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Of Birkenstocks and Chromosomes and Spiders Who Spell Well

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"You're wearing girl shoes," my two-year-old niece announced disapprovingly, pointing to my Birkenstock sandals. It was the first thing she said to me after running into the yard to meet me as I opened the door of my car, having just finished a long drive to visit family on the Virginia farm where I grew up.

"Well," I attempted to explain, "there aren't really boy and girl shoes. Boys and girls can wear lots of kinds of shoes. These are sandals, and I bet even your daddy wears sandals sometimes." Unconvinced, she shook her head "no." She had only recently begun having fully developed conversations with adults; each day she demonstrated a growing vocabulary and an understanding of both semantics and syntax, but the rigid rules of acceptable gender performance had already been connoted to her. I expect that no one had explicitly told her that sandals were only worn by girls and women, but she had made the translation using information she had, internalizing the binary categorizations of gender (Dargie, Blair, Pukall, & Coyle, 2014, p. 60) with ease: apparel and footwear designate who are "boys" and who are "girls." The culture—its images, its implicit expectations, its disapproval of variance from the "norm"—had instructed her about gender roles, and she was an apt learner.

In an article about gender role perceptions, Franklin Thompson and William Austin (2010) remind us that "gender role myths are promulgated from the day we are born" (p. 427). By the time students enter the kindergarten classroom, their acceptance of what Judith Butler (1990) labeled the "heterosexual matrix"—which defines our bodies in oppositional and hierarchical gender categories—is concretized, and historically, we have done little in schools to offer students opportunities to critique cultural beliefs about gender and sexual identity. Young adult literature offers us an opportunity to address that issue.

A little more than a decade ago, publishers began marketing a handful of selected YA titles that included gay and lesbian characters (Alex Sanchez's (2001) *Rainbow Boys*, Julia Watts's (2001) *Finding H. F.*, and Brent Hartinger's (2003) *Geography Club*, for example, all appeared in the early 2000s), and as the appetite for more diverse stories has grown, so has the number of YA offerings that feature queer and questioning characters. The percentage of titles published each season is still miniscule, however, when compared to the total number of YA books—less than 2% of the more than 3,000 books published each year (YALSA, 2012).

In this column, I spotlight four novels that tackle gender and sexuality issues directly. All of the books were finalists for the Lambda Literary Award (http://www.lambdaliterary.org/), given to authors and books that feature queer characters and storylines. And two have won the American Library Association's (ALA) Stonewall Book Award (http://www.ala.org/glbtrt/award), which first appeared in 1971

Bringing these diverse stories into the classroom has the potential to broaden and brighten students' understandings of human expression of identity and to encourage them to question their own cultural assumptions, as well as promote a sense of empathy.

and honors exceptional merit in writing related to the queer experience. Revealing, however, is the fact that it was not until 2012 that the ALA added the Children's and Young Adult Literature Awards to its list of categories. The novels I have selected for the column include characters with a range of gender and sexual identities—lesbian, questioning, transsexual, gender-non-conforming, and intersex—and settings—from the American Midwest to the Middle East. Bringing these diverse stories into the classroom has the potential to broaden and brighten students' understandings of human expression of identity and to encourage them to question their own cultural assumptions, as well as promote a sense of empathy.

Award-winning YA Novels with Queer and Questioning Characters

***None of the Above* (Lambda Literary Award Finalist, 2016)**

On her blog (http://www.iwgregorio.com), I. W. Gregorio describes her debut young adult novel, *None of the Above* (2015), as "*Middlesex* meets *Mean Girls*." Gregorio, a urologist by day and writer by night, based the story of her protagonist, Kristin Lattimer—a popular high school athlete whose life seems perfect until she discovers she is intersex (http://www.isna.org/faq/what_is_intersex)—on one of the patients she treated during her medical residency. Like Kristin, Gregorio's patient did not learn that she had Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (AIS) (http://www.aissg.org/21_OVERVIEW.HTM) until she was a teenager. AIS, a genetic condition that causes individuals to have XY chromosomes (the biological designation for "male"), results in the development of male internal organs (such as testicles), but physical development is not affected by the testosterone, so the individual "appears" female.

