. Specific to literary awards, it allows for a diverse executive board and literary committee within a foundation. On the other hand, it shouldn't have to be a BIPOC in a professional leadership role for change in diversity to happen. Relying on BIPOC to implement diversity when there are so few BIPOC in the industry can make change a difficult and slow process. It's a collective effort to tackle the issue and recognize what barriers inhibit BIPOC authors in the industry.

Lucas acknowledged and publicly addressed the diversity issue within the awards. She enacted change using her executive position within The Foundation. If executive boards of literary awards claim to value diversity, they need to acknowledge the barriers BIPOC authors experience in the publishing industry and the barriers authors may experience trying to become prizewinners. The literary world can become a diverse place for literature by acknowledging systemic barriers that exclude BIPOC publishing authors and making a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts like Lucas did.

IV. Barriers That BIPOC Authors Experience

By identifying the barriers that inhibit BIPOC authors, literary committees can acknowledge them and dismantle those barriers. Many barriers stem from systemic and societal oppression that has created a domino effect in the publishing industry.

The NBA, like many literary award committees, strives to award the "best" literature. The "best" is subjective and to be awarded a literary prize comes down to who is in the room and what they perceive as "best." It isn't as if BIPOC authors don't become prizewinners of prestigious awards,

but there are underlying factors that set them apart from their White competitors. These factors are ingrained on a social and systemic level and it's important for literary committees to recognize them in order to diversify the literature being recognized.

History of Systemic Oppression and Minority Exclusion

The publishing industry is tied to the history of anti-literacy laws, which made it illegal for African-American people and minorities, those enslaved and free, to learn how to read or write (Douglass, 2020). The culture of literature in the United States was built on Euro-centric stories and writers. In terms of book publishing, companies control the type of narratives that are published in the world. The lack of diversity within the industry that we see today is attributed to this factor.

It wasn't until 1983 when the NBA for Fiction was awarded to Alice Walker, the first African-American female to receive a prize within The Foundation for her book, *The Color Purple*. By this time, The Foundation had been around for nearly fifty years and it took decades for them to acknowledge a female BIPOC author as an award recipient. The barrier of historical oppression stretches beyond the literary world and begins even before an author gets their work published. The history of systemic oppression continues to be a barrier for many BIPOC communities within the publishing industry.

Institutionalized Racism and Implicit Bias in the Publishing Industry

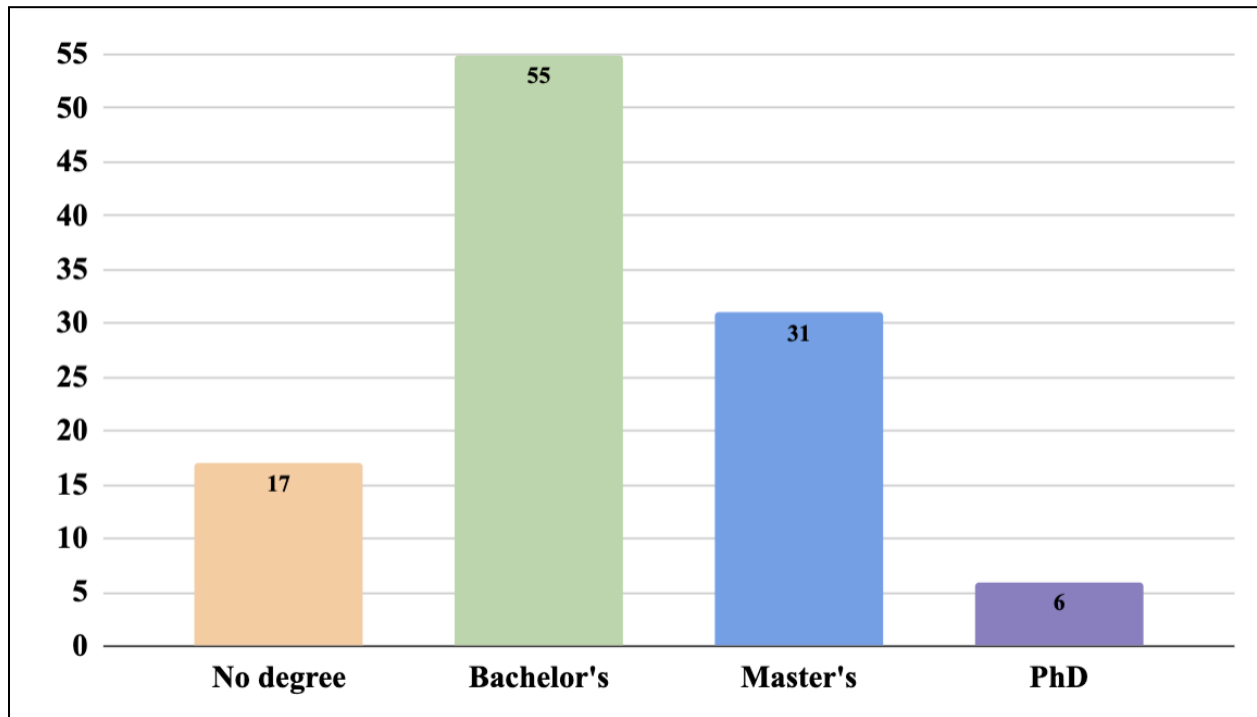
Race and racism are social constructs that have influenced how we function as a society. Interpersonal and institutionalized racism are not specific to the publishing industry but can be a significant and underlying barrier for BIPOC authors that excludes them from being recognized in literary awards. Implicit bias can play a role in deciding finalists and prizewinners and anyone can unconsciously succumb to it. Whether it's acquiring a book and publishing it or submitting a book for an award, they can all be influenced by institutionalized racism that is ultimately a barrier for BIPOC authors. Institutionalized racism is a factor that hinders BIPOC authors from being awarded. This is a generalized statement of the barrier that stretches beyond the publishing industry. But specific to literary committees, boards, and judges, it really depends on who is in the room.

