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Editors' Introduction: Educational Systems in Youth Literature

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“Overcome by sensations of being pulled underwater, drowning, I was constantly searching for anchors to keep me afloat, to pull me back safely to the shore” - bell hooks, *All About Love* (9)

We are pleased to introduce *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature* 4.1, a special issue containing articles that examine how learning occurs in different contexts and from a variety of standpoints: What do young people learn *because* of school? What do young people learn *in spite* of school? *Who* do young people learn from and *what* do they learn? How do systems of oppression shape the waters of school in which students swim? In education, what is the difference between floating, swift swimming, and sinking? These broad questions are all addressed to varying degrees throughout the issue.

We position this issue in an emerging body of scholarship concerned with representations of teachers and their work within schools (Boche; Dalton; Dalton and Linder; Jones and Osler; Miller et al.; Rodríguez; Shoffner). Yet, this issue expands on that scholarship in two important ways: one, this issue draws on various types of literary genres to ground its analysis of representations of youth education; two, this issue does not limit our understanding of education to K-12 school buildings and institutions of higher education. For instance, authors in this issue consider academic mentorship in graduate school, community-based science education, and Indigenous systems of education that predate current structures of K-12 education.

We intentionally untangle concepts of “education” from institutions such as “school” in our call for papers because we want an expansive understanding of all the ways young people learn in youth literature and popular culture. Subsequently, a narrowing of education to institutions such as schools would erase the very real ways in which formal educational institutions have long been (often intersecting) weapons of colonialism (Sabzalian), white supremacy (Vaught), and cisheteronormativity (Keenan; Mayo). Indeed, understanding the

weaponization of schools to maintain inequitable social hierarchies is one area of inquiry, among many, our call seeks to address.

The cover art of this issue, “Sink or Swim” by Jasaan Alleyne, a Black Trinidadian-Canadian artist, depicts a serene image of a Black woman submerged in water. We use this image to consider the ways educational systems can be likened to water. The woman’s eyes and mouth are closed as her body appears to be drifting within the water. There is no apparent emotion, not joy or despair, on her face. Thus, the woman can be seen as either sinking or swimming in the water. Furthermore, we reflect on hooks’ words included at the beginning of this introduction to give thought to the anchors and flotation devices that young people may seek or need to stay afloat in educational systems or to pull them back “to the shore.” As we introduce each piece in this issue, we consider the metaphor of water and swimming.

Alleyne’s work was inspired by the first piece in the issue, “From Bottom Bitch to Top Literacy Scholar: Academic Othermothering Depicted in a Young Adult Street Literature Memoir Text” by Delicia Greene. Greene explores the academic othermothering of Black girls by Black female literacy educators taken up in *PHD to Ph.D: How Education Saved My Life* by Elaine Richardson (2013). Through a critical content analysis guided by theories of Black girl literacies and academic othermothering, Greene demonstrates how the educators Denise and Dr. G embody academic othermothering in the memoir. Specifically, academic othermothering in Richardson’s text works to honor Black girls’ writing voices, publicly advocate for writing spaces for Black girls, and employ “tough love” to push Black girls to envision their future selves. In some ways, the othermothers introduced in this memoir serve as anchors in the lives of Black girls who are marginalized in schools due to both their race and gender. We see that even

though Black girls are able to “swim” and achieve academically in schools, there is still need for additional support to keep them afloat in white-dominated educational systems.

The second piece in the issue is “What Do We Do with the White [Cis] Women?: *Juliet Takes a Breath* as the Blueprint for Reimagining Allyship in Literacy Instruction” by shea wesley martin. martin begins the essay with a personal reflection of being taught by a well-intentioned cisgender white woman and how this shaped their educational experience. They then analyze *Juliet Takes a Breath* by Gabby Rivera (2016) in order to reimagine ways to develop critically conscious white cis women, who remain the majority of teachers in K-12 systems. By braiding together feminist pedagogy and culturally relevant teaching as modes of analysis, martin considers methods of allyship embodied by the cis white woman character Harlowe Brisbane. Ultimately, they argue that in order to claim true allyship, cis white women must fully recognize and challenge white supremacy and privilege as part of the feminist project, which is a move that could truly transform K-12 education. White supremacy is the water that shapes our society and schools.

Continuing the analysis of white women in education and schooling spaces, Nicole Ann Amato and Katie Priske turn to young adult literature marketed as feminist in “Champagne Problems & Popular Feminism: Naming White Feminism in Young Adult Literature.” Amato and Priske invoke different theories of feminism to consider how white feminism operates in tandem with the commodification of feminism broadly to present limited and oppressive understandings of feminism within feminist-branded young adult literature. The authors consider how adolescent girl characters develop their own feminist stances and literacy practices to challenge harmful norms in their schools while often simultaneously reifying racism and

classism. Weaving in theoretical readings with young adult titles, Amato and Priske offer classroom suggestions for naming and challenging white feminism within these texts.

