

Research on Diversity in Youth Literature

Volume 3 | Number 1 *Minstrelsy and Racist Appropriation*

Volume 3 | Number 2 *General Issue*

April 2021

Editors' Introduction: "A Bridge of Words"

Sarah Park Dahlen

St. Catherine University

Gabrielle Atwood Halko

West Chester University

<https://iopn.library.illinois.edu/journals/rdyl>

This article was previously published on Bepress at St. Catherine University. On June 25, 2024, the metrics were:

Downloads: 164

Abstract views: 92

Recommended Citation: Dahlen, Sarah Park and Gabrielle Halko. "Editors' Introduction: 'A Bridge of Words,'" *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2021.

Research on Diversity in Youth Literature

Volume 3
Issue 1 *Minstrelsy and Racist Appropriation*
(3.1) and General Issue (3.2)

Article 2

April 2021

Editors' Introduction: 'A Bridge of Words'

Sarah Park Dahlen
St. Catherine University

Gabrielle Atwood Halko
West Chester University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://sophia.stkate.edu/rdyl>

Recommended Citation

Dahlen, Sarah Park and Halko, Gabrielle Atwood (2021) "Editors' Introduction: 'A Bridge of Words'," *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://sophia.stkate.edu/rdyl/vol3/iss1/2>

This Front Matter is brought to you for free and open access by SOPHIA. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research on Diversity in Youth Literature by an authorized editor of SOPHIA. For more information, please contact sagray@stkate.edu.

This is not the editors' introduction we intended to write. As this issue goes to press, Derek Chauvin is standing trial for the death of George Floyd. The mass shootings in Boulder, Colorado; Atlanta, Georgia; and Indianapolis, Indiana, demonstrates how gun violence continues to take American lives at alarming rates. The shootings in Atlanta took the lives of 8 people, 6 of whom were Asian American women, reminding us that Asian Americans and Asian American women in particular continue to be racialized, hypersexualized, othered, and deemed dangerous and disposable. In early 2020, we were talking with Dr. Brigitte Fielder and Dr. Katrina Phillips about guest-editing the special issue of *RDYL* 3.1. Essays for *RDYL* 3.2 began to come in, and we were hard at work. And then suddenly, everything changed. The coronavirus arrived in the United States, schools and businesses closed, and many people began to teach and work from home. The pandemic quickly revealed to a wider public what so many people already know—that Indigenous people and people of color face more barriers to accessing good health care; that they are concentrated in what we call “essential work”; that they suffer the most from poor health conditions and economic precarity.

Compounding an already frightening situation were the killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and Floyd and consequent Black Lives Matter protests around the world, as well as escalating anti-Asian racist attacks (*Stop AAPI Hate*). The 2020 election ramped up, especially with the historic naming of then-Senator Kamala Harris as Joe Biden's running mate; in November 2020 she became the first woman, the first Black American, and the first South Asian American to be elected Vice President in the country currently known as the United States. In addition to her previous accomplishments, Harris breaking these new barriers necessitated changes in children's literature; after Biden and Harris were declared the winners of the 2020

election, Nikki Grimes updated the timeline in her picture book *Kamala Harris: Rooted in Justice*, which is beautifully illustrated by Laura Freeman (Grimes).

The victory of the election has been dampened by Trump's refusal to concede and a slew of failed election challenges. We are shocked but not surprised by the violent breach at the Capitol on January 6, 2021. The deadly insurrection—fueled by white supremacy and the unfettered proliferation of fake news—was a devastating and fitting conclusion to what is already being called the worst presidential administration in American history (Naftali). In considering these events and their media coverage, it's important to think about how children learn not just from classrooms and textbooks, but also from their environment, including the news. They decode images and make connections with what they learn in these other contexts. In “The Whole Story in a Single Photo,” Clint Smith writes, “the design of the Confederate battle flag became inextricably linked to the story of the Confederacy. The flag's symbolism cannot be disentangled from the cause of those who fought beneath it. It cannot be separated from the words of its vice president, Alexander Stephens, who wrote in his infamous Cornerstone Speech that slavery was ‘the immediate cause of the late rupture and present revolution’ and that the Confederacy had been founded on ‘the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man’” (Smith). What impression does seeing images of the Confederate flag in the hallowed halls of the Capitol make on young people? What will they think of seeing mostly white people erecting gallows, carrying guns, and breaking into the Capitol? How will children's book creators remember and interpret this time period?