Gregorio tells a compelling story about identity, family, romance, and acceptance while educating readers about intersex individuals. This is not an easy task, and generally, I would argue that well-written novels do not attempt to teach readers about a topic or issue, but in the case of intersex, which has a range of biological manifestations and has historically been the cause of unnecessary medical interventions, such as surgeries to "correct" the condition, there is a great deal to understand, and informed stories are scarce. Of all the books I read last year, *None of the Above* felt perhaps the most important in terms of offering a narrative that sensitively explores the concepts of gender and sexuality in a way that demands that readers question the categories we have culturally delineated for identifying ourselves and others.

***George* (Lambda Literary Award Finalist, 2016; Stonewall Book Award, 2016)**

The charming and conceptually sophisticated debut novel *George* (2015) from genderqueer writer Alex Gino recently received the Stonewall Award (http://www.ala.org/news/press-releases/2016/01/2016-stonewall-book-awards-announced) and has garnered international attention for its perceptive portrayal of a transgender fourth grader, Melissa, whom the world sees as a boy named George. Melissa wants desperately to play Charlotte in her class production of *Charlotte's Web*, and she and her best friend Kelly spend hours practicing the lines in the play. When her teacher holds the auditions, however, she reprimands Melissa (whom the teacher sees as George) for wanting to play a part written for a "girl." Melissa is heartbroken when she is not cast as Charlotte, but she joins the stage crew. Ultimately, Kelly (who captured the Charlotte role) and Melissa hatch a scheme that allows Melissa to show everyone, including her parents, who she is. Gino deftly renders Melissa as a dynamic and likeable character who understands her own gender identity and simply needs a vehicle for helping others understand as well.

Gino (who prefers the gender-neutral singular personal pronoun *they*) says they have been working on the story that became *George* since 2003 and credits research, timing, and luck with the publication of the novel—one of only a tiny handful of middle grade novels that feature a transgender character. What makes *George* such a compelling novel, though, is not the fact that it portrays a transgender child; it is

that the portrayal is so deftly handled, and the narrative is so well constructed. Gino succeeds in bringing readers a timely story that also has the potential to endear them to the protagonist in much the same way that generations of readers have been endeared to the unexpectedly intelligent spider Charlotte—who, like Melissa, is a "radiant" character.

***If You Could Be Mine* (Lambda Literary Award, 2014)**

Sara Farizan, the daughter of Iranian immigrants, sets her first novel *If You Could Be Mine* (2013) in openly repressive Iran, where 17-year-old Sahar and her best friend Nasrin have been in love since they were both six. In Iran, however, the girls could be imprisoned, or possibly even executed, if their relationship is discovered. So, they keep their feelings for each other secret. The complications increase when Nasrin's parents arrange her marriage to a wealthy doctor. The announcement causes Sahar to contemplate the possibility of gender reassignment surgery, which is legal in Iran and more culturally acceptable than a same-sex relationship; it would allow her, as a man, to marry Nasrin. Sahar does not identify as "trans," but she is desperate and determined.

Farizan convincingly explores the underculture of queer life in Tehran, though she grew up in the US and describes herself as a "Westerner." She explains in an interview with *Mother Jones* (http://www.motherjones.com/media/2014/10/sara-farizan-you-could-be-mine-tell-me-again-how-crush-should-feel) that in writing the novel, it was important for her as a member of the LGBTQ community to imagine what it would be like growing up in the country her parents are from. In doing so, she offers readers a story that explores the idea of same-sex attraction (a concept at least familiar to Western readers) in the unfamiliar setting of the Middle East. Farizan successfully conveys both the beautiful and the disturbing aspects of a culture that is, at once, progressive and repressive.

***Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (Lambda Literary Award Finalist, 2013; Stonewall Book Award, 2014)**

Kirstin Cronn-Mills is a self-proclaimed Nebraska-born word nerd and soccer mom who now lives in Minnesota with her husband and son. She sets her second YA novel, *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (2012), in suburbia in southern Minnesota where Gabe Williams is learning to live as a "guy" after 18 years of living as Elizabeth. Gabe is a music fiend and feels lucky to land a summer gig as a DJ hosting a show on community radio; he calls the show "Beautiful Music for Ugly Children" and quickly develops a small but loyal fan club of listeners. In his DJ role, Gabe finds the freedom to be himself. He also finds a supportive music mentor and friend in his 70-year-old neighbor, John, who works at the station. Call-in requests for Gabe's radio show help him develop relationships with some of his fans, but being known publicly also complicates his transition when he is outed and threatened.

