Panel 14: Queer Identities

Robyn Dennison, Loving Girls: Romance and the Realisation of Queer Identity in Young-Adult Fiction

This paper analyses the representation of queer girlhood in three Anglophone YA novels (two North American, one Australian) published in the last fifteen years. I argue that in these novels to be a girl, regardless of sexual identity, is to pursue a version of womanhood in which subjectivity is defined and legitimised through the achievement of romantic relationships. Each novel features a narrative strand that introduces a love object with whom the protagonist seeks romance, which establishes tension that escalates over the course of the narrative as the potential couple face obstacles, but which will be resolved by the end in either success or failure. Informed by the work of Roland Barthes, I analyse Julie Anne Peters’ Far from Xanadu (2005), A. S. King’s Ask the Passengers (2012), and Jared Thomas’ Songs that Sound Like Blood (2016), demonstrating how the protagonists’ acceptance of their non-heterosexuality relies upon the pursuit or fantasy of normative romance in ways that reinforce expectations about women, sex and identity: that sex is risky outside the confines of a monogamous relationship; that in order for queerness to be legitimised, sexual desire must be accompanied by romantic feelings; and that the fantasy of a normative romantic relationship – long-term, monogamous, potentially-procreative, and carried out at the domestic site of the shared home – is the key driving force of a woman’s life. I thus show how heteronormative expectations about adult life are mapped onto queer girls. Ultimately, while I find much to be celebrated in the increasing visibility of queer women in YA since the end of the twentieth century, I also find in these novels the perpetuation of reductive ideologies about girls’ satisfaction and value being tied to romantic success, and about queer identity being an essential, internal reality that emerges gradually through a process of realisation and self-acceptance.

Robyn Dennison is a PhD candidate at Melbourne University, where she teaches creative writing and is researching girlhood, narrative theory, and queer young-adult fiction. Her research has previously appeared in Children’s Literature Association Quarterly.

Dalila Forni, Young Adult Graphic Novels and Female (Bi)sexual Identity in Long Red Hair and Blue is the Warmest Color

The proposal aims to examine two graphic novels considering female bisexuality: Long Red Hair by Meags Fitzgerald (2016) and Blue is the Warmest Color by Julie Maroh (2010). Although many studies analyzed homosexual representations in literature, comics and culture, bisexuality is usually an invisible minority linked to persisting stereotypes. Moreover, few works of art directly focus on bisexual identity and openly defines this orientation. Novels, comics and graphic novels on the topic are usually labelled as lesbian or gay works of art. For this reason, the present study aims to analyze from a bisexual, gender-based point of view two
graphic novels that may present bisexual female identities and to examine their portrayal of love and sexual relationships.

The presentation will be based on Young Adult Literature, LGBTQ Studies and Gender Studies in order to investigate the selected texts and their potential in presenting bisexual and female subjectivities to young adults. Literature – and graphic novels in these specific case studies – has a strong influence on young readers’ perception and interpretation of reality since they offer precise behavioral and social models. Inclusive literature, sensitive to different aspects of sexual orientation, may encourage self-awareness in new generations. For this reason, the two books will be interpreted from a bisexual perspective in order to discover limits and potentialities in portraying different sexual orientations related to femininity through images and words.

Dalila Forni is a PhD candidate in Education and Psychology at University of Florence, Italy. She obtained her MA in European and Non-European Languages and Literatures at the University of Milan. Her research interests include children’s narratives and gender identity. She is currently researching how gender identities are represented in children’s storytelling, from picture books to videogames.

Miranda A. Green-Barteet and Jill Coste, Non-Normative Bodies, Queer Identities: The Marginalization of Queer Girls in YA Dystopian Literature

Recently, Young Adult (YA) dystopian fiction has been heralded for featuring strong female protagonists who question gender norms. From The Hunger Games trilogy and the Divergent series to more recent works like Amy Ewing’s The Lone City series, authors of YA dystopian fiction are creating female protagonists who overwhelmingly challenge the gender and age limitations facing real-life girls. Further, many of these protagonists resist oppressive social structures as they work to make their worlds more progressive. These efforts toward progress are notable, but they mask another reality of this supposedly subversive genre: while the dystopian protagonists do often transgress gendered expectations, most still are white, able-bodied, heterosexual girls.

In fact, queer girls rarely feature as protagonists in this popular genre, and YA dystopian novels with queer girls as secondary characters often render their experiences as less important than those of the heterosexual main character. Many queer characters sacrifice themselves for a purported greater good, resulting in the main character’s increased awareness of systemic injustice; alternatively, queer girls often simply disappear from the text, suggesting that they matter not at all. When queer female protagonists are present in the genre, their experiences are often presented as explicitly non-normative, and in their quest to empower themselves and claim subjectivity, their queerness is routinely sidelined. In this essay, we examine the tendency to minimize queerness, arguing that despite its seeming emphasis on presenting strong, fully-actualized adolescent female protagonists, YA dystopian fiction continues to overlook queer girls.

We focus on Francesca Lia Block’s Love in the Time of Global Warming and Erin Bow’s The Scorpion Rules, both of which center on queerness: each features bisexual protagonists who claim subjectivity and celebrate their sexuality. In these books, the protagonist’s individual journey toward self-awareness and sexual identity merges with the social critique expected of
the dystopian genre. These teenagers learn how the poor decisions of adults now shape their restrictive environment, and they also learn that their personal experience of love is important, and, indeed, necessary in empowering them to fight the system.

However, Block’s and Bow’s representation of queerness is restrictive as their texts equate queerness with non-normative bodies. The protagonists in both novels must sacrifice their own physicality to change the dystopian paradigm in which they live. While both characters seemingly make empowered choices to alter their bodies, their physical changes heighten their marginalization. Drawing on Queer Theory, we argue that these texts offer a narrative of empowered queer girlhood that is usually missing from this genre, but that the books’ emphasis on non-normative bodies mutes that power, reinforcing that queer girls are non-normative themselves. Thus, the protagonists’ queerness becomes secondary to the physical alterations that cause them to re-evaluate both their physical bodies and their subjectivity. These texts then imply that their protagonists’ sexuality — and, by extension, that of their YA girl readers — is less important to their identities than the circumstances of their dystopian worlds.

Miranda A. Green-Barteet is an assistant professor cross-appointed in the Department of Women’s Studies and Feminist Research and the Department of English and Writing Studies. She has published on Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Wilson, Sarah Pogson, as well as on race and gender in The Hunger Games. She is the co-editor of Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction. She has also co-edited Reconsidering Laura Ingalls Wilder: Little House and Beyond with Anne K. Phillips.

Jill Coste is a PhD candidate at the University of Florida. Her dissertation work focuses on forms of resistance in contemporary YA fairy tales. Her areas of interest include children’s and young adult literature, diversity in YA dystopias, fairy tale retellings, and 20th-century American culture. Publications include “Going Postmodern Gothic: Neil Gaiman’s Feminist Fairy Tales,” in Critical Insights: Neil Gaiman, and “Subverting Standards and Formulating Fairy Tales: Sarah Fielding’s Conventionally Unconventional Use of Fantasy in The Governess,” a peer-reviewed article in San Diego State University’s The Unjournal of Children’s Literature.