As we reflect on the events of January 6, and the shootings in Atlanta, Boulder, and Indianapolis, it is prescient to consider Hayley Stefan's article about gun violence and whiteness, where she argues that ableist “mad violence” is often a mask for white supremacist treatments of

and reactions to gun violence in schools. In “Mad Violence,” Stefan juxtaposes treatments of the predominantly white school shooting in Littleton, Colorado, with the work of youth activists of color after the Parkland shooting, thereby suggesting that gun violence, wherever it occurs, must be read through an ableist, white supremacist framework.

In her article, “The Legacy of the Black Arts Movement in The Children’s Literature of Toni Morrison and Sherley Anne Williams,” Tosha Sampson-Choma maps how the Black Arts Movement extends to writing for young people, specifically in the writings of Morrison and Williams. Sampson-Choma identifies these two as writers whose works for adults were quite successful before they began also writing for young readers, but whose children’s literature did not receive the same attention as their previous writings. Therefore, Sampson-Choma argues for readers to reconsider their works for children within a Black aesthetic, under the same rubric as the Black Arts Movement.

Leah Van Dyk begins her article “Into the Woods: Queer Natures in Malinda Lo’s *Ash*,” by noting that despite its position as an important and ground-breaking queer young adult novel published over ten years ago, *Ash* remains understudied. By engaging queer ecology and the fairy tale, Van Dyk asks readers to consider that “*Ash* posits a different opportunity for young girls within the forest space—one of queer becoming.”

In “Identifying Inclusion: Publishing Industry Trends and the Lack of #OwnVoices Australian Young Adult Fiction,” Emily Booth and Bhuva Narayan undertake an audit of Australian young adult literature published between 2016 and 2018. Inspired by publishing data from the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education’s Cooperative Children’s Book Center, they similarly track publishing patterns in Australia. Booth and Narayan rely on publicly available information about how authors self-identify to track #OwnVoices authorship and

evaluate the impact of international advocacy for diverse books on Australian publishing patterns.

We are also pleased to include three book reviews. Allison Estrada-Carpenter writes that Roberta Seelinger Trites' *Twenty-First-Century Feminisms in Children's and Adolescent Literature* (2018) is "a valuable and useful piece of scholarship that serves to thoughtfully identify key shifts in the discussion of feminism in recent children's and adolescent literature." Analyzing books such as *Out of the Dust*, *Ninth Ward*, and *Brown Girl Dreaming*, Trites examines how these texts engage with feminist ideologies, with particular attention to how they consider the influence of material feminism. In reviewing *Nerds, Goths, Geeks, and Freaks: Outsiders in Chicana and Latina Young Adult Literature* (2020), Cristina Rhodes writes that editors Trevor Boffone and Cristina Herrera are concerned with two main questions: "What does it mean to be an outsider within an already marginalized community?" and "How does Chicana/Latina children's and YA literature represent, challenge, question, or expand discussions surrounding identities that have been deemed outsiders or outliers?" They seek answers to these questions through what Rhodes calls an "especially impressive" volume that is both accessible and academically rigorous. In reviewing *Growing Up Asian American* (2018), Noreen N. Rodríguez writes, "At long last, Asian American young adult and middle grade fiction is receiving major accolades and is firmly becoming a part of the literary mainstream." We encourage readers to read these three reviews and consider how you might engage the books in your research and teaching.

Given how the pandemic disrupted so much of our work and lives, we decided to delay the publication of issue 3.1 and publish it together with issue 3.2. Therefore, this double issue includes *RDYL* 3.1, which is themed "Minstrelsy and Racist Appropriation" and has been

masterfully edited by Brigitte Fielder and Katrina Phillips. Though the special issue was planned long before the killings and protests of 2020, those events put into sharp relief just how necessary it is for us to keep pushing conversations about race and racism, how important it is to center Black voices and Black people, and how terribly far we are from achieving justice in so many areas.

In February 2021, *School Library Journal*'s blackface cover image and story focusing on white readers demonstrated once again why we need to keep discussions about racism and blackface front and center. On March 2, 2021, Dr. Seuss Enterprises announced that it was ceasing publication of 6 books that "portray people in ways that are hurtful and wrong." This unexpected announcement and its proximity to Read Across America Day, an event long centered around Dr. Seuss, caused both #Seuss and #CancelCulture to trend; it sparked conversations on many news platforms and across social media; and prompted over 300,000 downloads of Ishizuka and Stephens' article, "The Cat is Out of the Bag: Orientalism, Anti-Blackness, and White Supremacy in Dr. Seuss's Children's Books," published in *RDYL* 1.2. As in 2019 when the article was first published, the findings in Ishizuka and Stephens' article attracted the attention of right wing media, which in turn reinforced both the importance of the work as well as the costs that come with doing this work, particularly to Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color.

