Editor’s Introduction: Diversity in Graphic Novels: Forging a Path of Understanding

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It has been well-documented that children’s and young adult (YA) literature publishing continues to lag in reflecting the vast diversity of today’s society. In fact, according to the National Center for Education Statistics 2021 (Irwin et al.) data, only 46.1% of the K-12 public school population identifies as white while the teaching force remains predominantly white. In other words, we are now educating a majority minority populous and that is not what is reflected in the literature assigned in schools. A few organizations have taken on the work of not only addressing the lack of diversity but pointedly working to diversify a publishing industry that, much like education, is overwhelmingly white (Lee & Low Books). The monocultural norm in publishing remains white, straight, cis, able, middle-class, Christian, and male, which leads to an overabundance of representation that reflects that normative view (see figures 1-4). These multiple privileged monocultural traditions in publishing continue to uphold narratives that are familiar, and often rely on, at best, stereotypes and oversimplifications, and more often, damaging and demeaning representations written, edited, and published by people who do not reflect anything but the familiar and the traditional.

Yet stories written by and about marginalized communities including Indigenous people, people of color, LGBTQ+ people, people with disabilities, and faith traditions that fall outside the Christian norm, continue to be outnumbered by stories depicting white, cis-gender, heterosexual, able, and Christian characters. The reason often murmured in publishing spaces is a simple one–familiarity sells. When pushed, publishers appease the complaints of overrepresentations of white, straight, male, cis, and able by publishing books featuring anthropomorphized animals and objects in children’s literature (K.T. Horning as cited in Horn Book). These “neutral” characters far outnumber stories featuring Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC) characters. These publishers are clearly communicating that talking trains are
more worthy of attention, appreciation, and study than marginalized people. Trying to disrupt and change these large systems (publishing and education) often feels like trying to hold the tide back with a bent spork. The task is impossible under the best of circumstances and the tool at hand is simply inadequate.

But, instead of despair and surrendering to the inevitable, we believe there is a way that education can and should do the work of disrupting and reimagining a new narrative landscape in the classroom. Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop’s “mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors” approach upholds the importance of every child being able to see themselves in stories, as well as the stories of those different from their own experiences. Those with unearned privilege must also have both the opportunity and the skills to read across cultural divides. In this way, we are suggesting ways to continue Dr. Bishop’s groundbreaking work. Not only must we have authentic representations across multiple forms, genres, and developmental reading levels, but we must provide ways for educators to learn to read and comprehend across multiple marginalized cultures—including but not limited to race, ethnicity, language, gender, and sexuality. In other words, providing multiple opportunities for marginalized readers to see themselves in states of raucous joy, as well as traumatic struggle, and everything in between should be the norm. Students deserve to see all their complexities reflected back on them in the texts used to learn from within and outside the classroom.

While there is still much room for growth, progress has been made in the last several decades in diversifying children’s literature. Groups like We Need Diverse Books and authors like Malinda Lo and Jason Reynolds have consistently pushed for books where all children can see themselves. While there is a robust body of work and conversation around diversity in traditional children’s and YA publishing, there has been less research and discussion around
diversity in graphic novels. Long considered a “lesser” form of text than traditional print texts, graphic novels are slowly gaining traction as “real” literature. Having won or been long-listed for almost every major literary award, graphic novels are gaining recognition both by literary critics and teachers as complex works in their own right and no longer just a watered-down version of “real” books or books just for struggling readers.

It is important to note that graphic novel publication and consumption continue to skyrocket—particularly since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. In a recent report by the NPD Group (Raugust), the production of “YA graphic novels are up 123%, and children's graphic novels are up 33%.” Anecdotally, we have both heard many teachers, librarians, and parents say—sometimes complain—that many of their children (including Jung’s own daughter) exclusively read graphic novels. Despite their popularity with readers and accolades awarded to them, there is still skepticism from some parents and educators regarding the complexity and rigor of comics as a form of literature. We hope the studies in this issue will highlight the complexity and literary depth made available by centering these texts in the curriculum.

With the huge surge in publishing and consumption, it is high time to delve more deeply into what this means for understanding the representation of diversity within graphic novels. When we first began discussing the idea for this special issue, we looked for statistics on diversity and graphic novels. We were surprised to find that there did not seem to be any clear published statistics on this. To this end, Jung pulled numbers from the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education Cooperative Children’s Book Center Diversity Statistics Book Search. Over 2018-2022 (through July), CCBC has 786 titles categorized as graphic novels. Utilizing the search function, she extracted numbers for graphic novels with primary characters representing various racial/ethnic groups, religious minorities, LGBTQ status, and dis/ability. As
a point of comparison, she also pulled out numbers for books with non-human primary characters (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Graph of Racial/Ethnic Diversity in Graphic Novels 2018-2021 (Produced by Jung Kim). Created with statistics compiled from the Cooperative Children’s Book Center Diversity Statistics Book Search.

