

BUILDING JUSTICE PODCAST



CRISJ Building Justice Podcast

Season 3, Episode 11: Why Is Representation in Children’s Literature Important?

Moderator: Ryan McMurray

Guests: Dr. Tonmar Johnson, Christopher Burch

Please note: This transcript may be imperfect. Please contact Ryan McMurray directly should you have questions.

Music lyrics:

Company under construction, the function, justice for the human family we demand it. Justice, true freedom, equality is a must. Thus, decolonization of the planet. So bust this. People be the power now we’re Building Justice. Pulling out divinations, now we’re Building Justice. Welcome the planet to the Podcast, “Building Justice,” “Building Justice,” “Building Justice.” Building is to add on, or to do away with.

Introduction

Welcome to Building Justice, a podcast by Sacramento State’s Center on Race, Immigration and Social Justice (CRISJ). We explore critical issues affecting our communities with the hopes of creating a healthier and more just world.

Ryan McMurray: Welcome to Building Justice, a podcast by Sacramento State’s Center on Race, Immigration, and Social Justice. We explore critical issues affecting our communities with the hopes of creating a healthier and more just world. I’m Ryan McMurray. I am a Sac State alumnus, and I’m also the chief editor at Seventh Gap Media. I’m here with Dr. Tonmar Johnson, Professor of Sociology and President at 7 Gap. Media, and Christopher Burch, San Francisco based artist and lead illustrator at Seventh Gap media.

Ryan McMurray: So I wanna start just by having both of you introduce yourselves. Tell us a little about yourselves. Tonmar, let's start with you.

Dr. Johnson: Alright. Thank you for having me. Thank you for hosting this event here. I'm Dr. Tonmar Johnson, and I'm born and raised in the Bay area. I actually am a community college graduate. Went to Solano Community College after high school. I received a football scholarship, and ended up graduating from New Mexico with a bachelor's degree in both sociology and political science. I ended up coming back home to Sac State and getting my Master's degree in sociology from CSU Sacramento. So go Hornets. And then I received my doctorate from UC Davis. I'm currently a college professor. Have been now, for this is my eighteenth year, and I'm also the department chair, and have been on multiple committees. Everything from being the Vice President Elect at the California Sociological Association to being on the Board of Directors for the Pacific Sociological Association. Yeah. So wonderful.

Ryan McMurray: Yeah, I agree. Go Hornets. We are both Hornets for life, stingers up. Christopher, how about you?

Christopher Burch: So I was born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri. Graduated from University City High School, and went to Columbia College in Columbia, Missouri, off of an art scholarship. I've been pretty steadfast in my art practice since I was 15 and after graduating I worked as an art teacher for Saint Louis Public Schools...and then came out to San Francisco in 2006 to get my masters at the San Francisco Art Institute. And since then I've been focused on art. Public art projects that speak to the expansiveness of Black people, of humanity, in order to inject narratives that are often not seen in the world. I work a lot with mythology and narratives within my studio practice. I've also created several educational workshops that combine myth making and identity, called reflective mythologies.

Ryan McMurray: That is wonderful, and for our listeners, who maybe have not seen Christopher's artwork, I can tell you I have seen it, and it is incredible. Can we find you on Instagram just by typing in your name?

Christopher Burch: No, there's unfortunately many Christopher Burches. I'm being beat out by billionaire venture capitalists on social media. So that's my goal to beat. If I could beat out a billionaire venture capitalist I'm doing alright, but the best way is at Goya Goon. G-O-Y-A underscore goon. G-O-O-N.

Ryan McMurray: Excellent! Excellent! Alright! So I know that I've mentioned Seventh Gap media a few times now, and our listeners probably don't know what that is. So, Tonmar, can you tell us, what is 7th Gap media, and what is its mission statement and overarching values?