Despite books such as *How to be an Antiracist* (Kendi), *So You Want to Talk about Race* (Oluo), and *White Fragility* (DiAngelo) skyrocketing to the top of many reading lists in the summer of 2020, white supremacy continues to reign; race—and racism—remain at the forefront of our lives. To quote from the title of a provocative and heart wrenching book, it is always "A Good Time for the Truth" (Shin); it is always a good time to talk about race and racism.

And yet, we have hope. On January 20, 2021, the nation and the world heard Amanda Gorman, the nation's first National Youth Poet Laureate, recite "The Hill We Climb" at Joe Biden and Kamala Harris' inauguration ceremony, showing us once again the crucial role that words—and poetry specifically—play in the lives of young people. How fitting that our cover image is inspired by Margarita Engle, who recently served as the Young People's Poet Laureate. *RDYL*'s cover image, "Variations of Building Bridges," created by artist MicKenzie Fasteland, is inspired by Engle's poem "How to Write a Bridge of Words." In a personal communication to Sarah Dahlen, Engle wrote, "This short acrostic was inspired by participating in Wade Hudson's [and Cheryl Hudson's] *We Rise, We Resist* anthology, and by my YPPL Bridges, Not Walls theme."

Gorman began "The Hill We Climb" by asking, "[W]here can we find light in this never-ending shade?" (2-3) And yet, she continues, "Somehow we've weathered and witnessed/ a nation that isn't broken,/ but simply unfinished" (13-15) and reminds us that "If we're to live up to our own time,/ then victory won't lie in the blade./ But in all the bridges we've made" (46-48). In this unfinished, ongoing work of building a better world, of building bridges instead of walls, we hope that those of us in this corner—this corner where we care so deeply about children and children's literature—may have the courage to write, to speak up, to act, and to be.

"For there is always light,
if only we're brave enough to see it.
If only we're brave enough to be it." (108-110)

Works Cited

DiAngelo, Robin. *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*.

Beacon Press, 2020.

Engle, Margarita. "All Nations Are Neighbors and I Wonder." *We Rise, We Resist, We Raise Our*

Voices, edited by Wade Hudson and Cheryl Willis Hudson, Crown Books for Young Readers, 2018, pp. 41-2.

Engle, Margarita. "How to Write a Bridge of Words." (Personal communication with Sarah Park Dahlen). 30 Oct. 2018.

Foussianes, Chloe. "Amanda Gorman's Poem Stole the Show at the Inauguration. Read It Again Here." *Town & Country*, 21 Jan. 2021,

<https://www.townandcountrymag.com/society/politics/a35279603/amanda-gorman-inauguration-poem-the-hill-we-climb-transcript/>.

Grimes, Nikki. *Kamala Harris: Rooted in Justice*. Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2020.

Hudson, Wade, and Cheryl Willis Hudson. *We Rise, We Resist, We Raise Our Voices*. Crown Books for Young Readers, 2018.

Ishizuka, Katie and Ramón Stephens*. "The Cat is Out of the Bag: Orientalism, Anti-Blackness, and White Supremacy in Dr. Seuss's Children's Books." *Research on Diversity in Youth*

Literature, vol. 1, no. 2, 2019, <https://sophia.stkate.edu/rdyl/vol1/iss2/4>.

Stop AAPI Hate. Asian Pacific Planning and Policy Council (A3PCON) / Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA) / Asian American Studies Department of San Francisco State University, 19 Mar. 2020, <https://stopaapihate.org/>.

Kendi, Ibram X. *How to Be an Antiracist*. One World, 2019.

Naftali, Tim. "The Worst President in History." *The Atlantic*, 19 Jan. 2021,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/01/trump-worst-president-history/617730/>.

Oluo, Ijeoma. *So You Want to Talk About Race*. Seal Press, 2019.

Smith, Clint. "The Whole Story in a Single Photo." *The Atlantic*, 8 Jan, 2021,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/01/confederates-in-the-capitol/617594/>.

"Statement from Dr. Seuss Enterprises." *Seussville*, 2 Mar. 2021,

<https://www.seussville.com/statement-from-dr-seuss-enterprises/>.

Shin, Sun Yung, editor, *A Good Time for the Truth: Race in Minnesota*. Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2016.

Grimes, Nikki. "Guest Interview: Nikki Grimes on Writing Kamala Harris: Rooted in Justice."

Interview by Kekla Magoon. *Cynthia Leitich Smith*, Feb. 2021,

<https://cynthialeitichsmith.com/2021/02/guest-interview-nikki-grimes-on-writing-kamala-harris-rooted-in-justice/>.