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Using LGBTQ Graphic Novels to Dispel Myths about Gender and Sexuality in ELA Classrooms

The format and content of LGBTQ graphic novels make them effective pedagogical tools for engaging students in critical discussions about gender and sexuality. By using two exemplar texts, the authors offer teachers a vocabulary and method for engaging in these conversations.

As teachers and teacher educators, we are committed to using texts that characterize our students' diverse experiences and that challenge them critically. Many English language arts (ELA) teachers actively combat homophobia and strive for gender and sexuality inclusivity in classrooms, and part of their effort includes sharing the experiences of people who identify as LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer). However, ELA teachers may benefit from further support that offers specific vocabulary and practical methods for facilitating critical discussions about gender and sexuality (Thein). In this article, we argue that the format and content of graphic novels that depict LGBTQ experiences are a unique and effective pedagogical tool to engage students in critical discussions about gender and sexuality.

Queer Theory and LGBTQ Young Adult Literature

Several scholars suggest that LGBTQ young adult literature (YAL) should be actively included in ELA classrooms to create an inclusive environment and to challenge homophobic culture (e.g., Blackburn and Smith; Clark and Blackburn). Beyond the inclusion of LGBTQ texts, teachers should actively address intersectional identities, or the interdependent structures of oppression, based on race, gender, class, nationality, etc. (Blackburn and Smith). Educators should employ "queer readings" of texts in use in the classroom curriculum not labeled as LGBT-themed (in other words, texts that are

"already on the shelf") and actively recognize and discuss instances with students where authors or characters challenge normative gender and sexual identities (Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth). Other scholars offer literary analyses of LGBTQ YAL (e.g., Thein and Kedley; Linville) or share their experiences using graphic novels with queer youth (Blackburn et al.). Adding to this body of work, we propose that graphic novels offer ELA teachers a unique opportunity for queer, critical discussions about gender and sexuality in the classroom.

We ground our article in queer studies (Butler; Fausto-Sterling; Halberstam; Rich; Sedgwick). Queer theory distinguishes *sex* categories (assigned at birth, based on genitals) from *gender* categories (expressed as feminine or masculine, based on social and cultural norms). We use *gender* to indicate both *gender presentation* (observed visually through images) and *gender identity* (revealed in thought or dialogue bubbles). We use *sexuality* or *sexual identity* to describe preferences in who we are attracted to and choose for intimate or romantic relationships. Society's unquestioned acceptance of the *gender binary* as truth conditions us to view male and female as the only (non-overlapping) options regardless of evidence to the contrary. *Compulsory heterosexuality* suggests that though heterosexuality is thought of as natural and the default sexuality, this is erroneous—its privileged status is maintained because it is culturally and legally expected and rewarded.

Scholarship on multimodal texts (including graphic novels) reflects limiting notions about a traditional, print-based understanding of literacy as reading and writing alphabetic text (Hassett and

Schieble). However, graphic novels are not limited to text and instead offer a complex interplay of written text and illustration, speech and thought bubbles, perspective shifts, panel arrangements, word balloons, font choices, color, and shading. Through reading graphic novels, students develop visual literacy skills and engage in complicated cognitive processes (Dallacqua; Schwarz). Students learn to use texts—in this case, graphic novels—in a way that challenges traditional and one-directional readings, coupled with learning about gender and sexuality in ways not attached to the binary. With practice, students can apply these critical readings to settings and practices in their lives beyond the texts they encounter in the classroom.

We offer ELA teachers strategies for identifying and dispelling myths about gender and sexuality and use the visual and thematic content of *Adrian and the Tree of Secrets* (Hubert and Caillou) and *Honor Girl* (Thrash) as exemplars. *Adrian*, translated from the original in French, relates the experiences of the title character in a Catholic secondary school where the headmaster considers homosexuality a condition to be cured. *Honor Girl*, a memoir, recounts a girl's exploration of her romantic feelings for another girl at a Christian summer camp. We selected these two novels because the visuals and thematic content make them rich texts for classroom discussion and ideal entry points into conversations about gender and sexuality with students. Furthermore, graphic novels, then, can reveal subtleties and nuances about gender and sexuality that without the interplay of text and image might otherwise be invisible. Thus, ELA teachers can use graphic novels with LGBTQ characters to dispel three myths about gender and sexuality: (1) that gender and sexuality are related, (2) that gender and sexuality are permanent, (3) that one's gendered and sexual life exists on a time continuum (the *heterotrajjectory*), with a prescribed order and natural starting and stopping points.

