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Editors' Introduction: Variations on Building Bridges

Sonia Alejandra Rodríguez

LaGuardia Community College (CUNY)

Sarah Park Dahlen

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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As we publish *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature* 4.2, we return to MicKenzie Fasteland's cover art, "Variations on Building Bridges," from *RDYL*'s Volume 3. Inspired by Margarita Engle's poem, "How to Write a Bridge of Words," Fasteland creates a colorful world of lush floating islands with children of different backgrounds surrounded by books, pets, and friends, all connected by a rainbow bridge. As we enter year three of the Covid pandemic, and consider what that entails in our public and private lives, we hold tight to the potential of Fasteland's rainbow bridge. As we write our editors' introduction, situated from our homes in the United States, women's rights have been attacked, voting rights are being threatened, challenges to Critical Race Theory (CRT) are on the rise, and, of course, challenges to diverse books have skyrocketed in school districts across the country. As women of color (Sonia Alejandra is Mexican and Sarah is Korean American) in academia who've devoted our professional lives and have a personal commitment to diverse books, we feel the weight of these politically motivated attacks while we continue to work toward building connections and paths, like those represented in Fasteland's cover art. Additionally, as women of color in the diaspora, the global impact of the pandemic and of the threat to civil and human rights is not lost on us.

Because we are editors working on a journal dedicated to diverse literature, the challenging and banning of books is at the forefront of our minds as we prepare this issue. While the affront to diverse books in classrooms and libraries is not a new concept, the increase of the challenging and banning we see now is closely tied to the spread of misinformation on Critical Race Theory. Community leaders, educators, and parents across the country have misinterpreted CRT, often a graduate school level theory, as anti-patriotic, divisive critiques of United States history and present society. In a *CNN* interview in May of 2021, Kimberlé Crenshaw said, "Critical Race Theory is not anti-patriotic. In fact, it is more patriotic than those who are opposed

to it because we believe in the 13th and the 14th and the 15th amendment. We believe in the promises of equality and we know we can't get there if we can't confront and talk honestly about inequality." It is precisely the talking "honestly about inequality" that many parents, educators, and elected representatives fear is happening in the K-12 classroom. This fear of what truths may be revealed to children, specifically white children, about race has led to actions that "would restrict teaching critical race theory or limit how teachers can discuss racism and sexism" in the K-12 classroom in more than half of the states in the country (Schwartz).

The policies and laws being created and reinforced across the country to limit or to completely remove what is understood to be CRT have led to an increase in challenging and banning diverse books. It's not surprising that many of these books are written by BIPOC and/or queer authors. The majority of the authors and books discussed in *RDYL*'s 4.2 issue, such as Dashka Slater, Adib Khorram, Adam Silvera, Benjamin Alire Sáenz, Mark Oshiro, and Ibi Zoboi, are presently being challenged. In a guest essay for *The New York Times*, Viet Thanh Nguyen writes, "Books are inseparable from ideas, and this is really what is at stake: the struggle over what a child, a reader and a society are allowed to think, to know and to question." As the scholars, educators, and authors in *RDYL* 4.2 demonstrate in their articles, many of these books present counternarratives that challenge white supremacy by carving space for BIPOC and queer experiences. As Nguyen points out, challenging and banning books is really about a "struggle" over what we know and the fear that once we learn more, or learn anew, that that knowledge will crack the status quo in our country. Challenging and banning books in K-12 classrooms is about preserving what white America imagines as American identity. Marilisa Jiménez García and Paige Pagan write, "While opponents justify their attack on the histories, knowledges, and narratives of non-white people with the assertion that education should be raceless and separate

from political advocacy, it only leaves racism unacknowledged and unchecked. In doing so, it upholds white supremacy and patriarchy, and it robs young people of a comprehensive and dignifying education.” As Nguyen, Jiménez García, and Pagan suggest, the “struggle” with challenged and banned books isn’t about protecting children’s innocence, but about protecting the existing imperialist system of power in the US. This becomes clearer when considering that some of the challenged and banned books are about BIPOC and/or queer joy and daily life.

The list from the Central York School District in York, Pennsylvania (@CYBannedBooks), includes books that are explicitly about racism and books that are about joy and daily life. For example, the list includes early chapter books such as Debbi Michiko Florence’s *Jasmine Toguchi* series, in which a young Japanese American girl begs her parents for a pet flamingo and learns to pound mochi with her family, and picture books such as *Hair Love*, written by Matthew A. Cherry and illustrated by Vashti Harrison, in which a young Black girl and her father do her hair. Including books such as the *Jasmine Toguchi* series and *Hair Love* tells us that the creators of this list are suspicious of the mere idea of inclusion; they do not want readers of color to see joyful depictions of themselves in youth literature, and they do not want white readers to know that children of color can have joy in their lives.