Dr. Johnson: Oh, that's a great question. And you know, this was a a concept that took a while to come up with. There were multiple names that were floating around in my head. And speaking to others about it as well. But 7th Gap Media is is a dynamic and forward thinking publishing company. And we will make our mark on the world of media and creative content. We were founded on the principles of diversity, inclusion, innovation, and excellence, and we will continue to become a prominent player in the ever evolving landscape of publishing. We have a commitment to delivering high quality content. And that is important for us. When I was putting together this company, the two people that continually stuck out in my head were you, Ryan, as the chief editor, and Christopher as the chief illustrator, artist, and etc. I've seen your work, Ryan and I've seen Christopher's work, and you two have a gift, and I genuinely mean that. And so, bringing you into Seventh Gap Media at the heart of it, has allowed me to right create this level of content, that will be forever changing. And you know, at the end of this, you know, we hope to inspire and connect people from all backgrounds, all interests and get them to start having conversations about diversity, equity and inclusion. So.

Ryan McMurray: Very cool. I wanna talk a little bit more about how we came up with the name Seventh Gap, because I remember that conversation. You know, I had suggested Seventh Direction, and then we googled that, and we found out that there was already a company called Seventh Direction. And then I remember you had asked me, have you ever heard of the Gap Band. And I said, yeah. And then, what did you say after that?

Dr. Johnson: Yes, sir, that was a conversation. And yeah, the Gap Band. You know, they were a late seventies, early eighties group that my parents loved and I grew up listening to. And I learned this once I got into college. I believe it was actually at Sac State, and Professor Todd Migliaccio's class that the Gap band got their name from the main streets in Black Wall Street, Tulsa, Oklahoma. And those streets were Greenwood, Archer and Pine. And that's how they got "gap," right? That's how they came up with the name but you know, going a little bit further into the number 7, and how that came up, that was a conversation, right, Ryan? We had it in multiple spaces, and it just kept, the number 7 just kept popping up. And one of the things I remember you saying was, There's obviously a reason. Right? The number 7 keeps coming into play. And so we both did a little bit of more research. And I remember you coming back and saying, You know, the number 7 is highly revered in the Native American community.

Dr. Johnson: And it's important, right, that we are representing all of who we are as a collective unit. And so, yeah, that's how we came up with it. Basically was, you know, again, looking at diversity and inclusion and making sure that you know we represent all facets of our communities.

Ryan McMurray: Exactly, man, exactly. I remember that conversation well, and it, it just sort of speaks to, you know. We went back and forth so many times, and so many different iterations of names. And that spirit of collaboration was always there. And that's something that I really value about this.

Dr. Johnson: Absolutely.

Ryan McMurray: So, Christopher. I wanna know more about how you came to be a part of this project, and what your initial thoughts were about it, because I know that Tonmar had contacted you, and that I was, I was not present for that conversation, though. So tell us a little bit more about that.

Christopher Burch: So, I originally...me and Tonmar met because one of my best friends I grew up with in St. Louis Scheduler Kelly and his wife, Alicia came to San Francisco, and they brought the kids in. Tomar is Alicia's cousin, correct? Through marriage. Yeah. Yeah. And so we all went out to his house in first time meeting. And they had the spades table set up.

And I was like, I was like, Oh, yeah, this is gonna be...this is gonna be fun. So I didn't know anything about Tonmar, or who he is, his experiences or anything. But we broke bread as a lot of Black people do over spades. And that's how you and how I grew up is that's how you really get to know somebody, right? Because it's, it's you laughin', you joking, you, you playing around, and it's just it's just a good time, and it's a way to, you know, every space play, every Black space play. Every person to play spades knows sitting at that table is serious, but it's also fun. So from there we met, and then we stayed in contact through social media. And it was there that Tonmar saw my craft and my practice. And through the mirror work and through exhibitions and things that are posted. And he reached out to me and asked me if I wanted to participate as the artist for 7th Gap Media.

Christopher Burch: And my initial thoughts were, this is amazing. Because for me, ownership over content. Production is truly important. I would say, the impulse, the ethos that that tomorrow is coming from is, is aligned with mine, and the importance and the urgency in which tomorrow is coming from is aligned with mine. So we have a lot of shared values that are really important. And you know, when you meet people with those with those levels of deep shared values, and they see the urgency that you see it's refreshing. And so I was on board at that point because I was like this is aligned with why I create what I create.