Myth 1: Gender and Sexuality Are Naturally Connected

The juxtaposition of text and image in graphic novels offers a distinct way to expose the erroneous conflation of gender and sexuality, and to explore places where gender and sexuality are presented

as dependent on each other. A person's sexuality is often assumed based on the person's gender presentation. Queer theory, however, disconnects sexuality and gender; the relationship we see developed socially and culturally over time, rather than being based on a natural or biological determination (Butler; Fausto-Sterling). Men who exhibit traditionally feminine (*gender*) characteristics are often suspected of (homo)*sexuality*, and the same is true for females displaying traditionally masculine gender traits. However, sexuality does not stem from gender (or vice versa), and gender and sexuality are two different and unrelated identity categories. The acronym we use in this article—LGBTQ—illustrates how often gender and sexuality are conflated and how frequently their relationship is implied. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual refer to *sexuality*, while transgender signifies *gender*. This conceptualization limits free and broad expression of sexuality distinct from its perceived relationship to gender presentation. To undermine this myth about gender and sexuality, ELA teachers can use the interplay between text and image in graphic novels as they analyze and apply these understandings to their lived experiences.

In *Adrian and the Tree of Secrets*, readers know early on that Adrian is exploring his sexuality and that he exhibits a nonnormative gender presentation (i.e., not traditionally masculine). One scene shows Adrian and a group of boys changing clothes in the school locker room. Adrian is depicted as seemingly hesitant to unbutton his shirt and disrobe. Behind him and to his back, Adrian's classmates are shown in various states of undress, facing each other, and with none of the apparent reluctance Adrian displays repeatedly through the frames. The dialogue has one student yell at another, "Look at that ass! Like a girl's!" The comeback: "You're the one who's queer!" We read the vocalized speech of one male student teasing another about a physical characteristic—his ass. The insult, however, lies in its label, based on gender—it is *like a girl's*. The reaction to this slight is another insult—*queer*. There are a plethora of definitions for *queer*, but here, it is clearly used as an insult, meant to be synonymous with *homosexual*. The description of the boy's ass using the female *gender* somehow implies queerness or *homosexuality*, as indicated by the comeback. The accompanying visual shows Adrian still in the foreground, hiding himself and his reluctance from

classmates, perhaps wary of being subject to their teasing, especially knowing he is, in fact, what they are using as an insult: queer. However, masculine heterosexual boys limit their use of gender and sexuality-based insults to other masculine heterosexual boys (Pascoe). Direct and overt bullying continues to persist about students who are gender nonconforming or LGBTQ-identified ("2015"). Adrian's visual placement on the margins of the locker room and the conversation occurs at the same time the classmates conflate gender and sexuality.

In *Honor Girl*, protagonist Maggie—sporting a new, short (and masculine) haircut—talks to Tammy, a camp counselor (see Figure 1). Maggie and Tammy wear identical camp uniforms, but Tammy's hair is noticeably different: longer, traditionally feminine, and held back with a flower barrette. Visually, the reader sees Tammy is angry and she stands with her arms crossed. She questions Maggie