While reflecting on “Variations on Building Bridges,” we gravitated toward the word “variation.” A variation of any kind is similar yet different. We are familiar with the ideas of needing to build bridges. We are familiar with the labor and toll building bridges require. But because of the heaviness of our current political and social state, we were called to look for variations as we considered the future of *RDYL*. Readers and followers of our journal may have noticed, or will notice, some changes as we move forward. First, we are thrilled to welcome two new Book Review co-editors, Cristina Rhodes and Nithya Sivashankar, who worked on their

first book review for this issue. Cristina and Nithya have published articles and/or book reviews with *RDYL*. We are grateful they've stepped into this new co-editor role. Secondly, we are pleased to announce that Sonia Alejandra Rodríguez has joined the editors-at-large team. In preparation for Gabrielle Atwood Halko transitioning out of her position as co-editor, Sonia Alejandra transitioned from Book Review editor to the editors-at-large team in April 2021, and Gabrielle formally stepped down in the fall of 2021.

We are especially thankful to Gabrielle Atwood Halko for serving as one of the inaugural co-editors of *RDYL*! Gabrielle was part of the group of activist scholars who founded and launched *RDYL* in December 2016, and since then has worked tirelessly to build a strong foundation to ensure the journal's endurance. Gabrielle's commitment, insight, and passion for *RDYL* has been invaluable. She will continue to serve on *DYL*'s Editorial Board and we are honored that she remains a vital part of the *RDYL* team.

We are pleased to present three articles in our current issue. In their article, "Disrupting Monolithic Representations of Queer Youth: Moving Toward Intersectionality," Matthew S. Jeffries, Ashley S. Boyd, and Janine Julianna Darragh analyze two young adult books that center LGBTQIA+ intersectional identity: *The 57 Bus: A True Story of Two Teenagers and the Crime that Changed Their Lives* by Dashka Slater and *Darius the Great is Not Okay* by Adib Khorram. Jeffries, Boyd, and Darragh argue that "YAL has just begun to explore the convergence of identities, and not necessarily the intersections, or the power dynamics related to LGBTQ+ people who hold other marginalized identities."

In "Naturalizing the Borderlands: Eco-Justice Poetics in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* and *All the Stars Denied*," Regan Postma-Montano provides a close analysis with an emphasis on environmentalism. She argues that books like *Aristotle and Dante*

by Benjamin Alire Sáenz and *All the Stars Denied* by Guadalupe García McCall “redress what constitutes environmentalism and environmental young adult literature, insisting that for many Latinx peoples, as well as for other marginalized and racialized communities, engagement with nature and land is interconnected with social justice imperatives.”

Trevor Boffone’s article, “When Bisexuality is Spoken: Normalizing Bi Latino Boys in Adam Silvera’s *They Both Die at the End*” highlights a marginalized experience within LGBTQIA+ representation in young adult literature. Boffone writes, “Bisexuality is also underrepresented in YA fiction, and although there is a growing corpus of YA lit focusing on bisexual girls, there is a noticeable void in books written about bisexual boys of any race or ethnicity.” Through an analysis of *They Both Die at the End*, Boffone argues for more representation of bisexual boys.

We are excited to also include a special forum interview by Sandra Saco, “*Wild Tongues Can’t Be Tamed: An Interview with Saracicia J. Fennell, Mark Oshiro, and Ibi Zoboi.*” Saco sat with the authors in a virtual interview to discuss the new collection, *Wild Tongues*, and to have frank conversations about colorism and identity in Latinx communities. Toward the end of the thought-provoking interview, Fennell said, “I want this anthology to be used as a conversation starter. And I want young people to reflect and talk about what’s going on within [their] own family group, within [their] own friendship group.”

In the review of Derritt Mason’s recent book, *Queer Anxieties of Young Adult Literature and Culture* (2021), Jennifer Tullos’ explains that “Mason’s work—situated at the intersection of queerness, adolescence, and affect—asks important questions that address aetnormative assumptions in queer YA literature scholarship and children’s literature scholarship more

generally. In so doing, *Queer Anxieties* provides a nuanced and fresh approach that will shape future (queer) children's literature scholarship for the better.”

At the end, we return to *Variations on Building Bridges*, not only as the cover art of this issue, but as a metaphor for how we will need to navigate persistent and new obstacles as we continue to center diverse books in *RDYL*. We hope you will enjoy issue 4.2.

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