Christopher Burch: So it's an opportunity to further influence the culture in positive matters. And it's an opportunity to further push self-affirming narratives into the world. So that's the reason why. Because I decided to be a part of 7th Gap Media.

Ryan McMurray: Wonderful, wonderful. I should probably clarify for our listeners at this point that the 3 of us have written, edited, and illustrated a book for children, a middle grades adventure novel. Tonmar wrote the book, I edited the book. And, Christopher, you illustrated this book.

Ryan McMurray: Tonmar, can you...can you give us the title, and then give us a brief summary of the plot. Not too many spoilers, though.

Dr. Johnson: definitely can't give the spoilers. And, and the beautiful part about this Ryan, is that you know we've, we've spoken about this, the 3 of us that this isn't just a book, right? This is a movement. And we are all in this to help make a change. To create representation for children who are generally marginalized in the media spaces. So in that, in our conversations, we wanted to make sure to create a title, right, that could bring kids to it, and so we came up with "mysteries of a middle schooler." And since this is the first volume, we decided with, "Let the adventures begin." Again, this is the first of many and, and people who don't know this book was inspired by my 2 children, the older 2. I'm sorry the older 2 children because I remember them growing up in spaces, and it being tough to find books with characters of color. Our youngest child, has a little bit more of an advantage now with, you know, eBooks everywhere, right? And so there is a larger space for him to be able to find these.

Dr. Johnson: But our older 2 didn't have this this access like the younger one has. And so yeah, that that's kind of where the inspiration came from. And so you'll see a lot of that throughout all of the books, right. But the first book is, is, it's about, you know, fraternal twins Evie and Marcus, and they're getting ready to start this adventure going into fifth grade, which you know, in many areas that's called middle school, right? And this school is a pretty, you know, prominent school that they had to get into. It wasn't just something that they applied and got it. No, they had to have good grades. They had to be active in their communities right? They had to bring something to the table to enter the school.

Dr. Johnson: So they both get in. And you know, the plot twist is, any time you get into something, it's it can generally be too good to be true, right? And so Evie and Marcus end up having this history teacher that they find out later on, you know, that a few of their people that they are connected with have also had this history teacher. And you know, some might say he's grumpy, some might say he's, you know, creates a little more discipline. Some might say he's just tired and worn out from an educational system here, that, you know, really doesn't value teachers the way we should. But in that they, they have to create this history project. And so they actually end up creating an app with a friend of theirs. And this app allows them to go into spaces that others aren't allowed to be in or can't get into yet. And so in this they use that to help them create this history project that they have to do.

Dr. Johnson: And so there is a lot of. There's a lot of plot twists, though, throughout right? This this book, and I don't want to give too much more. But it was important that, you know, the aspects of technology were put in here. The aspects of representation were put in here. The aspects of accountability, right, for young children. But it is also the aspect of having fun and being able to go to a place, right? Mentally, that you know, we generally can't get to just by sitting down. And so hopefully, this book does that for the readers.

Ryan McMurray: I just wanna say that was an excellent job of not giving away any spoilers, probably much better than I could have done.

Dr. Johnson: So no, I would tell you, I had to think about that a few times, right, because I was getting ready to say, and I literally had to bite my lip. But I want the, you know, I want the people who are hearing this podcast to be excited and want to purchase this book for their family, their friends, their children and even for themselves. Because again, it is an adventure, and it's an adventure that we can all sometimes get into and escape from, you know, from the realities of our everyday lives. And so I think that's really important for people to know.

Ryan McMurray: definitely, is it definitely is. Christopher? I'm wondering something. how did you approach the project that you were asked to do? And then, you know, do you have like a specific process for creating the art that you create? Or does the process depend on what it is you're creating?