“Chinese Children’s School Experiences Represented in Picture Books” by Lin Gou and Eun Hye Son explores representations of Chinese children in picture books set in the United States and England using theories of Orientalism and ideology. Gou and Son illustrate how the analyzed picture books often position white teachers as saviors and perpetuate an uncritical multiculturalism. Through their analysis of the texts, they reveal that depictions of Chinese students in schools are often reduced to stereotypical images. These authors conclude that it is important that there are authentic representations of diverse children’s identities in schools and offer other texts that provide rich representations of Chinese culture. Guo and Son consider ways to challenge white supremacy presented in children’s literature.

Mark Lewis and Luke Rodesiler consider the role coaches can play in promoting or hindering activist dispositions with student athletes in their article, “Youth Athletes’ Activism and Coaches: Representations in Sports-Related Young Adult Literature.” The authors consider how common portrayals of coaches being obsessed with victory at all costs combined with deficit views of youth result in depictions of coaches’ unwillingness to support student activism in the majority of the analyzed texts. Drawing on a variety of titles featuring a diverse array of school sports, the authors demonstrate how sports-related young adult literature can be incorporated into English language arts and social studies curricula to support civic engagement. Lewis and Rodesiler position their analysis within a critical media literacy framework, which produces implications for challenging deficit-based views of youth in media and culture at large.

In “Ni keehtwawmi mooshahkinitounawn: Lifting Up Representations of Indigenous¹ Education and Futures in *The Marrow Thieves*,” Joaquin Muñoz, Melissa Horner, and Robert Petrone illustrate how the post-apocalyptic setting of Cherie Dimaline’s *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) echoes the reality that Indigenous communities are already living in a post-apocalyptic world due to settler colonialism. In doing so, the authors challenge the broad application of “post-apocalyptic” and “dystopian” as often used in young adult literature. Through their analysis, Muñoz, Horner, and Petrone center Indigenous educational practices and offer a vision of Indigenous futures. They call for a “literary apocalypse” of the current canon that reigns over many educational institutions spanning from K-12 to higher education and perpetuates educational colonialism. The authors situate *The Marrow Thieves* as a text to imagine what an educational future could look like that is cleaved from the violence of colonialism.

In “‘There Are No Rewards for Girls Who Are Too Spirited’: Schools as Gaslighting Mechanisms in *Girls with Sharp Sticks*,” Kathleen Colantonio-Yurko, Shelby Boehm, and Kathy Olmstead apply the concept of gaslighting, a term birthed from psychology and made ubiquitous in pop culture after the 2016 election, to consider how schools act as a gaslighting apparatus. Focusing on the young adult novel *Girls with Sharp Sticks* by Suzanne Young (2019), the authors use a critical literacy framework to argue that school leaders, curriculum, and school culture can abet the psychological manipulation that hallmarks gaslighting. The authors detail how gaslighting works to perpetuate hierarchies that uphold male dominance at the expense of female suffering.

¹ The authors use “Native (Peoples)” and “Indigenous (Peoples)” interchangeably to refer to the original inhabitants of North America and use tribal affiliations for specific examples of individuals and Nations. The authors use “Peoples” to indicate the uniqueness of nations, groups, and cultures that have been practicing self-determination long before colonization—their inherent sovereignties do not rely on recognition of modern colonizing nation-states.

Our special issue concludes with the article “‘My Brain Is All the Super-power I Need’: Examining Black Girls in STEM and Schooling Spaces in Marvel Comics” by Christian Hines. In her piece, Hines highlights the brilliance of Black girls in spite of harmful education systems that fail to recognize their full capabilities. Hines offers Marvel’s comics *Ironheart* (2020) and *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur* (2019) to build on literature that affirms the capabilities of Black girls in STEM. Positioning her work within broad conversations about comics and school literacies, Hines analyzes how the two superhero characters enact their own literacies to build collaborative and caring spaces within their communities. Both texts analyzed in this piece are positioned as humanizing texts, which can also be seen as flotation devices in a system that continues to deny the humanity of Black girls.

As educators who work with elementary and secondary teachers and teacher candidates, we are particularly interested in constructing a special issue that offers potential pathways for reimagining education and classroom practices for future generations. We believe the work presented throughout this special issue will be informative to educators in a number of spaces: K-12 classrooms, libraries, higher education, and any context in which the value and wisdom of young people are honored. Building upon the metaphor of water, a number of the essays in this issue have made us question how sinking or swimming in schools is often presented as a reflection of students’ own capabilities while ignoring the weights that systems of oppression put on individuals within the world. We hope that readers will consider the metaphor of water while engaging with each piece in this issue.

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