about the short hair: "What have you done to yourself?" and "Are you having a nervous breakdown?" This isn't the only time Tammy criticizes Maggie's appearance based on expectations of what are proper ways of expressing gender and sexuality. She scolds Maggie for being a "show off" based on her talent in rifle shooting and warns Maggie to be discreet with feelings for friend Erin: "Have you heard of don't ask don't tell? Well it's the law. And it means no one wants to know your business." Those familiar with the social shaming many LGBTQ-identified individuals have experienced will recognize the visual positioning of Maggie each time she discusses her sexuality and feelings for Erin—under sleeping bags, on the edge of camp, on an isolated porch. Positive or negative, these discussions are relegated to the margins of camp. The reader senses that what Tammy demands of Maggie is already happening: discretion. However, Maggie's new masculine haircut is not discreet, and therefore, neither is her (homo)sexuality. The supposed need for discretion in Maggie's gender presentation and sexuality is contrasted with the non-discreet femininity of Tammy, the consistent camp chatter revolving around boys and makeup, the summer camp setting with very (homo)social summer camp behavior.

Adrian and *Honor Girl* offer clear instances of how gender and sexuality are seamlessly conflated: a woman with a masculine haircut is a non-discreet lesbian, according to Tammy. And Adrian's classmates use feminine characteristics and queerness to tease each other interchangeably. Additionally, ELA teachers can move the application of the myth from the graphic novel to the lived experiences of students.

Discussion Questions: (1) How do you (as the reader) know each character's sexuality? On what assumptions do you base your identification? On what assumptions do characters base their identifications? (2) How do the text and the images in the graphic novel show us and tell us a character's gender or sexuality? What might this genre be able to show us differently than a traditional novel?

Myth 2: Gender and Sexual Identities Are Permanent and Fixed

LGBTQ-themed young adult literature often reveals an "endpoint" as characters explore their sexuality, and by coming out of the closet, characters

FIGURE 1. Maggie and Tammy in *Honor Girl*



HONOR GIRL. Copyright © 2015 by Maggie Thrash. Reproduced by permission of the publisher, Candlewick Press, Somerville, MA.

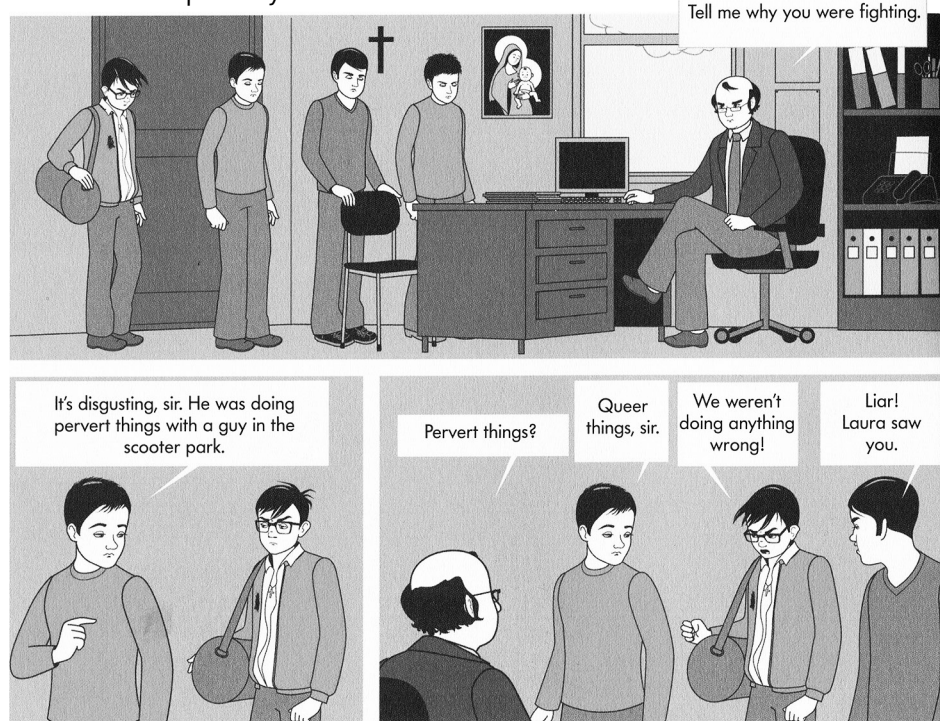
accept their now permanent LGBTQ identity (Thein and Kedley). Queer theorists, however, suggest gender and sexual identity can and do change for all people. Furthermore, social definitions of gender and sexuality shift over time, place, class, culture, and context (Butler; Marcus). The definition of *woman* today (what women look like, where women work, how women relax, and so on) is different from a century ago, and innumerable other factors (race, religion, region, cultural trends, context, social positioning) make it challenging to clearly define who is a *woman* and what that exactly means. Gender is often understood as fixed (*I have been and always will be a woman*). However, we consistently, in conscious and subconscious ways, shift our gender presentation. A woman expressing femininity by wearing a bikini bottom or a mini-skirt may be rewarded at the beach but warrant a reprimand at school events for the same clothing, and will alter gender expression accordingly. If a woman is plus size, elderly, or living in a frozen tundra, feminine expression that some consider inherent to *woman* might be outright unacceptable. Sexual identity is not permanent and fixed either and shifts in similar ways. We represent our