Christopher Burch: Hmm. So, I approach the project pretty open minded. Because I wanted to absorb as much information that Tonmar had in the book. The details. So I approached it first as a person that loves to read, right, and really just got a sense of Tonmar's writing style, and kind of like the textures of the world that Evie and Marcus inhabit. And so from there, I just kind of looked at what like the idea of the heroine or hero image for the book cover, right? The first thing that people see, and that amount of drama that needs to be there in order for that to immediately attract. But then also to tell that story. So I really just, I thought about what elements would be in there that would give that sense of mystery, adventure, intrigue, and that's really where I began. And then from there I just flushed out these ideas over several drawings, and just took my time with it and trusted the process. I've luckily done enough design work throughout my, you know, my career in which moving in spaces as a storyteller, myself, as someone that loves literature.

Christopher Burch: So for me it was like, this is just another, you know, another way to approach it, but I wanted to approach it from the standpoint that removed my own individual like aesthetic twist and things, and really keep it like in tune to what tomorrow was getting at in the book.

Ryan McMurray: That's really interesting. And you know, I have to say. I just I find it really amazing...just your ability to like draw emotion from me when I look at the artwork that you create, just by looking at it. I am not a visual artist. but I know good art when I see it. And I'm really happy that you're a part of this project.

Christopher Burch: Thank you. I'm excited about it as well, this project means a lot, and to work with y'all has been really refreshing and really invigorating for for multiple reasons that would probably take up the entire length of the recording time. But just know that like this is. This is also really inspiring for me to to be a part of this

Ryan McMurray: that's really great. So, Tonmar, I know that earlier you mentioned Dr. Todd Migliaccio from Sacramento State. And I, as it so happens, I took a sociology of pop culture class with him, and then I also was an instructional assistant for that same sociology of pop culture class as a grad student. So I wanna explore, just from a

sociological viewpoint, why media representation is so important. You know, there was a lot of talk about representation and media in those classes, so why does that matter so much?

Dr. Johnson: It's crazy. How, right, 6 degrees of separation, right? It's real. You had Todd as a professor, I had Todd as my thesis adviser. And where this kind of media representation, or why this concept of media representation is important is because in my thesis, my thesis was based on African American boys experience in sports, right? And why is it sports is so revered for African American youth. And so one of the most important aspects that during my research doing, my research in that timeframe was, I found this concept created by Dr. Harry Edwards, and it was called the Triple Tragedy.

Dr. Johnson: And it's this...the overarching theme is basically that African American boys are bombarded with, you know, things that are unhealthy for them long term via the media. And so when there's a lack of representation in every space that African American boys and girls step into, that becomes very problematic. In that, this book is centered around that, right, is making sure that there is a level of representation for those children that were generally not recognized, whether it was in books or textbooks, or whether it's on the big screen, or whether it's in Congress or, you know, in their doctor's office, or, you know, going into a classroom and seeing an instructor.

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Dr. Johnson: Having people that look like you, come from your communities, that understand who you are, and the things that you have gone through are so important for youth development. And so in that, you know, we are here to push forward and making sure that there is never again a generation that has to deal with the lack of representation in the media.

Dr. Johnson: You know myself, you, Ryan, and you've done an absolute amazing job at recognizing who you are and what you can do to help push this forward, and then with Christopher, and you know, his thought process, and how his art reflects all the various aspects of different communities. It's beautiful. And so at the end of it, you know, I hope that we can just continue to build on this and make sure that the youth know that there's someone there that genuinely cares about how they are being represented.

Christopher Burch: Indeed, indeed.

Ryan McMurray: Absolutely. You know, for our listeners, I should mention that I am a cisgender, heterosexual white man, and I grew up reading a lot. I love reading. And when I really stopped to think about it, I can say that all of the books that I read when I was a kid...the main characters, the protagonists, all looked like me. And so when we got to talking about this project, and really got into it, I tried to come at it from a point of view of like...you know, the world can seem like a pretty terrible place sometimes. And there's not a whole lot I can do about a lot of that. But there are things that I can do to make the world a better place. And, and so being a part of this project, helping kids

recognize themselves in the protagonists of an adventure novel. That's something that I can do. And, and it's something that I enjoy doing.