While many have championed tirelessly for greater representation of diversity in youth literature, the gains over the last several years have been small for most groups—with the notable exception of Asian Americans. Most significantly, Latinx publications continue to seriously lag behind the population it represents. While books about Latinx characters averaged about 5% of publications each year, 26% of children in the United States in 2020 are identified as “Hispanic” by the US (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics). Yet perplexingly, we continue to see books with “Animal & Other” characters grow in number, and the questionable growth of books with “brown skin, unspecified” characters. Even while books with white main
characters have been on the decline, the growth of other racial/ethnic groups has been relatively flat and animal/other books grow. Clearly, there is still considerable room for improvement within publishing.

When we first discussed the idea for this special issue, we both had a sense that graphic novels were making great strides with diverse representation. After all, award-winning and celebrated graphic novels featuring protagonists of color like *American Born Chinese* (Gene Luen Yang 2006), the *March* trilogy (John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell 2013, 2015, 2016), and *This Place: 150 Years Retold* (Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm et al. 2019) seemed to imply that diversity was doing “well” within graphic novel publication. However, Jung went back to pull the numbers and compared them to the 2018 infographic created by Huyck and Dahlen, based on CCBC data. Table 1 compares the original 2018 data from their infographic to the graphic novel data from that same year and then the graphic novel data from 2021. While graphic novel publication is more racially diverse than the wider youth literature publication field, it is not substantially better. And, again, the representation of anthropomorphized objects and animals solidly outpaces actual Indigenous people or people of color. We did discuss whether more books featuring protagonists of color were winning awards, but that level of analysis is beyond the scope of this particular introduction.

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<th>CCBC 2018</th>
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<td>Animal etc.</td>
<td>27%</td>
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<td>Asian</td>
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Beyond the race and ethnicity of the protagonists, Jung pulled the numbers to examine other kinds of diversity, specifically religion, LGBTQ+, and dis/ability. To note: Jung created the dis/ability chart by compiling numbers from the psychiatric, cognitive/neurological, and physical difference tags from the CCBC data. Some of the most heartening data come from representations of LGBTQ+ protagonists. From 2018-2021, there was over a 100% increase in graphic novels depicting protagonists from the LGBTQ+ community. Statistics for dis/ability and religious groups are harder to pinpoint trends for as they involve such small numbers. With less than five books a year, and oftentimes no books representing those communities being published, the numbers are simply too small to draw significant conclusions from—other than that we need more books depicting those communities.
Figure 2. Graph of Religious Representation in Graphic Novels 2018-2021 (Produced by Jung Kim). Created with statistics compiled from the Cooperative Children’s Book Center Diversity Statistics Book Search.
While there are many more possibilities for diving into what these trends might mean, the underlying message is that children’s publishing—in all arenas, including graphic novels—has historically struggled to adequately represent marginalized communities and continues to fall behind in keeping pace with our increasingly diverse world. However, publishers, like many businesses, react to what they perceive the market to be. In children’s publishing, the market drivers are not the readers intended by the authors. Graphic novels may be read across a wider age range than most other forms, but the purchasing powerhouses for the industry remain libraries and schools. Because of this, along with the publishing industry’s own monocultural outlook, the cycle of publishing problematic and familiar stories continues.
But what happens when an author successfully runs the gauntlet and finally accepts a publishing contract? Sometimes the editors ask authors to appeal to an implicit bias or to make characters more “relatable” which most often means “familiar to a privileged audience.” Or they are told to change tone and language to make the book more palatable to the most privileged audiences. On and on the stories go of authors and illustrators who are told by publishers, editors, and agents that they must cater to what Toni Morrison termed “the white gaze” in her famous interview with Charlie Rose (Charlie Rose). In order to begin to approach authenticity in literary representation, librarians and teachers must embrace a multiplicity of narratives of marginalized identities, written by authors from those communities. Without that, we simply fall back on well-known and familiar caricatures and tropes. Additionally, we must have a wide array of critical analyses to explore and examine what kinds of marginalized characters are being read, and perhaps more importantly, what teachers are doing with those texts.