sexuality differently at different ages, in different settings, and even within monogamous heterosexual partnerships; intimacy, what and who we love, and so on, are in constant evolution. Graphic novels can dispel the myth that gender and sexuality cannot, and do not, change in the lives of characters. ELA teachers can help students identify those shifts and how they are accepted or ignored.

In *Adrian*, a group of boys is called to the school's main office (see Figure 2). Adrian was assaulted after kissing the masculine and athletic Jeremy with whom Adrian shares a mutual attraction. Tradition and morality are represented through a Christian crucifix and portrait of the Virgin Mary behind a stern-looking headmaster. The headmaster asks who Adrian kissed. The other boys answer: Jeremy. They quickly defend Jeremy by adding: "But it's not his fault. He's normal." Adrian is not traditionally masculine, and based on that and the kiss, his peers position

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FIGURE 2. Group of Boys and Headmaster in *Adrian*



Reprinted with permission from *Adrian and the Tree of Secrets* by Hubert and Marie Caillou (Arsenal Pulp Press).

Adrian permanently as homosexual. In contrast, Jeremy, who is traditionally masculine (and who actively participates in homosexual *and* heterosexual behavior), is permanently positioned as *heterosexual*. We don't know Jeremy's sexuality—he has a girlfriend, he is attracted to Adrian, and he enjoys physical moments with both. But Jeremy's normative masculinity makes it difficult for his friends to accept he could be gay (like Adrian), and evidence to the contrary (kissing Adrian) is ignored in favor of a permanent sexuality based on Jeremy's gender—not his actions. Perhaps the most intriguing visual feature of this scene is what is absent in headmaster's office: Jeremy. Not only does Jeremy escape from permanent positioning as a sexual deviant, he is completely and conveniently absent while his friends suggest the kiss was “sick” and Adrian awaits the headmaster's punishment. ELA teachers can couple the visually absent Jeremy with the textual lashing of Adrian by peers and the headmaster. ELA teachers can challenge students to think of how we see gender and sexuality as permanent when it serves our beliefs and interests, or as flexible when it suits our other beliefs and interests.

Tammy promises Maggie in *Honor Girl* that girls can be free and innocent at camp. However, readers know that Maggie is not free. She must be discreet about her sexuality and her affection for Erin. She avoids the unceasing teasing about boys and expresses discomfort with camp traditions that require her to be traditionally feminine. Tammy's reaction to Maggie's short hair also illustrates the inaccurate conception of sexuality and gender as permanent or fixed (see Figure 1). Maggie's sexuality was ambiguous (or at least capable of being hidden) prior to the haircut. Now, Maggie's short hair makes her (homo)sexuality visible, concrete, and fixed, and a visibly annoyed Tammy asks Maggie to wait until leaving camp to start acting like a “freak.” To Tammy, short hair is not within the contextually acceptable limits of *woman* and therefore marks Maggie as a lesbian. Perhaps Tammy believed Maggie's lesbian tendencies would fade away with long hair. Regardless, short hair moves Maggie to the margins of acceptable gender and therefore permanently lesbian. ELA teachers may ask students to look only at the text (or conversely, only at the images) in *Honor Girl* to discuss the messages they read (or see) about gender and sexuality,

