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PRACTICE

Making the Case for LGBT Graphic Novels

JACQUELINE VEGA

I still remember the exact way my heart was pounding as I stood in the front of a classroom for the very first time. My senior year of high school, I was offered the opportunity to lead class lessons for a week in a World Literatures class on the graphic novel *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang. *American Born Chinese* (2006), a text that has become increasingly popular in English classrooms, tells a story of two teenage boys, one who is white and the other who is a Chinese second-generation child of immigrants (Yang 2006). The novel, in addition to being compulsively readable, explores racial stereotypes, cultural identity, and societal structures of privilege and oppression. These issues necessitate a dialogue that is complicated, challenging, and oftentimes overwhelming.

The difficulties surrounding dialogues about race, while not identical, are analogous to the difficulties which arise when discussing the discrimination facing the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community (Thein et. al., p. 170). And just as *American Born Chinese* provided a means to start a conversation about the complexities of racism, there are graphic novels which address and challenge issues facing the LGBT community, such as discrimination, stereotypes, homophobia, and transphobia, among others.

My experience teaching *American Born Chinese* was profoundly enjoyable. I felt a sense of accomplishment as my peers and I read through the book together in class, pausing to talk about significant panels, images, or concepts. Most importantly, this graphic novel provided a way for students to genuinely engage in a conversation about a subject that is oftentimes difficult to breach in the classroom. These conversations should not be viewed as a luxury, because these issues are directly and adversely affecting high school students.

In 2013, the Gay Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) National School Climate Survey (NSCS) reported that over fifty percent of LGBT students felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation and over sixty percent of students who reported an incident said that school staff did

nothing in response. In addition, LGBT students who experienced higher levels of victimization were three times as likely to miss school, have lower GPAs and lower levels of self-esteem, and higher levels of depression (NSCS). Perhaps even more disturbing is that less than twenty percent of LGBT students were taught positive representations about the LGBT community, and that nearly fifteen percent of students had been taught *negative* content (NSCS, my emphasis).

I would argue that a shift in acceptance toward the LGBT community can (and very well should) occur in the classroom, through alterations to the prioritization of what texts are featured in the English Language Arts literary canon. Specifically, I argue that teaching LGBT-themed graphic novels to high school students will:

- Normalize representation of LGBT students in the classroom.
- Engage students in socially relevant and necessary dialogues.
- Provide teachers and students with accessible and enjoyable yet complex and engaging texts.
- Demand that teachers and students reflect on their relationship to the LGBT community and the perspectives of their peers.

It is evident that change can and must come from the creation of a safe space for students to learn not only the contents of a text, but the larger context of a society made up of people who exist on a spectrum of sexual orientation, gender, race, class, and religion. By showing the numerous benefits of LGBT-inclusive curricula as well as graphic novel-inclusive curricula, I hope that the inclination to combine the two will appear natural, relevant, and necessary.

Challenging Heteronormativity

One of the more prominent and memorable characters from *American Born Chinese* is Chin-Kee, “a composite of racial stereotypes of Chinese” (Dong 2011, p. 232). He is represented with slanted eyes and buck teeth, he speaks Pid-

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gin English, and his luggage represents Chinese takeout food containers (Dong 2011, p. 239). Chin-Kee's annual visits to his seemingly Caucasian cousin Danny embarrass him and set him apart as someone who just doesn't quite fit in. Dong (2011) stated that Yang uses this character as a way to criticize racism with humor, and to provocatively instigate a connection between our nation's turbulent past and the present moment (p. 241). The usage of easily identified racist images can be seen as a challenge to common misconceptions of Chinese and Chinese Americans that are prominent in historical and contemporary discourse in America (p. 241). By introducing a character which embodies such complex racial themes, Yang has re-purposed the graphic novel and its connection to young adult literature (p. 244).

Similarly, graphic novels can challenge stereotypes of gender identity and expression in ways that can promote a non-heteronormative classroom environment. A scene from Raina Telemeier's *Drama* (2012) does exactly this. One of the novel's most daring and triumphant moments shows Jesse, one of the main characters (and the love interests of the lead character, Callie) as he breaks down gender roles and discovers truths about his own sexuality and identity. In this scene, it's the night of the big middle school play, and the lead actress has locked herself in the bathroom. With only minutes before the final music number, the stage crew is panicking. The shy but talented Jesse comes up with the solution: he could put on a dress and finish the musical. The only problem? That song ends in a kiss between the lead actor and the lead actress.

