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Race Matters Whether or Not We Talk about It: A Critical Content Analysis of LGBTQ+ Characters of Color in Three Contemporary Young Adult Graphic Novels

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As the diversity of the US student population has increased (The National Center for Education Statistics [NCES]), so has the diversity in children's and young adult (YA) books (Cooperative Children's Book Center). Bishop argues, as student demographics change, it is important for students to read books that are windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors that can help build critical consciousness and critical literacy skills for a more democratic society ("Mirrors, Windows"). Studies have examined queer representation in children's and YA literature and found greater visibility of LGBTQ+ youth and families since queer YA literature was first published in the 1970s (Jenkins and Cart; Cart and Kaywell). Few studies have examined queer representation in graphic novels and even fewer have researched queer characters of color (Betts-Green and Latham). This study, a critical content analysis of three contemporary graphic novels with queer characters of color, adds to the growing field of analysis of queer YA literature.

LGBTQ+ Characters in Young Adult Literature

Stories about LGBTQ+ characters have evolved drastically since their introduction to YA publishing in the 1970s (Cart and Kaywell). The first stories about LGBTQ+ youth were filled with "doom, gloom, or 'it's just a phase'" tropes about white characters that often ended in death or tragedy (Cart and Kaywell 1). In the 1980s and 1990s, story plots included more representation of queer adults and queer youth of color, primarily focusing on coming out stories. But since the turn of the century, LGBTQ+ stories have flourished with more racial diversity, characters finding love in queer communities, characters who are already out and living their lives, bisexual and transgender characters, and speculative fiction with queer content (Aldama; Cart and Kaywell). The stories have evolved from coded texts and ones containing continual linkages between queerness and death to narratives that focus on the nuanced stages and

experiences of fluid sexual and gender identities, showing a more diverse range of experiences in ways that actively challenge white heteronormativity (Bittner, Ingrey, and Stamper; Wickens).

As Christine Jenkins and Michael Cart discuss, there is a need to move beyond visibility to a more nuanced understanding of queer consciousness and community in depicting LGBTQ+ characters. This includes sharing stories of queer people of color and gender nonconforming characters and more complex stories of LGBTQ+ characters dealing with issues and challenges unrelated to their sexuality (Jenkins and Cart; Jiménez).

LGBTQ+ Representation in Graphic Novels

Graphic novels are “book-length works of fiction or non-fiction that use the conventions of a comic book to tell a story or convey information” (Kim 28). Graphic novels have become incredibly popular within YA literature and are now a billion-dollar industry in North America (Rouse). They have become popular with teachers because they can support students’ reading motivation, engagement, and literacy, as well as English language arts skills (Boerman-Cornell and Kim; Park). They can also support critical consciousness and teach toward social justice for students and teachers (Miller, Worlds, Dowie-Chin). Graphic novels with queer characters can facilitate critical discussion about gender and sexuality and combat heteronormativity (Kedley and Spiering; Vega).

The most recent large-scale study of LGBTQ+ representation in graphic novels was conducted in 2017 by Dawn Betts-Green and Don Latham, who built on Jenkins’ landmark study of LGBTQ+ literature published from 1969 to 1997 (Jenkins). Betts-Green and Latham conducted a content analysis of 31 graphic novels drawn from award lists and expanded upon Jenkins’ framework by including, among other categories, characters’ ethnicity. They found that among books with a single main character, half were white, followed by Asians or Asian

Americans, who made up 16% of the characters. Only one character was Latinx, and there were no Black protagonists (Jenkins). Some books featured more than one main queer character, but a majority of the secondary characters were white. This is consistent with Robin Moeller and Kim Becnel's analysis of the characters' races in 57 graphic novels from the Young Adult Library Services Association's "2015 Great Graphic Novels for Teens" booklist (American Library Association). They found that white characters made up 73% of the featured protagonists. The characters of color that did appear had small roles or were seen in the background. Most of the LGBTQ characters were lesbians and two-thirds of the books had female protagonists. There were few, if any, transgender and bisexual characters.