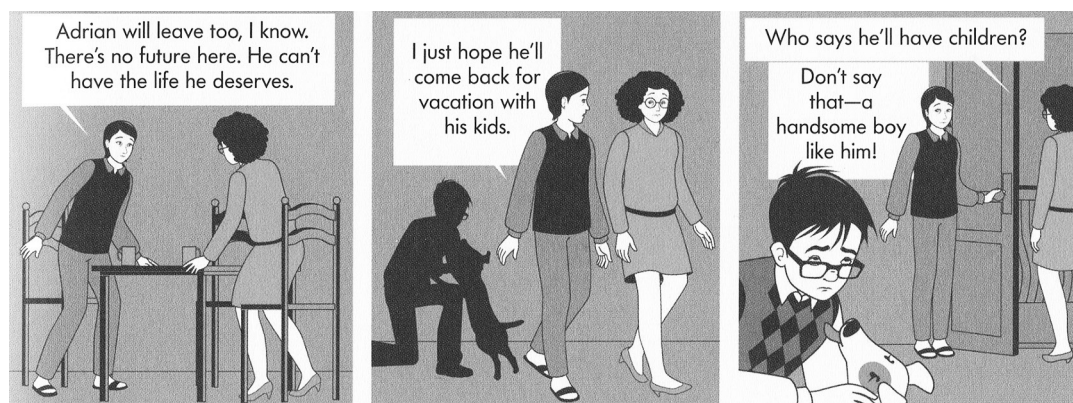
and how these messages overlap or contradict each other, and are rewarded or reprimanded.

Discussion Questions: (1) In what ways does the character perform gender and/or sexuality differently throughout the text? How do other characters react to that in positive and negative ways? (2) How do other identities of the character (class, race, religion, region, age, time, etc.) influence their gender and sexuality? (3) How do we use text and the images in the graphic novel to understand our answers to these questions?

Myth 3: The *Heterotrajectory* Is Assumed and Normal

Building on “queer time” (Halberstam) we use *heterotrajectory* (Kedley) to fill the existing void of a word that illustrates the third myth we hope to dispel using graphic novels. A *heterotrajectory* is the assumed path (or trajectory) a character takes in a society that values heterosexuality. We learn the *heterotrajectory* early: the popular playground rhyme taught us that “first comes love, then comes marriage, then comes the baby in the baby carriage.” Unspoken traditions dictate the expected and accepted order and stages of our sexual lives. Taking an unconventional path (LGBTQ, singlehood, multiple simultaneous relationships, etc.) or not following the prescribed order (cohabitation or children before marriage, etc.) are interrogated: *Why are you still single? You're pregnant, so when's the wedding? You're married, so when's the baby?* Many people do not follow the order and steps of the *heterotrajectory* as it is prescribed, but we are all rewarded and punished based on how closely we adhere to it. By using graphic novels to dispel the myth of the heterotrajectory, ELA teachers contribute to broadening and challenging gendered and sexual paths.

In *Adrian*, Adrian's aunt says she wonders if he will move away as she once did. Marked as a “fallen woman” in her youth, she escaped and hopes Adrian will as well (see Figure 3). Continuing through the dialog, Adrian's mother says she hopes he'll return home with his children to visit. Adrian's aunt asks how she knows Adrian wants children. To his mother, not having children is unthinkable, and especially because Adrian is handsome, as his mother suggests. ELA teachers and students won't need the visual to understand that his mother and aunt believe Adrian

FIGURE 3. Adrian's Mother and Aunt in Adrian

Reprinted with permission from *Adrian and the Tree of Secrets* by Hubert and Marie Caillou (Arsenal Pulp Press).

