

## Queer(ing) Literature in the Secondary English Classroom

Like many English teachers, I came to the profession in no small part because of a belief that literature is one of the most meaningful ways to explore and make sense of the human experience. That exploration and sense making was an endeavor I was eager to undertake with young people. I felt fortunate that I was teaching when, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the field of young adult literature seemed to be exploding. For many years preceding that period, the rate at which so-called multicultural young adult literature was being published had been steadily—if a bit slowly—increasing. But amidst this explosion were numerous titles that addressed a very real part of the human experience that had been largely neglected in the past: the diversity of human sexuality. And, whereas most of the early YA novels with gay and lesbian content tended to present a tragic view of gay or lesbian teens, these newer titles began to flesh out the genre, introducing gay and lesbian protagonists not only to root for, but to be inspired by; young people unsure of their sexual identity, and okay with that; characters who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ), as well.

Take, for instance, David Levithan's (2013) *Two Boys Kissing*. Narrated by a Greek chorus of souls from an earlier generation of gay men who died of AIDS, the novel tells the story of two boys who set out to break the Guinness World Record for the longest kiss. Revolving around these boys and their record-breaking, 32-hour kiss are the stories of numerous other gay and transgender teens navigating a broad spectrum of experiences with their sexuality—some

with joy, others with fear, some with confidence, others with confusion, some with loving support, others in isolation. The narrative chorus creates an interplay between a tragic past and a hopeful present, while simultaneously illustrating that continued work needs to be done to eradicate homophobia and heterosexism. The extensive range of experiences highlights the fact that there is no singular “gay experience.” To the extent that it disrupts that idea, the novel works to *queer*, or disrupt, common understandings and assumptions about sexual identity.

This newer genre, then, could be called *queer literature*, rather than gay and lesbian literature. If the latter term grew out of the field of gay and lesbian studies, and suggested an exploration or representation of “the gay and lesbian experience,” the former grows out of queer theory, which casts a critical lens on sexual and gender binaries such as gay/straight, male/female, masculine/feminine. Queer theory also pushes the exploration of hegemony and, in queer pedagogue Elizabeth Meyer's (2007) words, “the function of traditional heterosexual gender roles in reinforcing and maintaining harmful power dynamics in schools and society” (p. 17). As such, the term queer literature can be used to describe texts that lend themselves to this exploration, or to the body of literature that includes the great diversity of LGBTQ characters, narratives, and themes.

The reasons for including queer literature in our classes—or, said differently, for *queering* the literature we teach—are many: adolescence is a time when young people are making sense of what human sexu-

ality means, so to neglect its diversity is to marginalize it; we know well that among our students we always have a number who themselves may, now or eventually, identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer; we also have students whose families include LGBTQ persons; and we know well the prevalence of homophobia in our schools (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, & Palmer, 2012), as well as its damaging effects. These reasons sound out a call for social justice to all teachers of literature, as queer-inclusive teaching has the potential to address all of these concerns. However, there is another compelling reason to read it: to answer the call that brought so many of us to the profession—to engage with young people in exploring and making sense of the human experience, in all of its diversity. By doing so, we have the potential to couple social justice concerns with deep, complex, emotional, and intellectual literary work.

As part of a research study examining queer pedagogy and queer-inclusive teaching in secondary English classrooms, I conducted multiple case studies of teachers engaging in this work. These case studies, in addition to my own middle and high school teaching experiences, led me to believe in the critical importance of a solid theoretical and pedagogical foundation for the inclusion of such literature in our classrooms. To that end, let me take a moment to argue for the explicit inclusion of sexual identities within the purview of critical multiculturalism.

### **Theoretical and Pedagogical Foundations: Queer-Inclusive Critical Multiculturalism**

Such a conceptualization—a queer-inclusive critical multiculturalism—could provide a framework for the teaching of queer literature. Critical multiculturalism and queer pedagogy share a fundamental impulse: both seek to challenge the status quo and disrupt hegemonic understandings of identity, experience, and perspective. In this way, queer-inclusive critical multiculturalism urges English language arts educators to develop a pedagogy that treats literacy not only as reading and writing, but as a critical tool for understanding—and transforming—oneself and the world.