Nonlinear Model of Sexual and Gender Identity Formation as Framing

Coming out is more than just the process of telling others about one's sexual or gender identity; it is also the process of its internal formation (Cass; Degges-White, Rice, and Myers). Underpinning our understanding of the meaning of "coming out" is Michele Eliason and Robert Schope's nonlinear model of sexual and gender identity formation. Their combination of essentialist and social paradigms, along with considerations of identity development for individuals who are not white and cisgender, creates common themes that queer folks may experience in their identity formation. The stages of the model include differences, confusion, exploration, disclosure, labeling, cultural immersion, distrust of the oppressor, degree of integration, managing stigma, identity transformation, and authenticity. Importantly, the nonlinear model encompasses a fluid and shifting understanding of sexuality and gender identities, which interact and mutually shape one another. Notably, this lens can be used to address the coming out process for sexuality and gender because of the ways that society has lumped these different pieces of identity under the queer umbrella. Thus, we paid close attention

to the ways in which trans identity is separate from sexuality, while also attending to the intersectional experiences of the characters in graphic novels (Crenshaw).

We utilized this model because of its nimble and flexible approach to identity that mirrors the graphic novel to understand more deeply how queer youth of color are depicted in their coming out process in three YA graphic novels: *Flamer* (2020) by Mike Curato, *The Magic Fish* (2020) by Trung Le Nguyen, and *Cheer Up!: Love and Pompoms* (2021) written by Crystal Frasier and illustrated by Val Wise. In addition, we used intersectionality as the guiding theoretical framework to analyze and assess the dynamics of power and privilege across lines of identity in the texts (Collins and Bilge). We focused initially on the intersection of race and sexuality and then moved to other salient identity markers, including documentation status, class, religion, and language in understanding the coming out process of the queer youth of color in the selected graphic novels (Delgado and Stefancic; Misawa).

Methodology

More graphic novels about people of color and queer youth are being published than ever before (Cooperative Children's Book Center; Lo; Rouse). This study sought to investigate the representation of three queer youth of color characters in contemporary graphic novels through a critical content analysis. Differing from traditional content analysis, critical content analysis involves the researcher's use of a specific lens as a frame to develop research questions, select and analyze texts, and interpret findings (Short). The researcher takes a political stance and makes explicit their position in examining power and inequity. Intersectionality is used as a critical lens to frame our study, analyze results, and interpret our findings. While methodologies such as multimodal social semiotics and systemic-functional semiotics (Painter) are useful for analyzing graphic novels, we utilized critical content analysis as a wide lens to examine the

stories rather than the medium—in other words, we aimed to focus on what the texts were saying as opposed to how they were saying it. Two research questions guided the study: (a) How do three contemporary young adult graphic novels depict the coming out process for queer youth of color? (b) In what ways do these graphic novels discuss the intersectional identities of adolescents?

We selected three graphic novels with the following criteria: (a) young queer protagonist of color, (b) publication date within the past two years, (c) setting in the United States, (d) realistic fiction. Notable popular texts that almost fit the criteria include *Bingo Love* (2018), *Laura Dean Keeps Breaking Up with Me* (2019), and *Juliet Takes a Breath* (2020). However, they were excluded because they were published outside of the two-year window, geared to adult audiences, or were originally novels that were adapted into graphic novels. We also selected texts more likely to be circulated in school libraries or promoted online, with multiple starred reviews and included in popular booklists from websites including *Book Riot* (Brittain) and the Young Adult Library Services Association. *Cheer Up!: Love and Pompoms*, published in 2021, is about Bebe, a transgender Latina who is navigating finding her voice, captaining the cheerleading team, and falling for her white lesbian friend, Annie. *The Magic Fish*, published in 2020, focuses on Tién, a Vietnamese American son of refugees who is dealing with his grandmother's death and figuring out how to disclose his sexuality to his mother. *Flamer*, published in 2020, centers on a fourteen-year-old, part Filipino boy named Aiden and his experience at Boy Scout camp, where he struggles with bullying and accepting himself.

We first read these books independently, making note of general themes and personal reflections. We then each read two books a second time and coded these texts independently, using Eliason and Schope's nonlinear model of sexual and gender identity formation. Each book

had two coders. Next, we reflected on broader critical issues in the texts, paying attention to power and privilege in point of view, character agency, and story closure (Short). Then we revisited the coding and critical issues within the lens of intersectionality, moving between the frame and the text and drawing a final list of categories. We analyzed our notes together and created a final list of themes.