Dr. Johnson: right. And I have to interject here real quick, because people don't understand how important having allies in the dominant community are for marginalized or minority communities. And not only do I consider you an ally, I consider you a friend. I consider you an advocate. I consider you someone who has recognized their place. As a privileged cisgender, Caucasian male...but yet you're using that privilege to help create a space where others can feel included as well. And, and that is truly amazing. So thank you.

Ryan McMurray: Well, thank you both, and you know I consider both of you friends as well. I think, Christopher said in our last meeting, you know, we got like a 3 Musketeers sort of thing going on. It's pretty cool. So, Christopher, I want to move into a discussion about some of the challenges that BIPOC artists face that are that aren't typically experienced by artists that are part of the dominant culture. You know, as I said, I'm I'm not an artist. I don't know a lot about that world. So could you tell us about that, please?

Christopher Burch: That's, that's a question that I've been asking and experiencing for about 30 years. And I think it goes back to what the question that you posed to Tonmar about representation, who has the power to represent themselves in an accurate light? Without the distortion of stereotypes and assumptions and power dynamics that often grotesquely deform images of representation. We, as human beings, are instinctively drawn to want to see our image in the world. And what when we receive a reflection that is distorted, that then becomes a base point on how we see ourselves. So the lack of representation, or the abundance of distorted representations can have deep psychological impacts. It has on all of us. I remember growing up and loving to read, loving to read.

Christopher Burch: But it wasn't until eleventh grade that I actually was able to see myself in a novel, and realizing how powerful of a shift that was, a fundamental moment when I was just like, Oh, wow! This is this is something that is talking about my experiences. This person, I feel, feels like me. That level of association is, is, is, is powerful in how we view ourselves in the world. And so art is merely just a reflection of, of quote unquote, the dominant culture. And I definitely have an issue with the term dominant, but it is what it is, and it's used to explain white culture in America, and how much, how pervasive that culture is.

Christopher Burch: So as an artist, I really I really look at how to combat that. What narratives aren't being said, what narratives aren't being brought to the forefront. And oftentimes, those narratives that aren't being brought to the forefront are narratives that talk about. The expansiveness and power of Black humanity. Black care, Black myth, like just the Black, lives intimate lives in America. And I think from that standpoint, how I work, and how I approach projects is from that standpoint. It's an immense love for humanity, first and foremost, and then it's how can I push a culture that doesn't create grotesque and distorted reflections of myself into the world.

Christopher Burch: As an artist I have the ability to create images. What am I going to do with that? So that's the fundamental questions I ask myself. And then, you have the art world as a business, and that's a completely different story. But I will say, as long as every Black artist...you know, I have a have a problem with the term "people of color." But that's just...but folks from marginalized communities, as long as they know their power, know that they have the ability to influence culture and create a shift through their work, through their care, through the vulnerability, and through their strength. Poetry and art will always be a necessary and radical component in pushing culture forward in a positive manner.

Ryan McMurray: I think you said something really important there, that I wanna touch on. I mean it was all important. But, the thing that stuck out to me was that a lot of times when we talk about representation, there's a...there's a focus on the lack of representation. But that's not all it is. It's, it's that the representation that is there is often distorted in a negative way.

Dr. Johnson: That's very, very important, Ryan, right? When, when having these conversations and understanding that even when there is representation via the media about, you know and Christopher doesn't like it. But you know, "people of color." So when that's just a general term identifying, right, African Americans, people of Asian descent. Latin X, Latino, you know, Native American, etc., etc. But with that being said, understanding that again, right, we have a job to do to fight against this narrative that has been painted and given to us by the dominant culture. Again, that's some word that Chris, and dominant from sociological space, right, again, from a sociological term. Right? It means the people in the positions of power. Right? And so, even if you look at spaces like South Africa, right, where there's a large majority of Africans. Right? Traditional Africans. They're the dominant group still is right. Those of fairer skin, because they hold the positions of power. But with that again being said, you know, it is our job to to create narratives that genuinely reflect who we are. and the many spectrums that we are part of. And again, this was part of that triple tragedy that that Dr. Harry Edwards continued to speak about is that they will bombard us with, you know, in the media, with drug dealers and athletes, and gang bangers and single mothers and etc., etc. But where are the doctors?

