

# Research on Diversity in Youth Literature

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## Editors' Introduction: States of Matter

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I (Gabrielle) remember very little about my eighth grade Earth Science class (it was not a subject for which I had an affinity) but decades later, I still remember the kindness of my teacher, Dr. Glaser, and the lesson about states of matter: how different substances exist as solids, liquids, and gases, and how each of those states possesses particular properties. I bring that lesson into my classroom as we study children's literature and culture; how are we taught to view texts? And what happens when we view them as states of matter with permeable boundaries, so that we can move from an interpretation that treats a text as a solid substance, fixed in its form, to a liquid that changes to fit the vessel that contains it, to a diffuse and uncontainable gas? When we accept the idea that texts might occupy different states of matter, what possibilities appear?

We are delighted to publish *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature 2.2*, which brings together a community of scholars who urge us to look more closely at texts and reconsider their states of matter. These articles ask us to move from regarding texts as solid to seeing them as more fluid, capable of taking different forms and in so doing, performing new functions.

That fluidity highlights the pairing of our cover art, Valerie Noisette's "The Future in Our Hands," with the forum, "The Limitless Vision of Edwidge Danticat's Work for Young People." Guest editor and *RDYL* advisory board member Katharine Capshaw presents four essays on Danticat's writing for children and young adults, which she expands upon in her own editor's introduction.

Katelyn R. Browne continues the discussion begun in *RDYL 2.1*, themed "[Queer Futurities](#)," in the article, "Reimagining Queer Death in Young Adult Fiction." By tracing the trope of queer death in young adult novels from its initial appearance to more recent

transformations and ultimately repudiations of that fate, Browne urges us to see queer death as a continuing arc rather than as a fixed, unalterable interpretation.

Henry Cody Miller, Mario P. Worlds, and Tianna Dowie-Chin claim that young adult literature can serve as a mirror for teachers' professional development. In "From Pages to Pedagogy: Studying Fictional Social Justice English Teachers in Young Adult Literature," Miller, Worlds, and Dowie-Chin argue not just for the possibility but for the necessity of activist teachers in students' lives. They analyze three YA novels in which English teachers model what it looks like to be advocates alongside activist students, thus providing a kind of professional development for teachers reading these books.

In "'Whose Side Are You On?' Moral Consequences of Young Readers' Responses to *To Kill a Mockingbird*," Autumn A. Allen expands the ongoing critique of Lee's novel as a progressive text used to explore issues of race in middle and high school classrooms. Allen charts the progress of a homeschool reading group and the students' reader responses—some benign, others sharply critical—to the novel.

Wesley S. Jacques merges Black feminist thought with ethics of care in "Reading Relational in Mildred D. Taylor: Toward a Black Feminist Care Ethics for Children's Literature" and illustrates how those combined lenses offer a new reading of *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. He writes, "Applying this framework to reading *Roll of Thunder* demonstrates how liberation through ethical care is both possible and obtainable." In his treatment of the novel, Jacques illustrates how Taylor's portrayal of Cassie Logan centers young people and amplifies a flexible response to a world in which racism and oppression are everyday realities.

Finally, Sami Schalk deconstructs the much-heralded "diversity" of the American Girl brand. The producers of the popular dolls and books appear to celebrate a wide range of

representations; however, in “De-politicized Diversity in the American Girl Brand,” Schalk contests the language used on the company’s website and points out its calculated neutrality as a marketing strategy. By comparing American Girl’s rhetoric to current trends in disability studies and language, Schalk reveals the deficits between claim and reality.

In addition to these essays, we present two reviews under the direction of *RDYL*’s book review editor, Sonia Alejandra Rodríguez. In her review of Lara Saguisag’s *Incorrigibles and Innocents: Constructing Childhood and Citizenship in Progressive Era Comics*, Cristina Rhodes praises Saguisag’s reading of images of childhood as both a reinforcement of growing globalism and a re-inscription of American exceptionalism.

Nithya Shivashankar reviews the collection, *Children’s Literature from Asia in Today’s Classrooms: Toward Culturally Authentic Interpretations*, edited by Yukari Takimoto Amos and Daniel Miles Amos. While Shivashankar finds much to praise, she notes that the chapter on India obscures religious and cultural differences within the diverse country and focuses on retellings rather than contemporary children’s literature. In sum, “While PK-16 educators get a good overview of children’s literature from Asia from Amos and Amos’ edited collection, they also need to be aware of the fact that most of the texts suggested in this book offer opportunities for ‘informing’ the audience but not as many for ‘empowering’ them.”

We hope that you enjoy this issue of *RDYL* and find new possibilities for your conversations, teaching, scholarship, and activism.