As the English classroom is often given the “task” of meeting the multicultural needs of schools, literature is frequently thought to be the means to do so.

An analogy can be made between efforts to make booklists more multicultural and efforts to make booklists less heteronormative. Both efforts seek to disrupt the status quo in favor of inclusivity. When we discuss disrupting booklists in such a way, what we are talking about, in essence, is *queering* (or disrupting) them. Queering literature instruction, then, could be done by reading existing works through a queer lens or by adding literature with LGBTQ content.

In what could be called a traditional multicultural curriculum, literature is positioned as if it were representative of the particular culture from which the author writes. Particularly if the author is not White, race tends to trump all other social categories. A checklist mentality is often employed; if you have already “covered” the Black, Asian, Latino, American Indian, or perhaps European immigrant experience, there is no need to take up any more time or space with another. The books are presented as cultural artifacts that will allow students to “know” and “experience” Others. There may be some value in this; students are *potentially* able to “interrogate different readings of cultural texts and address critically the signifying power of such texts to create and affirm particular social identities” (Giroux, 2000, p. 495). Yet, such an approach also carries the ill-effect of being *essentializing* and *minoritizing*.

Giroux points out that “removed from broader public discourses and analysed outside of a whole assemblage of other cultural formations, texts either become the reified markers of a narrow version of identity politics or pedagogical resources for uncovering the attributes of specific identities” (pp. 495–496). Critical multiculturalists, in contrast to more traditional multiculturalists, eschew the emphasis on cultural representation and identity politics in favor of an exploration of the intersection of experience, power, culture, and identity construction—an exploration shared by queer pedagogues. Britzman (1995) asks, “What sort of difference would it make for everyone in a classroom if gay and lesbian writing were set loose from confirmations of homophobia, the after-

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thoughts of inclusion, or the special event?” (p. 151). A truly diverse, truly multicultural body of literature provides a rich and varied landscape for such a critical multicultural exploration, including literature that queers our common understanding and expectations about human sexuality.

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Critical multiculturalism by nature, with its critical postmodern and poststructuralist tendencies, *complicates* pedagogy, requiring its constant deconstruction and reconstruction. As Nieto (1999) articulates it, critical multicultural education “challenges teachers who are interested in transformative education to re-think what and how they teach, and to constantly question their decisions” (p. 207).

Critical multicultural education is not a pedagogy. It is a framework for the analysis, understanding, and development of all aspects of education, including but not limited to pedagogy. So what can we say about how to *do* queer pedagogy within a framework of critical multicultural education?

### **Theory into Practice**

Perhaps most important are the overall climate and approach taken in the classroom and, in regard to literature instruction, the way the literature is positioned by the teacher. In a queer-inclusive critical multicultural classroom, it would be positioned neither merely as “another good story” just like those with only perceived heterosexual content (analogous to a “colorblind” approach to race and ethnicity), nor as representative of “the” LGBTQ experience (as with essentializing literature by writers of color). It would be presented as an opportunity to critically explore that complex intersection of experience, power, culture, and identity, particularly as related to sexuality. There are myriad pedagogical strategies for doing this.

#### **Blurring Boundaries**

As Greg Hamilton (1998) describes after reading A. M. Homes’s *Jack* with his middle school students,

one approach might be to blur the boundaries between reading for academic purposes and reading to explicitly examine and better understand life, namely, “the implications of social, cultural, and historical influences on one’s sexual orientation” (p. 97). In his description of teaching *Jack*, a novel about a boy struggling to come to terms with the revelation that his father is gay, Hamilton illustrates his teaching moves to get students to “examine their own positioning” (p. 29). He concludes by suggesting three themes that might guide literature instruction: that adolescents like and need to have their opinions, assumptions, and responses challenged; that adolescents need literature that represents “real people in real situations going through some kind of a change” (p. 38) in order for them to practice coping with change themselves; and that we need to create space for a variety of worldviews and perspectives. Hamilton, in contrast to most of the other educators writing about teaching gay-themed literature, does not emphasize explicitly anti-homophobic or queer-inclusive goals, even while he chooses to teach *Jack* as a result of the homophobia he saw at his school. Instead, he uses his teaching of *Jack* as an example of how literature can be used to address the specific needs of adolescents.