Specific to the NBA, prizewinners and finalists are upheld by a set of criteria that is predetermined by the panel of judges. The set of criteria is reflected on personal preference and influenced by popular culture to determine which books are “prize-worthy.” Personal preferences derive from what is mainstream or popular in society, and in the publishing industry, “mainstream means White” (Deahl, 2020). Specific to literary committees, boards, and judges, it depends on who is overseeing the judges and who is appointed as a judge. A literary agent of color, who remained anonymous, claimed that “authors of color have less of a chance of getting acquired,” later attributing it to the publishing industry’s mainstream decisions (Deahl, 2020). If BIPOC authors have less of a chance to get their books acquired, it translates to fewer BIPOC authors and stories being submitted for literary awards.

Author Credentials

Since the beginning of the NBA for Fiction, six out of the 70 prizewinners were reported not to have attempted to go to college, much less obtain a college degree. Five of those prizewinners were awarded before 1974. Other authors who don’t have a degree dropped out at some point after being awarded. With the avid encouragement and importance attached to higher education in society today, there has been a distinct pattern of prizewinners with college degrees within the award.

Advanced Degrees of Prizewinners (1950 - 2021)



Source: See Notes Section

Prize-winning authors of prestigious literary awards have pointedly been “a homogenous group” (Mims, 2020). They have been dubbed America’s “MFA Industrial Complex” as they all tend to come from “the same, or similar, elite colleges, have a master’s or Ph.D. degree in English literature or writing, and then go to teach within the same circle of elite school” (Mims, 2020). Out of the 70 NBA prizewinners, 51 authors were professors or lecturers at some point, over half of whom taught at ivy league colleges like Princeton, Yale, and Harvard.

It becomes an issue when it’s only a Master’s degree holder or those in elite circles who are literary prizewinners (Mims, 2020). Many people, with or without college/ graduate degrees, write and publish their books. A barrier for BIPOC authors is the educational credentials that are seemingly desired by publishing companies. One may argue that higher education equates to a higher level of writing skills, thus the likelihood of becoming a literary prizewinner is greater. The issue is that higher education isn’t available to everyone and there is “a lack of opportunities available to certain demographics” which makes for a complicated societal system (Mossad,

2016). This is a barrier for BIPOC authors because it's a systemic issue in a society with a history of oppression. This is not to say that authors who don't have a college degree are eliminated from literary award considerations, but the pattern of prizewinners already having a college degree is telling. By looking at the past BIPOC prizewinners, those identified, all have advanced degrees that were earned prior to being awarded. Seven out of the 12 prizewinners earned one or more advanced degrees from ivy league schools. Based on NBA's track record, credentials of education are a barrier for BIPOC authors who don't have, don't want, or simply can't afford an advanced degree.