Critics have noted Cronn-Mills's ability to tell a nuanced first-person story about a transgender character. She makes Gabe's concerns about his family, his friends, and his romantic life not only believable, but understandable. *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* joins the short list of young adult novels that explore transgender issues, including Julie Anne Peters's *Luna* (2004) and Ellen Wittlinger's *Parrotfish* (2007), but Cronn-Mills is especially successful in exploring the emotional territory of transitioning without relying heavily on stereotypes about gender and identity. Gabe is a flawed and interesting character that readers will like and root for.

The four books reviewed here offer a sampling of the best recently published writing for young adults that explores gender and sexuality, and any of these novels would offer teachers opportunities to discuss rich character development, setting, complex plotting, narrative structure, rhetorical aims, and thematics. They also have the potential to invite conversations about the construction of identity, cultural bias, changing social attitudes, and national and international policies and laws that govern personal expression.

In the Classroom: Priming for Critical Conversations

Many English teachers "identify discussion as the heart of their approach to teaching literature" (Kahn, 2007, p. 16), and we can all likely recall classroom moments when students entered into conversations about important topics, spurred by a text the class was reading together. Engagement in authentic discussion results in a deeper comprehension of the ideas embedded in the literature we ask students to read (Kahn,

2007, p. 16), but guiding our classes to thoughtful dialogue can be daunting work. "Despite our high hopes, discussions [can] often flounder, marked by awkward silences . . . and superficial comments" (Bruss, 2009, p. 28). In terms of their social development, adolescents are experiencing what Giordano, Longmore, and Manning (2006) refer to as the "crossing-over process," which involves negotiating the terrain of romance and attraction (p. 265), so they are naturally interested in discussing gender and sexuality. However, the complex nature of these kinds of conversations requires explicit frameworks that support students as they develop substantive discussions.

[W]hen classroom discussions of sensitive topics are not managed well, students commonly just parrot the negative cultural messaging they have been subject to regarding gender and sexuality, and they fail to critically examine the text they are reading or their own ideas.

As they are learning to modify the tone of their comments to promote classroom discourse that aims to be both an exploration and a critique of the ideas in novels like *George*, *None of the Above*, *If You Were Mine*, or *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children,* students benefit from learning activities that are both invitational and structured. Otherwise, teachers run the risk of reinforcing stereotypical thinking and language, which hinders the objective of increasing empathy and understanding. In fact, when classroom discussions of sensitive topics are not managed well, students commonly just parrot the negative cultural messaging they have been subject to regarding gender and sexuality, and they fail to critically examine the text they are reading or their own ideas. The strategies described here can assist teachers as they engage students in sensitive and sensible discussions.

Activity I: The ABC Taxonomy

In *Writing as Learning: A Content-based Approach*, Rothstein, Rothstein, and Lauber (2007) describe a variety of instructional activities that support students as they develop their abilities to think, create, communicate, and interact with texts (p. 3). Their prereading strategy, the ABC Taxonomy, is especially apt for priming students for conversations about gender and sexuality, as it invites students to inventory the vocabulary they have already developed about these concepts (honoring what they know) and sets up a system for adding new terminology they may encounter as they read and discuss.

The ABC Taxonomy is a multi-phased strategy that involves self-reflection, work with a partner, and the creation of a dynamic class "dictionary" of terms related specifically to the topic of a lesson or unit. Here is how the strategy could work for a lesson that prepares students to read one of the novels highlighted in this column. Students first create a working document in their notebooks, titled "Taxonomy of Words Associated with Gender and Sexuality." The document simply lists the letters of the alphabet on every other line to allow space for alphabetized terms to be added. After they have created the taxonomy organizer, students work individually for approximately five minutes to brainstorm as many terms as possible, alphabetizing as they generate the words (or phrases).

Then the students work with a partner to add more terms to the taxonomy. Ultimately, the teacher invites the entire class to contribute terms to a shared taxonomy that can become a reference for vocabulary to be explored in a lesson or a unit; it can also serve as a dynamic class document that grows as the class acquires new vocabulary through reading and discussion. It is likely that in building the class taxonomy, the students (and perhaps the teacher) will encounter new terms, as well as familiar ones. The taxonomy, then, offers opportunities for the teacher to engage students in discussions of the language we use to specify gender and describe sexuality. By naming these words, we "sanction" their use and provide students a working vocabulary for class discussions.