#### **Teaching Queer Theory**

Another powerful approach might include teaching students about queer theory so that they might develop another lens to read not only the literature at hand, but all texts. One of the teachers I studied in depth, conducting extensive interviews and reviewing teaching materials, is Jennifer, a high school English teacher in a large, suburban public school. Much of her work calls to mind Deborah Appleman’s *Critical Encounters in High School English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents* (1999). Jennifer engages students in learning about critical theory so that they may learn to read literature and the world through multiple lenses and understand their own and others’ situatedness. She asks students to consider, “How can theory allow us to see from various perspectives in order to understand the complexity of human experience, to be in dialogue with the past and present? How can theory help us enter new dialogues to create different paradigms?” In this sense, her pedagogy seems to be decidedly queer—in the sense of disrupting what is commonly thought to be normal and

challenging hegemony—irrespective of the literature she uses.

Indeed, one of the lenses she explicitly teaches in some of her classes is that of queer theory. As with the other theories they study, students learn about queer theory through the direct study of theoretical texts—some primary sources and some written by Jennifer. Then they are asked to read a piece of literature through that lens. For a unit specifically on queer theory, students read Jeanette Winterson’s (1985) queer coming-of-age novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. Throughout their reading, they keep a journal and respond to writing prompts, including many designed to get them to apply their understanding of queer theory to their reading of the novel.

*Oranges* was, for Jennifer, “a life-altering text,” one that “saved” her as a young adult struggling with her own sexuality as she became an adult herself. As she describes it in her unit introduction, *Oranges* is

. . . an autobiographical novel which is a story of a young girl (the author) who begins to realize at a young age that she is not heterosexual. She is growing up with a mother who has a very strict and literal interpretation of her religion and abides by it even though it pains her daughter. As a means of re-writing the world she has been told about, the character (Jeanette) reconstructs her life by reinterpreting the constructs handed to her. She recontextualizes the books of the Old Testament in order to encompass her own life. She enters in and plays with the world of fantasy and myth and through her imagination is able to construct a vision of what her life could look like out of the ashes of the only one she knew. Her life has been storied. She realizes that in order to survive (physically, psychologically, spiritually, and emotionally), she must story her own life. It is her re-writing of history. In a way, the impulse of this course has been similar. By applying multiple perspectives and theories to texts, we are able to discern what we believe needs to be reenvisioned in our own lives and in the world. We, I believe, are called to rewrite the books of our own lives. Sometimes this means arriving at a deeper understanding of the world we have known. Sometimes it means leaving that world, that space, in order to create a new one. We will read the book applying all of the theories we have learned this semester, and we will apply the last theory we have not worked with yet—Queer Theory.

### Unrealized Concerns

Part of the reason Jennifer has worked so hard to introduce the book clearly and to frame it carefully within the larger context of the course is because of her worries—from the first time she taught the

unit—about what kind of reaction to expect from her students, particularly considering the large population of religious and conservative families at her school. Part of her concern was that people—students, colleagues, parents, all—would think she was pushing a personal agenda because she is a lesbian. However, in her years teaching and refining the unit, she has never faced objections—not from parents, colleagues, or students. Of her concerns, she says, “The students really helped me get over it fast.”

While the novel is indeed a coming-out novel, Jennifer says, it is “more of a coming-of-age novel.” It is mature and challenging, to be sure, but it is not sexually graphic or explicit—a fact that Jennifer says allows her to feel more comfortable teaching it than, for example, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (Angelou, 1969). If she were to face a challenge

to teaching queer theory or *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, she says, she is prepared for how to respond:

I would explain how queer theory fits into the larger discourse of my course, which is examining how, by coming to an understanding of the human experience through dialogue, newer voices come into the dialogue. And I always say, you may not agree with that character or you may agree with parts of him or her, but not others, but I want you to understand other people’s perspectives because it gives you a deeper understanding of the human condition.