Our readings and interpretations were influenced by our positionalities. Rosa is a second-generation Korean American woman whose parents immigrated in the 1980s from South Korea. She was formerly a high school English teacher in Texas who now supports preservice ELA teachers as an assistant professor of English Education. Kristian is a white, queer woman who taught elementary and middle school in Texas. She earned her EdD and now works at a nonprofit focused on digital equity in the classroom. Kimani is a Black, queer woman who is currently an assistant principal at a high school in Texas and is working on her PhD in Culture, Literacy, and Language. Our social locations, races, genders, and sexual orientations interacted with the ways in which we read, reacted to, and interpreted the data (Alcoff; Roger, Bone, Heinonen, Schwartz, Slater, and Thankrar). For example, Kristian paid close attention to the ways whiteness manifested in the texts, such as how Annie in *Cheer Up!* is depicted as a white savior. Rosa paid close attention to the ways in which the Asian American character's identity was depicted in the text, helping illuminate deeper findings about the main character's experience in *The Magic Fish*. Kimani noticed and called out the ways in which characters were depicted visually through cultural cues in language and artistry, emphasizing how these features in the graphic novels' text would impact readers' understanding of the characters' identities. For example, she noted how there were very few cultural cues characterizing Bebe in *Cheer Up!* as Latina beyond her

grandmother's recipe for ropa vieja. These small examples show some of the ways our positionalities and experiences informed what we saw and how we interpreted our findings.

Findings

We first discuss the major themes of the coming out phase depicted in each book, followed by the results of our reading of the three books through an intersectional lens.

Different Coming Out Experiences

The protagonists in the three graphic novels demonstrate different themes of coming out and a wide range of experiences. In each novel, the main character deals with more than just coming out, yet being queer and the disclosure and/or experience of being queer is a central conflict in each story line. Coming out theory as a lens helped focus our reading on the ways in which the main characters navigate the process of accepting and sharing their sexuality and gender identity with others. The stages of coming out manifest in each book in a variety of ways and impact how the reader understands not only the individual character but the contexts in which both the character and the reader live. The reactions from parents, friends, peers and the characters themselves, point to a society that is not welcoming to queer folks, yet where one can find small pockets of acceptance and joy.

Across all three books, the coming out narratives of each character explore how oppression influences identity formation (Eliason and Schope). The main characters explore what it means to be queer and to share that with others, emphasizing both the internal and external process of identity formation. In *The Magic Fish*, we see the main character dealing with the fears of disclosing to his parents (Nguyen 46-47). In *Flamer*, we see the confusion and exploration of queerness while Aiden is at camp (96-97, 125-127, 139, 245-246). In *Cheer Up!*, Bebe manages stigma and internalized oppression, voicing the impact of the harm she

experiences (28, 33, 46, 56-57, 63, 86). In many ways, the diversity of these coming out narratives and the positive self-reflection and peer reactions combat the typical coming out narrative often seen in LGBTQ+ literature (Jenkins and Cart).

However, in our readings, we did not see the youth engage with a deeper queer community in any of the books and found few moments in which the protagonists highlighted how their queerness and racial identities were integrated (Betts-Green and Latham; Eliason and Schope). There were moments when role models appeared such as Ted, the camp counselor from *Flamer*, who was fired for being gay, but overall, the characters did not find queer spaces where they could authentically be themselves. Instead, they relied on acceptance and validation from their straight peers. Without engagement with an accepting queer community and positive queer role models, the characters operate within a world that reproduces heteronormativity.

Trauma as a Common Denominator

A common theme among the stories was trauma related to being LGBTQ+. This is a pervasive trope in YA literature. Aiden, in *Flamer*, experiences relentless bullying from his peers for being different. He is ridiculed for being overweight and Filipino. He also has a high-pitched voice and has been told his inflection is effeminate. For his differences, Aiden is verbally, emotionally, and physically attacked throughout the story and, as seen through flashbacks, has been abused throughout middle school. The violence he experiences culminates in his decision to end his life, which fortunately does not happen in the end.