BIPOC Prizewinners: Earned Degrees

	Bachelor's Degree	Master's Degree	PhD Degree
Ralph Ellison	*Honorary Doctorate (Harvard)		
Alice Walker	Poetry (Tuskegee University)		
Charles Johnson	Journalism (Southern Illinois University)	Philosophy (Stony Brook University)	PhD in Philosophy (Stony Brook University)
Ha Jin	BA (Shandong University)	Creative Writing (Brandeis & Boston University)	PhD: Creative Writing (Brandeis & Boston University)
Jesmyn Ward	English (Stanford University)	Media Studies (Stanford University) MFA in Creative Writing (University of Michigan)	MFA in Creative Writing (University of Michigan)
Louise Erdrich	English (Dartmouth College)	Writing (Johns Hopkins University)	
James McBride	Composition (Oberlin Conservatory of Music)	Journalism (Columbia University)	
Colson Whitehead	BA (Harvard)		
Sigrid Nunez	BA (Barnard College)	MFA (Columbia University)	
Susan Choi	English Literature (Yale)	English Literature (Yale) MFA in Fiction (Cornell University)	
Charles Yu	Biology with a minor in creative writing (University of California, Berkeley) JD (Columbia Law School)		
Jason Mott	BFA in Fiction	MFA in Poetry (University of North Carolina)	

Source: See Notes Section

Tokenization

The publishing industry is aware of the lack of diversity among its writers, professionals, and award winners. Whether it's intentional or not, there are many literary agents who believe that the publishing industry “cover[s] up systemic racism” that then makes it difficult “for Black authors to overcome the same hurdles that White authors face” (Deahl, 2020). Dhonielle Clayton, an African-American author and the co-founder of Cake Literary, states that the handful of BIPOC authors who have been published or awarded are used in an “attempt to cover up systemic racism” (Deahl, 2020). This may be the belief of one book publishing professional, but the claim is reflective of the industry through research and data collecting. By awarding a couple

of BIPOC authors, it can be seen as solving the diversity issue, but it only reaches the surface level of the larger, systemic issue. Clayton continues her assertions by claiming that the prevailing approach at publishing houses is, “we have our Black fantasy author, or we have our East Asian author, so we’re set” (Deahl, 2020). That type of mindset creates barriers for BIPOC authors and leaves a bad taste.

Committee Boards and The Status Quo

This barrier for BIPOC authors focuses on the committee board members and their biases rather than the award process. There is an expectation placed on BIPOC authors that they should write about their racial or cultural experiences in order to get recognized by a larger audience. This is tied to the ideas of the “status quo” and gatekeeping (Mossad, 2016).

Committee members don’t pay enough attention to the evaluations of communities represented in the works they are considering (Kraus, 2016). Some literary award committees, like the NBA, have to read hundreds of submissions from authors of varying backgrounds and education levels. Personal preference plays a factor in decision-making if the story evokes familiar feelings or situations that the reader can relate to. Preference is a culmination of multiple things ranging from personality to popular culture. Preference can depend on the individual's traditions, expected reading content, and, often, privilege, all of which can be difficult to pinpoint and identify upfront. The likelihood of the whole judge panel coming to a consensus is low (Dekker, 2018). This is not to say that luck is a contributing factor, but the judges in the space can make all the difference as to who gets awarded.

V. Solutions for Literary Committees

Literary awards can positively impact an author’s reputation and career. Amplifying the authors of these books inherently shapes what readers recognize as the culture of literature and within their respective genres. The following solutions are meant to dismantle societal barriers and structures to allow for equity within literary awards.

Appoint BIPOC to Executive Positions

Racially diversifying the committee boards for these awards seems like an obvious solution, but retaining those seats with BIPOC is the challenge. Change must happen from within a company.

The presence of change starting with executive positions creates a company norm of a diverse working environment. The presence of more BIPOC in executive roles leads to “expanding who is encouraged and recognized” within the industry as a whole and literary awards (Mims, 2020). A diverse judging panel serves as a “cultural sounding board” for underrepresented communities and voices when it comes to storytelling (Kraus, 2016). At the same time, BIPOC should not have to be the one to evoke change, but retaining BIPOC in executive positions is a starting point.