Through rigorous and meaningful teaching, Jennifer creates the conditions for her students to learn not only how to read literature from multiple perspectives, but to read the world from multiple perspectives, as well.

### Queering the Literature We Teach

Literature does not need to have central LGBTQ content to be engaged in the endeavor to queer the English classroom. The implied (or explicit) *hetero*-sexuality in most stories would be acknowledged and explored in queer pedagogy, as well. And, in stories

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that contain what might be seen as peripheral LGBTQ content, a queer-inclusive class would acknowledge

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and explore that content, rather than gloss over it. *The Color Purple* (Walker, 1982) comes to mind; how many of us know teachers who, when teaching the novel, gloss over the sexual relationship—if acknowledging it at all—between Celie and Shug? Guided by a queer-inclusive critical multicultural framework, *The Color Purple* could instead become a rich site for investigating the implications of the characters' relationships and sexualities, particularly as they inter-

sect with gender, race, and class, and as they relate to power in the novel.

**Queer(ing) Literature: *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian***

An excellent example of a young adult novel that would not likely be considered queer literature, but that provides ample opportunities to work as queering literature, is Sherman Alexie's (2007) *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. The narrator, Junior, is a high school freshman who transfers from his reservation school to Reardan High, a "White school" that lies 20 miles outside the reservation. His best friend calls him a traitor for leaving the reservation, and others there think he is an "apple"—red on the outside and white on the inside. Meanwhile, Junior's new classmates treat him as an oddity and outcast. Junior's struggle is well summed up by his new friend, Gordy, who tells him, "Well, life is a constant struggle between being an individual and being a member of the community" (p. 132).

The novel explores race and class identities quite explicitly. It gives attention to ableism, as Junior has a variety of medical problems attributable to a congenital neurological disorder. It also explores homophobia and social norms about what is acceptable behavior for males, including behavior between two male friends. We don't find Junior with any struggle about

his own sexual identity; the story suggests he is heterosexual. However, his male friends are constantly making homophobic remarks and rebuking Junior for being too sensitive or intimate. Part of the appeal of the book is the authenticity of voice in all of the characters, including the constant jabs they take at one another. Alexie manages to suggest homophobia is wrong—through Junior's comments about boys being "afraid of their emotions" (p. 132) and his esteemed grandmother's remarks on the topic—without contriving a sexual identity crisis to center it on. While there is certainly a place for literature that depicts and explores the often violent and horrific effects of homophobia, Alexie does something different; he illustrates homophobia as it is perhaps more commonly expressed today—in a half-joking manner. Take this excerpt as an example:

A few days after basketball season ended, I e-mailed Rowdy and told him I was sorry that we beat them so bad and that their season went to hell after that.

"We'll kick your asses next year," Rowdy wrote back. "And you'll cry like the little faggot you are."

"I might be a faggot," I wrote back, "but I'm the faggot who beat you."

"Ha-ha," Rowdy wrote.

Now that might just sound like a series of homophobic insults, but I think it was also a little bit friendly, and it was the first time that Rowdy had talked to me since I left the rez.

I was a happy faggot! (pp. 197–198)

Alexie, through the narrator, calls out casual homophobia, but he doesn't reject and demonize the characters for it—a significantly different approach from much of the other young adult literature that tackles the topic. Junior's perspective, juxtaposed with Rowdy's casually homophobic comments, provides rich material for discussion, and meets critical multiculturalism's commitment to rejecting easy assumptions and representations of identities and issues. Junior's grandmother, whom he respects immensely, could be given credit for Junior's comfort with queerness. He tells us:

My grandmother's greatest gift was tolerance.

Now, in the old days, Indians used to be forgiving of any kind of eccentricity. In fact, weird people were often celebrated.

Epileptics were often shamans because people just assumed that God gave seizure-visions to the lucky ones.

Gay people were seen as magical too.

I mean, like in many cultures, men were viewed as warriors and women were viewed as caregivers. But gay people, being both male and female, were seen as both warriors and caregivers.