So what is the big deal about seeing a boy in a dress? Or a boy kissing another boy for the sake of a play? Would this scene even be noteworthy if the character's gender were female? These questions indicate a heteronormative approach to this text, just as the aforementioned statistics from the 2013 GLSEN NSCS indicate that the climate in high schools in America is based in heteronormativity. Heteronormativity refers to the structure and institutionalization of a specific set of social practices and expressions of identity that assume heterosexuality as the norm (Garica and Slesaransky-Poe, p. 247). While most pre-service educators consider themselves to be supportive of the LGBT community, LGBT issues tend to be avoided by these educators. There exists a discrepancy between intention and action. The same excuses arise when confronted about this avoidance: teachers feel they are unprepared, that it is not in their job description, that it goes against laws and procedures, and that it's not fair to the other students (Thein et al. 2013). This pervasive hesitation

ultimately reinforces heterosexuality as the norm, and homosexuality as a rare and dangerous exception. Macgillivray (2000) has summed up the consequences of this inaction, stating that LGBT students "are not as strongly supported in their development into psychologically healthy and well-adjusted adults as are heterosexual students, whose identity is acknowledged and reflected in the curriculum and practices of the school" (p. 313). The conversations surrounding the literature, then, play an enormous role in preventing this from happening. As Thein et al. (2013) have stated:

Reading literature . . . is about helping students become aware of the perspectives of others and better understand their own lived experiences . . . Therefore, teaching texts that feature LGBT characters, families, and situations really is the work of any language arts teacher who takes seriously students' experiences and identities (p. 179).

And while bringing LGBT issues into classroom discussion may raise some difficult questions, that conflict is ultimately more productive than silence when it provides students with clarity on the subject of gender identity and expression. In addition, MacGillivray (2000) has asserted that to say that teachers must not teach values at all is problematic, because it is impossible for schools to be completely value-free; the discussion, then, should be deciding which values are the most important for schools to encourage and teach (p. 316). And as Clark and Blackburn (2009) state, "teaching cannot and should not be value-free, neutral, or apolitical" (31).

At the same time, it demands of educators a great deal of self-reflection: on teaching style, personal values and beliefs, and unconsciously learned ideas about gender and sexuality. Garcia and Slesaransky-Poe (2010) posit that there are two main positions educators may employ in their classrooms: facilitative or obstructive (p. 251). Facilitative teachers act more positively toward LGBT individuals, and embrace a non-traditional view of gender roles and identities (p. 251). Obstructive teachers are more likely to incorporate (whether consciously or unconsciously) their homophobic viewpoints into their classroom practices, and are less comfortable with flexible gender roles (p. 251). I would argue that most teachers fall along a spectrum of these two values, and that as self-awareness increases, so does the responsibility to evaluate and challenge harmful ideologies which might carry over into the classroom.

The scene from *Drama* ends with Jesse finishing the musical, with the dress, the kiss, and all. Novels that feature

such explicit subversion of stereotypes open up the possibilities for reflection and conversation in the classroom. Teachers can take advantages of scenes like this to challenge their biases, and validate LGBT students' identities and personal explorations. Clark and Blackburn (2009) state that working against those biases is critical for teaching LGBT-themed texts (p. 31). They also acknowledge that this type of work is necessarily political, and challenges the power structures in our society, because only when there is a community of support for the teaching of LGBT-themed texts, texts that are inclusive of a range of sexual orientations and gender identities, can we move forward (p. 31). This productivity is necessary to create a safe, inclusive environment for LGBT students.

Evaluating Identities and Creating Authentic Literacies

Mouffe (2001) asserts that "Every form of art has a political dimension" (p. 100). I would argue that this powerful statement reflects the inherent qualities of LGBT-themed graphic novels. The art is political, and the political becomes art. This can be seen through the character of Chin-Kee, who represents the complex attitudes toward cultural heritage and bi-nationality. Through a similar type of stereotyped image, Alison Bechdel (2006) explores gender identity and expression in *Fun Home*. *Fun Home* is Bechdel's unflinching autobiographical narrative about her tumultuous childhood, relationship with her father, and discovery of her sexual orientation. A scene depicting an experience shared between her and her father begins with the words "[i]n the city, in a luncheonette . . . we saw a most unsettling sight" (p. 117). Thus begins Bechdel's recollection of the first time she saw another lesbian.

I didn't know there were women who wore men's clothes and had men's haircuts. But like a traveler in a foreign country who runs into someone from home—someone they've never spoken to but know by sight—I recognized her with a surge of joy. Dad recognized her too (p. 118).

Presented in this scene is an image of a woman, who fits the stereotypical image of what Bechdel refers to as a "bulldyke" (p. 119). For Bechdel, this woman represents, to a certain extent, what Chin-Kee represents for Danny: a manifestation of the shame felt for being culturally other. "Is THAT what you want to look like?" (p. 118) Bechdel's closeted father demands of her in this scene. This irony is

intentional, and effective. The woman represents what her father cannot express, either. The image of this woman sustained Bechdel through her childhood years, and she reflects that it most likely haunted her father (p. 119).