Similarly, Bebe, in *Cheer Up!*, suffers from a range of abuse throughout the story, including unwanted physical advances and microaggressions for being a trans girl. Jonah Mitchell, a white-passing boy who others on the cheer team find attractive, routinely harasses and objectifies Bebe in and out of school. Bebe also suffers from abuse by strangers. After a

football game, a coach from the other team mistakes another member of the cheer team as transgender, calling her a “little cross-dresser,” and then learning that it is Bebe, redirects her anger and refuses to let her change in the locker room (54). The trauma does not stop there. Even Bebe’s closest friends mistreat her and tokenize her. For example, they coerce her to be team captain and later attempt to nominate her to homecoming queen without her consent. One team member, Dani, tells her teammate, “Supporting the state’s first transgender cheer captain is going to make such a great college entrance essay!” (20). Bebe also experiences trauma at home. Her father is not fully supportive of her transition, and both parents have threatened to make Bebe go back to “dressing like a boy” if she does not get good grades. “They think me transitioning is a luxury. And they’re worried it’ll distract me from getting good grades and getting into college” (41).

The Magic Fish is the only story whose main character is not constantly suffering abuse for being queer. Tiễn has two good friends, Julian and Claire, and both his parents clearly love him. However, his teacher, Mrs. Flynn, and a priest, Father Niles, out him to his mother and force him to take “faith counseling,” stripping Tiễn of his agency (214–15).

In all three books, a central theme for the protagonists was the experience of trauma related to coming out. Aiden and Bebe experience the most frequent harassment and violence for being queer, while Tiễn is traumatized by those in authority, his teacher and a priest. While all three characters experience trauma, the stories themselves are not tragedies. They end with some hope.

Race Matters . . . Whether or Not You Mention It

A glaring difference between the three books is the degree to which intersectionality was outwardly present in the character development. In all the stories, being queer is essential to the

plotlines. However, other salient identity markers such as race, class, and gender were explored to varying degrees of depth.

In *Flamer*, Aiden's identity as Filipino plays a central role in his bullying. In his orienteering course, a white boy uses a racial slur and pulls at the side of his eyes, asking Aiden if he is in the right class "'cause it's orientEERing, not orientALing. Hahaha!" (102). This is a common occurrence for Aiden: "People love pointing out that I'm part Asian, as if I were unaware. It's not always as mean as this guy, but it still gets me upset" (104). In addition to his racial identity, Aiden's Catholic faith deeply influences his development; it is a major cause of his suffering and internalized homophobia. After another violent encounter with the racist white boy, Aiden tries to reason with himself: "I know I'm not gay. Gay boys like other boys. I HATE boys. They're mean, and scary, and they're always destroying something or saying something dumb or both. We learned at [Catholic] school how bad homosexuality is. It's a SIN. Gay people do bad things. And I'm not a bad person. I try to do good. All the time. So I couldn't be gay" (125).

Beyond Aiden's race, religion, and sexuality, another important part of his identity is his role as a big brother to twins Tessa and Tommy and a confidant for his mom. His father is abusive to the family, so Aiden takes on the role to console his mother: "We have lots of talks and she encourages me all the time, but sometimes she asks me for advice, and I don't know what to say. Especially when she talks about problems with Dad, which happens a lot. And on the rare occasions my father actually speaks to me, it's usually to complain about Mom" (28). He also tries to protect his siblings as a "third parent, since Dad works so much. I try to keep them busy when Mom and Dad are fighting. Hopefully the summer hasn't sucked too much for them while I've been away" (31).

In *The Magic Fish*,² Tiền, like Aiden, also has intersecting identities that shape his character. While Tiền's sexuality is central to the story, so is his race, class, language ability, and documentation status. Tiền is the son of Vietnamese refugees. He wears a tattered jacket with multiple patches that his mother, a seamstress, sews for him instead of getting a new one. Tiền's father takes the bus to his night shift job. Tiền is fluent in English but his parents are not. His grandmother in Vietnam is ill, but his parents have not been able to visit in the past eight years as they have been waiting for citizenship. This family dynamic shapes Tiền's coming out process. With all of his family's troubles, Tiền tells Claire, "I don't want to trouble anybody. I just . . . I feel like everybody's problems are so much bigger than mine" (150).