Gay people could do anything. They were like Swiss Army knives!

My grandmother had no use for all the gay bashing and homophobia in the world, especially among other Indians.

“Jeez,” she said, “Who cares if a man wants to marry another man? All I want to know is who’s going to pick up all the dirty socks?” (p. 155)

The novel illustrates material that is ripe for the exploration of critical reading—material that will help readers to explore how characters come to inhabit particular, and varied, perspectives, and also to explore the interplay between the various characters’ perspectives, as well as with their own. The intersections of race, class, gender, dis/ability, and sexuality are so salient, the novel possesses extraordinary potential for queering readers’ assumptions about identity and experience, particularly when guided in that exploration.

It is worth noting, too, that *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* received the 2007 National Book Award for Young People’s Literature, among other high literary honors, and has appeared on numerous library industry “best books” lists. We must acknowledge, however, that it has been challenged by parents and banned by numerous school districts across the country, seen as too mature and too vulgar, with opponents highlighting a reference to masturbation, the use of profanity by the teenaged protagonist, and for what some see as an anti-Christian perspective. Alexie (Drake, 2008), who says the book is largely autobiographical, counters:

Everything in the book is what every kid in that school is dealing with on a daily basis, whether it’s masturbation or racism or sexism or the complications of being human. To pretend that kids aren’t dealing with this on an hour-by-hour basis is a form of denial. . . . The world is an incredibly complicated place, and our literature must match that, especially literature for our kids.

Defenders, including Pam Juel, a library coordinator in an Idaho school district where the title was removed from a supplemental high school reading list in response to parent opposition, have stood up against censorship of the book, asserting that “[e]ducation is not about confirming what we already know and believe. Instead, education should be about increasing

our capacity to understand, problem-solve, explore, create, and contribute to a complex world” (Sun, 2014).

### In Practice

*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* is a favorite of students in the classroom of one urban high school teacher I studied, Cecile. In addition to teaching this and other queer(ing) novels, her practice illustrates another site for queering the English classroom—the reading workshop, where she works to integrate queer texts as often as possible. She describes the evolution in her approach this way:

I think that before, when I’d introduce books or tell kids about them, I might have highlighted if there were sexuality issues in them, as if to warn them or something. Like I’d make it a big deal, which probably contributed to them responding in a big-deal kind of way. But now I’m as comfortable talking about books’ sexuality content as any other content. For example, I often do little book talks to the class, just to get them excited about books and help them find something they would like to select for themselves for reading workshop. I bring in a bag of titles that are high interest, and I try to include a really good variety. It’s very fun, actually. I love doing it, and the kids love it, too. I’ll just sit there and hold up each book, saying a little something about it. Maybe I’ll read a page or two if I think that might hook someone, or I’ll just talk about what it’s about or how great it is. And I’ll usually have a book or two in the bag that has some sexuality issues in it.

Some favorites for me and for students have been Garret Freymann-Weyr’s *My Heartbeat*, Julie Anne Peters’s *Luna*, Francesca Lia Block’s *Weetzie Bat*, and Alex Sanchez’s *Rainbow Boys*. When I am doing the little book talks, I might or might not mention that there’s any queer content, depending on the story, but even if anyone has a bit of a “Whoa!” response, I just blow by it like, “The book’s really good. Anyone want it?” A bunch of kids would raise their hands, I’d toss it to someone, and just move on to the next book. I’d like to think I was more savvy than this a few years ago, but I might have been like, “This is a book about a gay kid who is having a hard time coming out. If you’d like to read this, would you please raise your hand in front of the whole class?”

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Cecile works against heteronormativity by ensuring that her classroom library has numerous books with LGBTQ content and characters in it, and by working hard not to shy away from them—and consciously working to make her classroom a place where students don't shy away from them, either. Rather, she

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works to give the books a comfortable presence alongside their heteronormative counterparts.