This prereading strategy also "normalizes" the terminology used in discussing a text that features narratives of gender exploration, fluid gender, gender roles, gender identity, sexual identity, sexism, and heterosexism and allows the class to examine how words have power to describe and explain, as well as to elevate and denigrate. In the brainstorming session, a teacher might encourage students to include all of the words they know, but in creating the class document, the teacher has an opportunity to help the class

select the vocabulary that seems most appropriate for classroom discourse. This method of engaging the students actively in constructing a class dictionary avoids the less-helpful lecture about appropriate classroom language; instead, it spotlights vocabulary, opens a conversation about language use, and previews the ideas that students will encounter as they read a text that addresses gender and sexuality.

Activity II: List, Group, Label

Another vocabulary activity that prepares students for an interaction with a "sensitive" text is List, Group, Label, a "strategy for stimulating inductive thinking about elements of a unit of study before beginning the unit" (Nessel & Graham, 2007, p. 127). Inductive thinking involves making generalizations based on specific details. In this activity, the teacher organizes the students into pairs or small groups and provides each with a preselected list of 25–30 words that are related to the unit (this is the "list" element of the strategy). The words can be written on individual small cards for easy manipulation and arrangement. Each group of students receives a set of the cards and is asked simply to organize the words into categories (the "group" element of the strategy) and then to generate a label for each category. Students do not need to know the meanings of the words; they are simply encouraged to do their best thinking about how the words might be categorized. After the students have organized their lists, the teacher can have them speculate about the topic of the text the class will be reading. They can also discuss their rationales for organizing the words and creating labels for their categories; it is helpful to have groups compare their processes and final results.

This strategy can also be extended as the reading progresses. For example, after reading and discussing the text, the students return to their original lists and revise them to reflect their current thinking about the words, given the information they gleaned from the text. Constructivist researchers such as Hilda Taba and Jerome Bruner "recognized that instruction is particularly effective when students are encouraged to use what they know to generate tentative meanings that they can revise as they learn more" (Nessel & Graham, 2007, p. 127). This kind of prereading activity builds anticipation and interest and previews concepts that are important to understanding a text generally, but it can be particularly helpful to prepare students for the study of a novel that addresses what are often considered taboo topics for the classroom.

This activity highlights the important distinctions between the concepts of gender and sexuality, which are too often conflated and may be confusing to students.

Activity III: Double Bubble Map

David Hyerle (2009) has developed a useful visual system for designating eight distinct cognitive functions in his work on Thinking Maps (http://dft.designsforthinking.com/?page_id=17), and his map for comparing and contrasting, the Double Bubble Map, is an appropriate tool for helping students prepare to read a novel that addresses gender and sexuality (see Fig. 1). Hyerle suggests that "comparing and

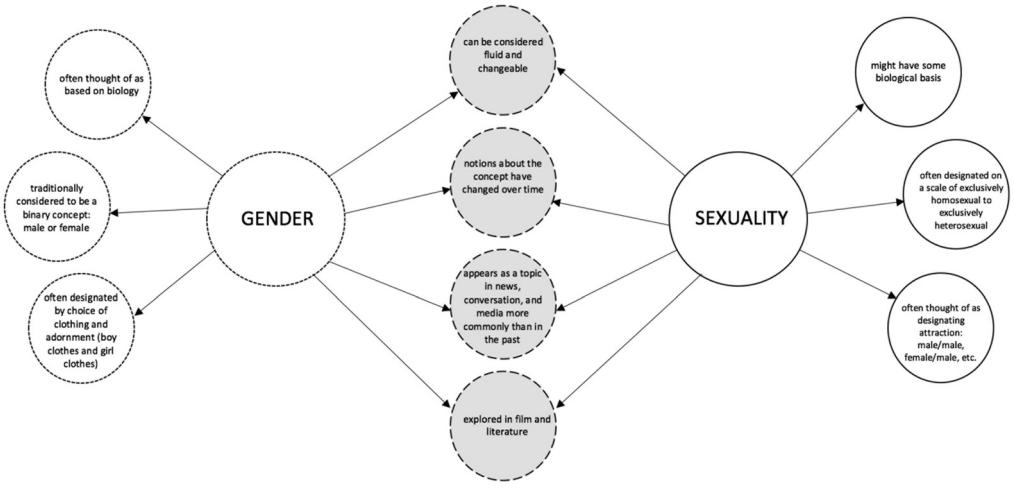

Figure 1.

contrasting is most easily accomplished by students when they graphically detail similarities of and differences between two concepts rather than only verbalizing their thinking" (2009, p. 22). For this activity, students can work in pairs or small groups to examine the terms *gender* and *sexuality*.

