“We Need Diverse Books”: Children’s Texts as Art and Activism

In a 2014 opinion for the *New York Times*, children’s author Christopher Myers describes what he calls “the apartheid of children’s literature,” in which “characters of color are limited to the townships of occasional historical books that concern themselves with the legacies of civil rights and slavery but are never given a pass card to traverse the lands of adventure, curiosity, imagination or personal growth” (Myers). If you’ve ever heard the idea that a library card is a “ticket to the world,” you’ll appreciate Myers’s imagining books as a world unto themselves. The point is not only that the publishing industry is lacking in diversity; it’s that children from marginalized groups are not represented as having the right to “travel” either metaphorically or literally in the world of books. While Myers’s observations unfortunately are still relevant to children’s and young adult literature, things have changed for the better. In this course, we’ll read and analyze a selection of exciting recent children’s and young adult literature by diverse authors and featuring diverse adventurers navigating their worlds across a number of genres, including picturebooks, a graphic novel, contemporary realism, magical realism, and dystopia. While we study the artistry of the books, we’ll also address questions about diversity and representation in literature produced for this most vulnerable and important audience and look at the place of the “We Need Diverse Books” campaign in the history of activism for increasing diversity in books for children and young adults.

Plans are underway for guest speakers and for class involvement in an exciting digital humanities “curation for activism” project involving field research in bookstores in students’ communities. The skills developed through this project will be applicable to a variety of fields and research topics.

The course texts will be chosen from the following:

Akwaeke Emezi, *Pet*
Angeline Bouley, *Firekeeper’s Daughter*
Anna-Marie McLemore, *When the Moon was Ours*
Benjamin Alire Sáenz, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Universe*
Cherie Dimaline, *Marrow Thieves*
Kelly Yang, *Front Desk*
Neal Shusterman, *Challenger Deep*
Shaun Tan, *The Arrival*
Susan Tan, *Cilla-Lee Jenkins*
Additional picturebooks (TBD)