is out of earshot and this conversation is one he isn't privy to. By the second frame, however, Adrian appears as a shadowy backdrop, and now the reader questions what exactly he can hear. The third frame shows Adrian at the forefront, and his aunt and mother appear behind him. He absentmindedly plays with a dog, but he clearly heard the entire conversation. The text alone doesn't allow for this progression, and the reader must look simultaneously between the images and the dialog to see how the heterotrajjectory is imposed on Adrian's future. How might a conversation like this affect a child? Why does his aunt assume he might not follow a heterotrajjectory, and why would that alternate path disappoint his mother? ELA teachers can use this interplay in graphic novels to explore the ways characters who stray are overtly and subtly steered back onto heterotrajjectory, and discuss real-life examples of the rewards and restrictions for staying/veering from the heterotrajjectory.


In *Honor Girl*, the nearby boys' camp joins the girls' camp for a social activity and the girls spend significant time preparing for the visit: they evaluate outfits, apply makeup, and decide on potential couples. A boy is pointed out to Maggie with the accompanying dialog: "See that guy? He wants you. He's Lacey's cousin and he is a rifle god . . . Lacey told him you were a rifle goddess! And you'll have little rifle babies together." Maggie is subjected to compulsory heterosexuality here—the default—and furthermore, likely a romantic match for Lacey's male cousin based on their shared affinity for rifle shooting. The suggestion they will have rifle babies together implies an accelerated heterotrajjectory: meet a boy with whom you have something in common, commit, and procreate

(i.e., have rifle babies). The frame immediately following offers further illustration of an ever-present assumed heterotrajjectory. The boys have just arrived but they haven't yet mingled; in fact, they remain at opposite ends of the space and are shown standing segregated and apart. A burly man in a plaid flannel shirt appears, menacingly waves a canoe oar, and in a larger font relative to the rest of the page, yells: "I'm always watching!" What, exactly, is he watching, and why would he need to yell a warning and surveil this setting? What is likely to happen when boys and girls share a space? Returning to an earlier frame, we are reminded again that the boys and girls are segregated—they haven't spoken to each other but even their hetero-proximity implies a need for scrutiny. Moving multidirectionally to reread text and reexamine images is a unique feature that graphic novels offer ELA teachers as they explore the limitations and opportunities of the heterotrajjectory with students.

Discussion Questions: (1) How are you as a student coerced onto the heterotrajjectory? In what ways have you tried to move away from it, and what kinds of reactions have you faced? (2) How is the heterotrajjectory represented in the graphic novel? How does the setting or other characters try to force people back onto the heterotrajjectory?

Conclusion

Although LGBTQ texts remain controversial in classrooms and teachers are reluctant to include them in curriculum, starting conversations about gender and sexuality is a worthwhile endeavor in the ELA classroom. Our analysis of LGBTQ graphic

novels offers teachers a vocabulary and a method for engaging students in critical conversations by identifying and dispelling three myths associated with gender and sexuality: (1) gender and sexuality are naturally connected, (2) gender and sexual identities are permanent and fixed, and (3) the heterotrajectory is assumed and normal. *Adrian and the Tree of Secrets* and *Honor Girl* are ideal for application of our methods and are well-suited for a standard ELA curriculum that addresses coming-of-age narratives and bildungsroman. However, the discussion questions we pose should be widely applied to LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ texts alike. Our ultimate goal is not simply including LGBTQ-themed books in classrooms, but rather that teachers make opportunities for queer readings of texts, and conversations about gender and sexuality that affect the lives of all students. Graphic novels provide teachers with a powerful multimodal format to do this work and are an important tool for beginning and extending these conversations in ELA classrooms. 

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Teen sexuality is a taboo subject, but teens want and need books that talk to them in clear and respectful language about sex. Tune in to this podcast episode to hear about an array of nonfiction books on teen sexuality—some about the mechanics of sex, some about the media and body image, some written by teens themselves. You'll hear about books for older as well as younger readers, boys as well as girls, gay teens as well as those who are straight or questioning. Through them, teens and adults will find a place to get their questions answered, along with the opportunity to talk and think about sex in healthy and personally empowering ways. <http://bit.ly/YxOOiO>

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