

Research on Diversity in Youth Literature

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"Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors"*

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Editors' Introduction

Gabrielle Atwood Halko
West Chester University

Sarah Park Dahlen
St. Catherine University

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Our Origin Story

The story of *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature (RDYL)* is a story of community. It is a story of collaboration. It is a story of coffee shops and connections and curiosity. It is a story of happy coincidence. And it is, above all else, a story of conversation and what can happen when we show up, ask “What if...?” and start listening. What if we answered a call within youth literature studies and created a new forum for scholarship and conversation around identities and intersectionalities? What if we welcomed research that highlights identities and intersections -- scholarly, gender, racial, cultural, religious, and beyond? What if we acknowledged and even embraced the scholarly gaps in our field and sought to fill them?

That call crystallized in 2016 when Katharine Slater, the Diversity Committee, and the Membership Committee of the Children’s Literature Association (ChLA) recruited four women of color to speak on the “Needs of Minority Scholars” panel at the 2016 ChLA conference. The panel, part of ChLA’s Building a Career series, included Sarah Park Dahlen, Laura Jiménez, Marilisa Jiménez-García, and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas. It was so well-received that Slater worked with Dahlen, Jiménez, Jiménez-García and Michelle H. Martin to convert it to a forum of essays for publication. This was especially important for two reasons. First, the women on the panel were junior faculty, some of whom were soon going up for tenure and building their promotion dossiers, which are typically measured in the number of publications and citations. (For further reading on the related issue of underciting scholars of color, see Chakravartty, Kuo, Grubbs, and McIlwain.) Second, “diversity work” is often not acknowledged as “real” academic work. This work is both psychological and intellectual; it exacts a heavy toll on those who undertake it, and too often that labor and its costs are rendered invisible. Converting the panel into a series of essays served the dual purposes of illuminating the intellectual aspect of this work and transforming it from the temporary nature of a panel discussion to the permanence of print.

However, when the group proposed this forum to the Association’s journal, the editors acknowledged the importance of the discussion but declined on the grounds that the pieces were “commentary” rather than “scholarship.” Despite this setback, the scholars were, as Michelle H. Martin wrote in her essay, “used to finding alternate routes to have our say” (2017, p. 101). They turned to *The Lion and the Unicorn*, where editor Karin Westman enthusiastically accepted their essays for immediate publication.

Meanwhile, in December 2016, six activist scholars and ChLA members -- Poushali Bhadury, Gabrielle Atwood Halko, Marilisa Jiménez-García, Lara Saguisag, Katharine Slater, and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas -- met for coffee in downtown Philadelphia. Sarah Park Dahlen joined by Skype. Inevitably our talk turned to the need for increased diversity in our field and how to play a meaningful and lasting part in creating that change. It was clear that we needed a new space for scholarship, one that would actively seek work that was frequently deemed “too political” or “not scholarly enough” by established journals. We brainstormed ideas to address this deficit -- a deficit that drives away promising scholars and reinforces the racial and intellectual hegemony that pervades children’s literature -- and decided that we needed a new journal.

Sarah shared that her university had a platform for publishing an open access journal. When the spring 2017 semester began, Sarah convened a meeting with the St. Catherine University Library and Master of Library and Information Science Program, who eagerly supported the creation of a new journal, *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*. During that semester we formed diverse Editorial and Advisory Boards that range in expertise and representation -- we were especially delighted that no one declined our invitation -- and Sarah and Gabrielle volunteered to be the inaugural editors.

As we began setting up *RDYL*, the forum #WeNeedDiverseScholars was published in *The Lion and the Unicorn* (41.1) in 2017, and Katharine Slater and the ChLA Membership Committee scheduled a follow-up panel at the 2017 Children’s Literature Association conference. Once again the room was packed, and discussions continued long past the breakout sessions. Those panels reaffirmed that the need for these conversations is real. The initial difficulty in publishing this forum, however, is one example of the lack of space for necessary work in our field -- efforts to expand research on representations of diversity in children’s literature and consider the identities and lived experiences of diverse scholars as an essential part of our scholarship.

Vision

For our first issue, we sought submissions by #OwnVoices (underrepresented persons writing about topics related to their lived experiences; see Corinne Duyvis, 2015) scholars from all disciplines engaging with Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop’s seminal article “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors” (1990). Dr. Bishop writes that young people need both window and mirror

books; window books show readers “views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange,” while mirror books provide a “reflection.” Window books might also be “sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created by the author.” She concludes, “When there are enough books available that can act as both mirrors and windows for all our children, they will see that we can celebrate both our differences and our similarities, because together they are what make us all human.” We wanted to know how, almost 30 years after its initial publication, youth literature studies and the practices surrounding it (scholarship, publishing, programming, teaching, circulation, and so on) have responded to, taken up, and/or ignored Bishop’s framework and call to action.