“Affirmative Action to Affirming Diversity”

The idea behind “affirmative action to affirming diversity” promotes the long-term necessity and retention of BIPOC publishing professionals in executive positions. Literary awards are highly debatable and it questions the process of gatekeeping in a space labeled as “prestigious.” When it’s mainly White authors who are awarded major literary awards, it does not give an accurate representation of literature that is influenced by popular culture. Issues of racism and discrimination are diminished when there are more BIPOCs in executive roles and in spaces of major decision-making (Roberts, 2021).

This solution could diminish the lack of racial diversity on committee boards. Due to the systemic racial oppression within the publishing industry, an affirmative action plan centering on marginalized and BIPOC communities would allow them to obtain higher leadership positions or the opportunity to. It’s shown that affirmative action has “positive effects in equalizing employment rates for women and minorities” (Amano, 2017). While people may argue against affirmative action, this solution goes further in stating that The Foundation, and other committee boards, should not only proactively implement an affirmative action plan but affirm diversity in their overall mission statement in order to foster an inclusive workplace. Affirmative action may be the first step, but this solution integrates being aware of possible individualized and institutional biases.

Enlarge the Judge Panel

Enlarging a judging panel in numbers and diversity allows for more perspectives to be in the space and have a say in the decision-making process. In 1986, Toni Morrison’s book, *Beloved*, was a finalist but lost to Larry Heinemann’s book, *Paco’s Story*. While many readers were

disappointed, The Foundation was “embarrassed by this idiosyncratic choice” (English, 2005). This led to the Foundation enlarging the judging panel from three to five the next year and they have since kept the same number of judges for every panel. By enlarging and diversifying the panel, it allows for different opinions and perspectives on the criteria that judges must base their votes on (Dekker, 2018). This is not to say that Heinemann’s book did not deserve the award, but The Foundation noticed a lack of consideration for Morrison’s book that left them questioning the panel’s judging process. Aside from increasing the numbers, it’s equally important that the judges are more than racially or ethnically diverse as well. “Good” literature is perceived differently by everyone and personal connections to themes, characters, storylines, etc. contribute to that. A diverse judging panel, beyond race or ethnic background, will allow for nuances in criteria and perspectives when it comes to choosing finalists and prizewinners. In any situation where judging takes place, it’s subjective.

VI. Conclusion

Literary awards are controversial and highly political. They raise issues of gatekeeping, judgment, and representation (Harper, 2013). The stride to eliminate the barriers that BIPOC authors might experience in the publishing industry, and when being recognized for literary awards, is an uphill battle that can’t be solved overnight. Due to the barriers addressed being on a systemic level, they might begin well before publishing a book or being considered for a literary award. Solutions are difficult to identify and will take time to address and overcome as many of them, if not all, are on a systemic level. The solutions identified in this research are circumstantial and solely based on observation and research of systemic barriers BIPOCs experience on a professional level.

With the rise of movements like #BlackLivesMatter and “We Need Diverse Books,” change in diversity within the industry is erupting (Roberts, 2021). There isn’t a formula on how to operate or provide equal access and equity, but there are measures that companies can take to eliminate barriers. The Foundation, and other literary awards foundations, can help communities by “identify[ing] and provid[ing] culturally relevant books” that reflect great literature on society (Bickmore, 2017). The influence of both movements has started the conversation around storytelling, expectations, and BIPOC writers.

The Foundation's choice, while arguably politically motivating, to elect Lucas as Executive Director was a step forward in diversifying award recipients. Lucas is one of many cases where BIPOC in executive positions can evoke lasting change when it comes to diversity and inclusion efforts. The movement toward diversity has long been held by the belief that only BIPOC individuals are responsible for making this change, but it must be a change that the collective instills.

Acknowledgments

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Last but not least, I'd like to thank my mom for being the reason I went to graduate school in the first place. This research wouldn't be possible without my mom who pushed my reading habits as a kid and always took me to the library (even on super rainy days).

NOTES

1. A comprehensive list of finalists and winners of the National Book Award from 1950 to 2010, for all categories, can be found here:
<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.737.8448&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
2. Finalists and prizewinners from 2011 to 2021 can be found on the website:
<https://www.nationalbook.org/national-book-awards/>
3. In-depth research into prizewinner's background/heritage, family background, profession(s), gender identification, and education came from a myriad of sources and was cross-referenced for accuracy.

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