In *Cheer Up!*, one level of intersectionality that is explored is gender and sexuality. When Bebe and Annie are hanging out in their room, Annie asks if Bebe likes girls or boys. Bebe is unsure. Asking this question and exploring the nuance of Bebe not labeling her sexual identity reflects a complicated intersection of gender and sexuality. However, unlike in *Flamer* and *The Magic Fish*, race and ethnicity in *Cheer Up!* is not discussed explicitly in the text. In the graphic novel, the depiction of Bebe's Latina identity is clear from her image and when she is making ropa vieja in the beginning of the book. Yet, we never see the characters discuss any parts of her identity beyond her sexuality and gender. Without a more nuanced exploration of Bebe's racialized identity, we as readers are left to wonder how the intersections of Bebe's identity impact her experience as a trans girl. The text does differentiate between Bebe's navigation of her gender and management of stigma compared to those of Annie, her white, cisgender, lesbian girlfriend—Annie can fight and be herself, while Bebe has internalized that she has to be quiet and perfect to make sure people like her. Although it is explicitly clear that Bebe sees Annie's freedom as her cisgender privilege, the text does not explicitly state that Annie's whiteness is

part of why she can act this way. After not being allowed to change in the girl's locker room at another school, Annie attempts to stand up to the coach and to the other cheer squad members, but Bebe gets upset at her for creating a fight: "I can't just turn everything into a fight every time someone is insensitive or rude. So sometimes if people are trying, that's enough for me. I can swallow some hurt feelings for the sake of not having to fight every moment I'm awake! And I NEVER want to be the center of attention!" (57).

Discussion

Although there is a range of coming out narratives shared in these texts, the depictions of the characters still follow stereotypes when it comes to their queerness and race. In each story, the main character identifies explicitly as a queer youth of color, but the level of nuance that is explored differs across the texts.

In *Cheer Up!: Love and Pompoms*, there is much discussion about how Bebe differs from Annie, but there is no discussion about race or ethnicity. In this way, *Cheer Up!* is an example of what Bishop would characterize as a *melting pot* book in which Bebe's race is not essential to the story ("Reflections"). She could be white and the story would fundamentally be the same. In addition, there is a missed opportunity to talk about Annie's white privilege and how it creates space for her to behave differently than Bebe. Bebe's racialized experience compared to Annie's is not mentioned, yet the reader is left to assume that Bebe is continuously in danger, not only because of her transness, but also because she is a woman of color. At the end of the book, Bebe stands up for herself against Jonah, but only as long as Annie is there to reassure her with her whiteness that everything is okay. The plot equates whiteness with safety, which implicitly reinforces racial power structures. Without a conversation between the couple about race and

racism, the reader assumes that heterosexist and white supremacist power dynamics stay intact, forcing Bebe to endlessly manage the hate she receives instead of the world changing around her.

In *Flamer*, Aiden is made fun of for being Filipino, but the text does not specifically contextualize this with his sexuality. We only learn that he is Asian American when he is bullied, and this piece of his identity is not discussed beyond the ways it makes him different. Unlike with his exploration into his queer identity, we do not see him exploring what it means to be Filipino or how he can accept this piece of himself, too, as it is not clear if he does. All that the readers know is that he is tired of “always checking the other box” (105). Aiden does not have a positive Asian American role model or other Asian Americans to be in community with. In his journey, there is no reckoning with his Filipino identity as there is with his not being straight. Beyond the torment he receives for being Filipino, Aiden’s Asian identity is otherwise invisible, a common trope tied to the model minority myth in young adult Asian American literature (Mathison).

In *The Magic Fish*, Tièn’s racialized identity was more developed through the exploration of his family’s immigration story and the experience of his mom. We see Tièn considering issues of language, class, and documentation status. These identities act as layers that complicate and enrich the process of disclosure of his sexuality to his mom. The resolution of the text is realistic in that it shows a private moment of acceptance from Tièn’s mother but leaves the other barriers intact as future challenges that he will have to navigate. While *The Magic Fish* is nuanced in portraying Tièn’s racialized identity, it still holds up the trope of desiring whiteness as Tièn crushes on his white best friend. In fact, in all three books, the main characters crush on the white best friend with blond hair, reinforcing racist standards of beauty.