Articles

We are delighted with the ways that the essays in this issue both diverge from and connect with one another as they respond to Bishop’s model. They remind us, first of all, that #OwnVoices are not monolithic; they also illustrate the fluidity of mirrors, windows, and doors and the futility of seeking fixed or isolated representations. For example, Robert Bittner’s essay on representations of queer Christianity in young adult literature reflects a different #OwnVoices perspective than Cristina Rhodes’ examination of hybrid identity as a literary mirror. In turn, S. R. Toliver, Michelle H. Martin, and E. Sybil Durand examine different texts and the ways in which they reflect - or do not - their own experiences as Black women. While Toliver focuses broadly on representations of Black girls in fiction, Martin analyzes a single verse novel for its function as both mirror and window, and Durand addresses multiple texts that reflect identity categories beyond her own.

In the opening essay, Toliver provides important context regarding Bishop’s development of mirrors, windows, and doors and acknowledges the influence of Virginia Hamilton’s “hopescapes” not only on senior scholars such as Bishop but also on the ways current scholars such as Toliver apply it to their own work. In “Like Raindrops On Granite,” a collaborative analysis of Marilyn Hilton’s *Full Cicada Moon*, Martin and J. Elizabeth Mills use the model Martin proposes in “Brown Girl Dreaming of a new ChLA”; they work cross-culturally to understand one another’s #OwnVoices experiences while modeling crossover scholarship that can build White scholars’ competencies in mentoring scholars of color. Robert Bittner interrogates representations of queer Christianity in five young adult novels in “Queer Christian Voices in YA Literature.” He begins by sharing his personal experiences as both queer and

Christian and then discusses how this body of literature has evolved over the years. Cristina Rhodes' "Reading for Mirrors" zeroes in on specific reflections of and for biracial Latinx readers and the ways in which Matt de la Peña's *Mexican Whiteboy* reflects hybridized ways of being. This is especially important considering the scarcity of such stories for young, multiracial Latinx readers, as documented by Amina Chaudhri (2013). In the closing essay, "Unsettling Representations," E. Sybil Durand and Marilisa Jiménez-García draw on their experiences and expertise as women of color scholars as well as ethnic studies scholarship to argue that "representations of identity in recently published youth literature favor discourses and texts that acknowledge youth identities as fluid, overlapping, and intersecting."

The authors of the essays in this issue draw on their lived experiences and research to analyze different texts for young people. Paralleling the calls for more #OwnVoices-authored works for young people, our vision for the inaugural issue of *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature* is to follow the title of *The Lion & the Unicorn* forum #WeNeedDiverseScholars and showcase #OwnVoices scholars doing new and exciting work on diverse youth literature. In keeping with our mission, we also commissioned artist, author, activist, and educator Maya Gonzalez to create original artwork for *RDYL*'s first issue. *The Reading Tree* is a colorful, inclusive image that captures perfectly how we feel about *RDYL*: we invite you to join us in this new space for conversations on diversity in youth literature. We hope that *RDYL*, a peer-reviewed, open access journal created by a diverse group of like-minded scholars for a diverse readership, is a platform through which we can support and amplify research on diversity in youth literature. Welcome to *RDYL*!

Notes

1. **COVER ART:** *The Reading Tree*, by Maya Gonzalez, was commissioned by *RDYL* for the cover of issue 1.1. This original artwork is supported by the American Library Association (ALA) Office for Diversity, Literacy, and Outreach Services (ODLOS). For more information, see <http://www.mayagonzalez.com/> and [ALA ODLOS](#).
2. We are grateful to the many people whose support helped to bring *RDYL* and this first issue to fruition. First and foremost, we appreciate the guidance of our Editorial and Advisory Boards, and Jody Gray at ALA's ODLOS for providing the funds to commission our cover art. We are thankful to the St. Catherine University Library staff (Emily Asch, LeAnn Suchy, Heather Tompkins, Amy Shaw) and the MLIS Program

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3. The essays in this issue are formatted according to APA; future essays will be formatted in MLA 8.
4. In the first upload of this editors' introduction, we expected that #OwnVoices would hyperlink to Corinne Duyvis' website, but it did not. On June 4, 2018, in order to correctly attribute #OwnVoices to Duyvis, we revised the sentence on page 2 and added the full citation to our References. We apologize for this omission.

Reference List

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