Dr. Johnson: Where are the dentists? Where are the firefighters? We're the artists were the writers. Where are the editors? Where are the college professors? Where are the college presidents? Right? And so again, it is our job to make sure that this next generation of youth can see themselves in all of those spaces. And with Seventh Gap Media, that's what we are going to do. We're going to make sure to bring that into the homes and classrooms of any youth that you know, has ever felt this way

Christopher Burch: Yeah and I think that in itself is a beautifully revolutionary purpose. That meaning, you know, that level of not to see yourself in the world is is psychologically damaging.

Dr. Johnson: in every aspect this right? Not just in certain spaces, in every aspect. Right?

Christopher Burch: So that's that. That's truly, truly important. And those are, that was one of the core values that made me realize this 7th Gap Media is a place I need to be.

Ryan McMurray: Me too, and I am just so excited for whatever is coming next. So this next question is actually for both of you. If you could send a message directly to the kids who are gonna read about themselves in the pages of the book or see themselves on the cover, what would that message be?

Christopher Burch: Hmm! You wanna take this one or—

Dr. Johnson: go ahead, Chris, I'll let you start. Yeah.

Christopher Burch: I would say continue to question. Continue to investigate. Continue to protect your imagination, and continue to grow. Your education is your responsibility. It's not your teachers, it's not your parents. It is yours, that is a gift. Treat it well.

Dr. Johnson: Amen, I love that

Ryan McMurray: Powerful message.

Dr. Johnson: Yeah. So I wanna read you a quote from a kid who is a YouTube influencer that I was able to get the book to early, right, to have them review it. And this kid's name is Super Amani 4, okay? And he's on YouTube, and Super Amani 4 said, "when I read an adventure book, I don't just read. I like to dream, feel, and see myself going through the adventure. This book did all of that. Fellas, when I tell you that message, right? There is everything that we needed to hear, you know? I don't think it could have been put any better for the youth. and I hope they really are going to hear that quote from that young man. He 11 years old. And you know again, he said, that that's what this book did.

Ryan McMurray: Those are some pretty powerful words, I mean. thank you, Super Amani 4. Okay. So I think by the time this podcast episode airs, the book is going to be published, it will be out. It will be available for purchase. Where can people find the book and the artwork for purchase?

Dr. Johnson: I wanna just say this, there's a couple of little caveats in the book that I think the youth will genuinely appreciate, and I believe that the parents of the children purchasing this book will also appreciate, because Christopher did an amazing job at giving them spaces where they could be themselves. And I'll leave it at that about those spaces. But this book will be available on all platforms. We are also working on currently getting some pretty prominent individuals within the media space to purchase a large portion of these books, so that, you know, we can go and hand them out to some of the

kids who generally wouldn't be able to afford them. And so, you know, this book is bigger than me. This book is bigger than Seventh Gap Media. This book is larger than us as a collective

Dr. Johnson: and so you know, we will have this in audible form, we will have this as a paperback E 4. But this is just the beginning. This is just the beginning. Ryan and Christopher and I. We're trying to put together a schedule here for a book tour. And you know, hopefully, you know, people who are hearing this are just at Sac State. But you know this message gets out to a larger community as well, and the book tour will go, you know, up and down the West Coast all the way into, you know, the Midwest, touching some East Coast cities and down in the South as well. But I also want you all to know that your local bookstores will also have access to this book. So if they don't have it, and you go in there, please ask for it. Because we want the local bookstores to win in their respective spaces as well, because those are the spaces where many of the kids that we are trying to reach can walk into and then possibly see themselves in this adventure.

Ryan McMurray: Excellent. And with that, I think we're gonna wrap this episode up. Thank you for listening, we hope our ongoing conversations spark understanding, empathy, and motivation to join the struggle for a better future for all.

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Concluding Language

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Outro Music Lyrics

No more penalties and no more wars. Based on the actions. Now, time for "Building Justice," "Building Justice." Time for building justice, justice.