Identity Workshop Introduction

Windows and Mirrors. In the library we like to talk about how books function as windows and as mirrors.

A book that is a mirror is one that you see yourself in. It’s comfortable and familiar and it makes you feel seen. It validates you, because it is someone else sharing experiences you know and feelings you have, and in doing so affirming that you are not alone. It makes you feel connected to the story, to the storyteller, and to others who also recognize themselves in that book. And, when it’s a really good mirror, it helps you realize new things about yourself. It finds words for things you know but haven’t yet figured out how to express. It helps you see dimensions of yourself you didn’t know were there, or to see them in new ways. The right book helps you see yourself more fully and accurately.

A book that is a window is one that helps you see outside of yourself. It relates experiences you’ve never known, feelings you’ve never dealt with, perspectives you’ve never considered. It takes you somewhere else, gives you an opportunity to know life as someone you’ve never been. A window is for new information and new insight. It teaches empathy for difference, connection with others. A good one makes you bigger because it takes you outside of yourself in ways that, when you return, you bring some of the outside back with you. The right book helps you see the rest of the world, and those who live in it, more fully, more accurately, and with more understanding, appreciation, and love.

In Race Project we call this our Identity Workshop. It is for expressing and exploring yourselves, who you are and what has made you that way. And our goal is to create an event that allows you, like a library full of good books, to be windows and mirrors for each other. We want you to tell your stories today and to listen to the stories of others. As you do, we hope you will encounter stories that resonate, that you recognize, and that help you see yourselves more clearly. In those, we hope you find connection. We also hope you experience stories that challenge you with their unfamiliarity, that push you outside of yourselves and give you pause as you consider things you never have before in ways you’ve never thought to. Then move past the discomfort of unfamiliarity to appreciation and connection. And realize, even as you are being gifted with windows and mirrors from others, that you are providing the same in return through the stories you are sharing about yourselves.

We’ve done our best to bring you together with schools different than your own—from different parts of the city, other types of neighborhoods, different racial makeups, and different socioeconomic statuses. We want you to connect with peers you would be unlikely to encounter in your normal, daily lives, and maybe not at all. More opportunities to find windows. Yet we also expect you to find surprising mirrors in your new friends from those other schools and unexpected windows in students from your own. We’ll do this in a number of ways throughout the workshop. Big conversations and small ones. Structured activities and hanging out. Some with deliberate racial lenses, but some with personal ones for fun and bonding. Because your race informs your identity, as long as you are sharing who you are, you will be talking about race in one way or another. So let’s talk about race today, but even more let’s talk about ourselves. And listen. And connect, by discovering our common identities.