The mapping begins by writing the two words on opposite sides of a large sheet of paper and then drawing a circle (the bubble) around each word. Then students list the unique characteristics of gender in bubbles that lie to the left of that term and the characteristics of sexuality to the right of that term on the map. Between the two words, the students list characteristics that both concepts share. After they draft together, the students then create a polished final version of the map that designates the similarities and differences with color coding. For example, the word *gender* and its particular qualities could be red, the word *sexuality* and its particular qualities could be blue, and the similarities could be purple. The color designations reinforce the information the map displays. This activity highlights the important distinctions between the concepts of gender and sexuality, which are too often conflated and may be confusing to students. It also prepares the class for interaction with a novel that features characters that do not represent expected gender norms.

This kind of pre-discussion preparation encourages more reasoned and considerate responses to characters and ideas that might seem difficult to understand or identify with.

Activity IV: Literature Circle Discussions

Literature Circles, peer-led discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same book together, have been popular in ELA classrooms for at least two decades and have a solid research base to indicate their effectiveness in promoting engagement and comprehension (Daniels, 2002). This model for discussion can work especially well when students are reading "controversial" texts, as the groups are small, self-managed, and explicitly structured. Students prepare in advance for the discussions by playing a series of reader roles, including discussion director, illustrator, word watcher, passage collector, and summarizer. The roles can vary, but each student has the opportunity to read closely, think specifically about certain aspects of the text, and prepare notes that inform the discussions.

The format of this mode of discussion allows for flexibility on the part of the teacher in assigning texts to read and invites students to choose a text that seems especially interesting. For example, a teacher might design a unit with a theme that relates to aspects of gender and sexuality, and as part of the unit may ask the students to form a Literature Circle around one of the four novels that appear in this column (which represent a range of reading levels, characterizations of gender variance, author backstories, and cultural information). It is common for teachers to share a book talk about each of the novels the students may select as a way of assisting the students in choosing the book that seems most appealing.

Shelby Jones, an English teacher in metro-Atlanta, regularly uses Literature Circles in her classroom, but she says that she finds them especially helpful in providing a safe space for conversations about issues of gender and sexuality because they require students to process their ideas about the text as they play their assigned roles *before* they enter a discussion with their classmates (Emert, 2016, p. 258). This kind of pre-discussion preparation encourages more reasoned and considerate responses to characters and ideas that might seem difficult to understand or identify with. Karen Schlick Noe, a professor in the College of Education at Seattle University and author of several books on Literature Circles, has created a website, the Literature Circles Resource Center (http://litcircles.org/), that is especially useful for anyone trying the strategy for the first time, but is also helpful for those who use Literature Circles regularly, as the site includes research, links to resources, and example units.

Conclusion

In an article that appeared in *The ALAN Review* in 2008, "Creating Space for YAL with LGBT Content in Our Personal Reading," Katherine Mason points out that adolescent literature is "a source of both information and validation" (p. 55). The novels included in this column easily serve these purposes, bringing students stories of gender-nonconforming characters

who are learning about themselves and seeking self-acceptance and social validation. Cronn-Mills, Farizan, Gino, and Gregorio also offer rich narratives that spur reflection, invite questions, and open the door to discussions that belong in the English classroom, where students examine their own developing identities in relationship to the characters and situations they find in the texts they read.

My niece—now in high school—and her peers live in a charged macro-culture where media saturation makes it impossible to avoid encountering misrepresentative images, crass innuendo, and insensitive gender stereotypes. Without invitations from teachers to discuss issues within the context of a critically engaged classroom, however, it is entirely possible for her to misunderstand how intolerance and intransigence color our perceptions of norms. The culture has an agenda, and it will offer her instruction, just as it taught her about "boy shoes" and "girl shoes." Young adult literature is beginning to provide us with stories that interrogate our assumptions about identity. It is up to those of us in classrooms to accept the challenge these stories offer. Deconstructing stereotypes benefits all students, regardless of where they see themselves on the spectrum of gender and sexual identities, and well-told stories have the power to touch us, inspire us to think critically, and alter our perspectives about the world and ourselves.

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