This special issue of RDYL works to add to the body of literature on diversity in youth graphic novels. The four articles included here cover a wide span of issues—a critical content analysis of intersectionality and queer representation in contemporary graphic novels by Rosa Nam, Kristian Lenderman, and Kimani Mitchell’s “Race Matters Whether or Not We Talk About It: A Critical Content Analysis of LGBTQ+ Characters of Color in Three Contemporary Young Adult Graphic Novels”; the power of Design and decentering white, traditional, and canonical texts in Annmarie Sheahan and Ashley Dallacqua’s article “Centering Students as Designers: Engaging with Lowriders to the Center of the Earth”; the complexities of multi-ethnic/-racial identity in Eleanor Ty’s article “Embodying Diversity: Malaka Gharib’s Graphic Memoir”; and the power of Critical Race Theory and Black superheroes in Michael Dando’s “Black Heroes Matter: Bringing a Critical Race Theory Perspective to Comics Pedagogy.”
four of these articles address not only the affordances and power of graphic novels but their limitations and considerations as well. Just as graphic novels are not the great panacea to addressing all literacy woes, simplistic embracing of “diverse” representation in graphic novels is also not the answer.

Nam, Lenderman, and Mitchell’s analysis of LGBTQ+ representation in three graphic novels with queer main characters challenges whether representation is “enough” or if queer “characters require suffering and others’ approval to accept themselves instead of finding the joy inherent in being queer.” This echoes our earlier questions about youth literature that only perpetuates stories of trauma and harm without also allowing room for joy. Their article pushes back on this the proliferation of trauma narratives in LGBTQ+ youth literature and asks the important question, “If all narratives emphasize the suffering that comes with identifying as LGBTQ+, what does this mean for queer youth of color reading these stories?” All three graphic novels also involve protagonists of color and the authors’ use of an intersectional lens allows for greater exploration of the ways in which the graphic novels highlight or oversimplify intertwining issues of race and queerness, highlighting the complexities of capturing multifaceted marginalized identities.

Sheahan and Dallacqua’s use of Catherine Camper and Raul the Third’s Lowriders to the Center of the Earth as part of a text set with tenth graders speaks to the power and pitfalls of bringing in non-traditional literature to the classroom. Drawing upon critical literacy, they unpack the ways in which students did and did not take up the text within the unit. While the incorporation of the text helped engage students’ multimodal analysis and draw upon their cultural funds of knowledge, they found that students referenced the text less often and seemed to value it less than more traditional texts. The authors raise important questions around whether
it was the ways in which they introduced the text or whether it is the lifelong expectations students have been inculcated with in terms of what a “real” text is. This speaks to the implications of how a single unit or single text is not enough to challenge traditional ways of teaching and learning, but the importance of repeating that work over time.

Ty’s analysis of Malaka Gharib’s *I Was Their American Dream* delves into representations of diversity through both Gharib’s writing as well as her images. Ty analyzes the ways Gharib presents her struggles with negotiating her multi-ethnic/racial and religious identities in America using a variety of modes. A child of a Muslim Egyptian immigrant and a Catholic Filipina immigrant, Gharib wrestles with making sense of her multiple identities. As she describes, “Gharib’s graphic memoir reconfigures the painful moments of nonbelonging, misrecognition, and of being a minority into recognizable practices through humor and a semblance of order.” Her in-depth analysis provides insight into the ways Gharib juxtaposes a variety of images with her words to relay levels of entanglement of a contemporary multicultural identity. Analyses like Ty’s provide support for the textual power of graphic novels in depicting complicated, complex stories in ways that words alone will not.

Dando’s argument for the use of comics—specifically superhero comics—in classrooms is an important one, especially when understood through the lens of Critical Race Theory. He argues that “comic books can operate as counternarratives and reimaginings that invite students of color” to play with identity and engage in emancipatory and transformative practices. Dando not only makes the case for why comics matter, but also the critical connections between CRT and comics. Discussing comics like Black Panther and X-Men, he highlights the ways in which they work as counterstories to dominant narratives of marginalized children embedded in notions of deficiency and abnormality. While mostly a theoretical piece, Dando still centers the power of
educators in bridging comics and race into their classrooms. Describing potential questions and possibilities for practice, he underscores the power of comics “to examine how cultural, social, and racial representation is created, transmitted, and reproduced.”

Finally, Trung Le Nguyen’s gorgeous cover art speaks to the power of images and words in representing the myriad possible worlds graphic novels can offer to readers. It speaks to the kinds of engagement and community that can be built up as readers engage not only with the text but their sense of place within it. Being able to envision themselves as heroes or villains or fantastical creatures, they can glimpse not only their own stories but the stories of so many others. This is the power of reading.
Works Cited


Kim and Jiménez: Editor’s Introduction