In some cases, she has no agenda except to interest students in the books like any other, and in other cases, she says, she angles to get particular students connected with the books, because she believes they might be helpful for them in thinking about their

own or others' experiences. In this way, she treats the topic much as she would with, say, a book about death or bullying or any other issue with which her adolescent students may be particularly concerned. She is careful not to "out" students with these books. In the past, she says, students (and many adults) might have assumed that if someone chooses to read a "gay book," that must mean that she or he is gay. But by positioning queer books as merely interesting books like any other, she creates the space for all students to choose them without stigma.

Blackburn (2012) discusses research in which students point out that when teachers take the approach of just letting students self-select queer texts, they set the stage for students to self-censor for fear of peers' homophobic reactions. Blackburn's students argue that teachers need to assign the titles as whole-class texts to avoid this. Gonzales (2010) agrees, though he makes the argument for different reasons. Building on Winans's (2006) argument that simply including nontraditional texts does nothing to disrupt hegemonic pedagogy, he argues, "Allowing students to change the content [of our curricula] does not necessarily affect our pedagogy either" (p. 85). But observation would suggest that Cecile's intentional work to create an environment in her class where queer texts are seen as normal, coupled with her specific recommendations to the class as a whole and/or to individual

students, seem to achieve a significant step beyond simply adding the books to a classroom library where students can self-select them. Indeed, the increasing enthusiasm with which her students self-select queer literature seems to indicate that, at least with many students, self-censorship does not trump interest.

## **Becoming Agents of Social Change**

In graduate teacher education courses where I have taught or lectured, I have found that most pre- and inservice teachers hesitate to teach queer literature primarily for fear of protest by administrators, parents, and students. However, neither Cecile nor Jennifer seeks approval from superiors, colleagues, or parents for their use of queer literature. Their attitude toward this is similar: such literature is in fact normal and appropriate, so there is no need to position it otherwise. Essentially, they rule out the likelihood of censorship or reprisal and do not feel any need for specific approval.

Cecile teaches at a progressive, urban high school where queer issues are commonly addressed. She has never encountered disapproval or resistance from parents or other educators, though she certainly has from students—ranging from homophobic outbursts ("This is some gay shit!") to more tempered discussions in which students express disapproval of LGBT identities and "lifestyles." Earlier in her career, she responded to such homophobia by telling students that it simply would not be tolerated because it is hurtful and disrespectful; essentially, she worked to silence homophobic students. Though such incidents were challenging, they never stood in the way of her continued commitment to queer-inclusive teaching.

As she gained experience, she developed more skill at focusing on the texts at hand and facilitating discussions where students could express themselves honestly without hateful outbursts. Like Junior in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, she does not demonize homophobic students. Instead, she engages them—through the literature she teaches, her pedagogy and methods, and honest dialogue—thus creating the conditions for transformation. She notes that every year, homophobic resistance seems to decrease, a fact she attributes to increased visibility and changes in attitudes about sexuality in youth pop culture, in addition to her continued work creating a

positive, queer-inclusive classroom environment. In fact, increasingly, she finds that homophobic remarks are addressed and challenged by other students before she even feels the need to respond. Not only is Cecile an agent of social change, but her students are, as well.

By expanding the body of literature we teach and by positioning literature as artifacts of and sites for the exploration of social construction and interaction, we make moves toward more adequately meeting all students' academic and social needs. As important, we create for students the conditions under which they may explore their own and others' shifting identities and perspectives, enabling them to become agents of social change. It is only by recognizing and exploring queerness that we may heed the call to explore with our students the extraordinary diversity of the human experience.

**Camie Kim Lin** worked as a middle and high school English teacher and literacy coach in New York City public schools for eight years and was an adjunct instructor at Teachers College, Columbia University, where she completed her Ed.D. in English Education. Her dissertation, entitled *Queering the Secondary English Classroom or, "Why are we reading gay stuff?" explores LGBTQ issues and content in the classrooms of three secondary English teachers and develops principles for enacting queer-inclusive critical multiculturalism*. She regularly lectures and writes about LGBTQ issues in K-12 education and is particularly interested in queer-inclusive children's and young adult literature. Her other research interests include education equity issues and parents' decision making about their children's educations.

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