Studies about queer YA literature have found that queerness is depicted as centered around trauma (Goodman; Jenkins). These texts' narratives support this finding.

Heteronormative society and bullying from peers play the role of individual challenges that the youth must overcome to reach their full, authentic selves. Each character deals with bullying from peers and disapproval from adults, causing feelings of isolation, shame, and self-doubt associated with queerness that impact the scope of identity development explored (Eliason and Schope). As Thomas Crisp discusses, the challenges in each story reinforce homophobic tropes by not holding others in the story accountable for their homophobia and instead putting the work of changing on the individual queer youth of color. These three characters require suffering and others' approval to accept themselves instead of finding the joy inherent in being queer. If all narratives emphasize the suffering that comes with identifying as LGBTQ+, what does this mean for queer youth of color reading these stories?

Though the characters find conditional acceptance among peers and family members, the stories do not combat the stereotypical tropes that Jenkins and Cart hope queer YA literature can move beyond. We still see queerness tied to violence, exploitation, and death in *Cheer Up!* and *Flamer*. We see queerness being a distraction or burden for Tièn and Bebe. And with all three characters, we see that whiteness is centered in their attractions. Because of the traumatic ways that the coming out stories are portrayed, they at times fall into the one-dimensional stereotypes often found in media representing LGBTQ+ youth (McInroy and Craig). This portrayal can further reinforce these stereotypes for the non-LGBTQ students and adults reading these texts and make the multifaceted LGBTQ+ youth reading the text feel invisible or excluded from their own stories.

Implications for Authors and Educators

There has been progress in representation in graphic novels for queer characters of color. Yet our analysis shows that problematic tropes are still reinforced in narratives. Even a well-written young adult graphic novel focusing on queer youth of color may promote stereotypes or tropes that can be harmful. It is imperative that educators who use these texts first critically read the stories before introducing them to students and consider critical approaches to teaching the texts (Boerman-Cornell and Kim; Ginsberg and Glenn). For example, in our first reading of *Cheer Up!*, the characters' progression from best friends to enemies to lovers felt authentic. After coding for the coming out themes and using an intersectional lens to examine power and privilege, however, we saw problematic themes, including Bebe's continual endangerment and Annie's whiteness operating as a tool to save her. This is not to say that this book or other books with problematic themes should not be used in schools. No book is perfect. Rather, it is imperative to read texts critically and support students as they analyze the stories, including through a queer literacy framework (sj Miller) and/or an anti-racist lens (Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides). Equally as important, LGBTQ+ voices should not be used as stand-alone, token stories. They should be methodically incorporated through classes and grade levels, and teachers should be supported in teaching ways that "challenge heteronormativity and cisnormativity" (Miller 7; Miller, Worlds, and Dowie-Chin).

One way teachers can begin to challenge texts with counternarratives is by critically teaching with speculative fiction. Stephanie Toliver suggests that speculative fiction acts as a "telescope" through which "children—especially those whose access to futures and fantasies has been distorted by violence and oppression—will be able to see that those futuristic and fantastical landscapes are actually closer than they first appeared to be" (30). In future studies, researchers can explore how queer youth of color and coming out stories are depicted in

speculative fiction in graphic novels and traditional novels. Future content analyses of these texts are pertinent as speculative fiction can provide an avenue for authors to explore the futures of queer characters of color beyond the reality of oppressive experiences.

Conclusion

Young adult literature can build better futures (Edelman; Muñoz; Matos and Wargo). Literature opens doors for young people, and the representation of queer youth of color in graphic novels represents positive change. This analysis of the types of representation in recent popular graphic novels offers a framework for questioning the underlying assumptions that even texts promoting representation can emphasize. Each of these texts share stories of queer youth of color engaging in the complex task of finding their identity. By looking at themes related to coming out and the ways in which the character's sexuality and race are explored, we can better understand the wide array of coming out experiences that are shared, as well as the opportunities for highlighting tropes and power structures while teaching these texts in the classroom.

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