The visual nature of a graphic novel allows this scene to exist in layers of meaning. We have the text, then the images, and then the interaction of the two, which manifests in an abstraction of space and time. This visual element enhances our understanding of stereotypes in a way that words alone cannot. We can see the literal "sub-text" of the scene through the recognition on young Alison Bechdel's face when she recognizes a kindred spirit—and the internalized shame on her father's. In Telgemeier's *Drama*, we see the joy radiating from Jesse as he fearlessly takes his place on stage and shows who he really is. Mouffe (2001) also states that "every form of artistic practice either contributes to the reproduction of the given common sense . . . or contributes to the deconstruction or critique of it" (pp. 99-100). These images demand that deconstruction and critique; in this way, graphic novels may challenge us in ways that texts of a singular modality cannot.

In addition to presenting and exposing stereotypes in new and exciting ways, the multimodality of a sequential narrative fosters multiple and authentic literacies. Yang (2008) states that the "visual permanence" of graphic novels allows for the rate of information transfer to be firmly in the control of the reader, like having a remote control (pp. 188-89). Graphic novels, then, empower students with these kinds of tools when analyzing texts that discuss social problems, sensitive topics, or ethical dilemmas, such as the scenes featuring Chin-Kee, the "bulldyke," or Jesse in a dress. The visual element of a graphic novel creates abstractions in time and space that require a different kind of engagement than with a purely textual novel.

The experience of reading a multimodal text, then, engages critical thinking skills. Hansen (2012) has explained that in order to analyze a scene in a graphic novel, students must be able to produce language that describes the visual and textual exchange. This medium gives students agency to interpret language in new ways, sparking their attention (p. 60). And it has been established that graphic novels have the ability to not only spark attention, but to maintain interest and engagement in ways that traditional texts cannot.

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Bakis (2013) observed that most students, even students in the honors or AP track, utilize a “skimming and scanning process.” She has concluded that a majority of assigned reading has become about doing the minimum amount of work for a grade (p. 66). She has countered these “inauthentic literacy practices” by designing her course content around graphic novels and “other forms of sequential-art narrative” (p. 66).

The results of this implementation were overwhelmingly positive. “I was able to foster deeper, more authentic forms of reading...[students] willingly and ably conduct[ed] rich, thought-provoking discussions with one another, with me, and with others outside our classroom space” (p. 67). She goes on to explain how her students went so far as to communicate with international students in Turkey about graphic novels, and even interviewed graphic novelists via Skype (p. 67).

The result was that students were no longer just skimming and scanning, but rather became genuinely interested in the form and content of graphic novels, “practicing both new and traditional literacies authentically” (p. 67). These literacies, when paired with politically charged images, have the remarkable potential to create meaningful representation and dialogue. However, MacGillivray (2000) warns that even in classrooms where LGBT themes come up, these instances may possibly do more harm than good:

[These occasions] often help perpetuate myths and damaging stereotypes . . . The processes of systematic exclusion and systematic inclusion as they are embedded in the curriculum and practices of the school shortchange all youth who need to be provided with correct information about human differences, no matter how controversial some consider it so be (312).

Therefore, the importance of analyzing examples like *Fun Home* and *Drama*, where perceptions of gender and sexual identity are represented and challenged visually, cannot be overstated. These texts elicit multiple and authentic literacies and genuine critical engagement. And if this literature is fully incorporated and engaged over time, students and educators alike will be repeatedly confronted to consider their role in the LGBT community, whether as someone who identifies outside of the heterosexual norm, as an ally, or as homophobic (Clark & Blackburn 2009, p. 31). The students’ ability to engage with and relate to the text will determine the impact of these conversations.

Graphic Novel Recommendations

The novels endorsed below are chosen based on their literary merit and artistic caliber, as well as their fantastic contributions to LGBT-themed narratives. I present the following list as a (by no means comprehensive) collection of excellent graphic novels which also happen to feature LGBT characters and themes.

- *Are You My Mother?* (2012) by Alison Bechdel

In this “comic drama,” Bechdel recounts the trials and tribulations of her artistically inclined but creatively oppressed mother. By delving into her mother’s past as an actress and artist and paralleling it with her own artistic experience and sexual awakening, Bechdel provides a compelling portrait of a unique mother-daughter relationship.

- *Fun Home* (2006) by Alison Bechdel

This meticulous, autobiographical novel explores the Bechdel’s turbulent past with her father, a closeted homosexual, and parallels it with the author’s discovery of her sexual identity. The novel provides an unflinching look into developing sexuality, parental relationships, self-discovery, the end of childhood, and the early stages of adulthood.

- *Drama* (2012) by Raina Telgemeier

Drama is the story of Callie, a 7th grade stage crew enthusiast, as she navigates a bunch of, well, drama. After getting rejected by her crush, she sparks up a friendship with twin brothers Jesse and Justin. Justin comes out to her as gay, and she begins to have feelings for Jesse. The story follows the three as they come to term with new feelings and old flames, all while working on their middle school’s big musical production. It’s a lighthearted behind-the-scenes look at budding friendships, romances, and identity.

- *Pedro & Me: Friendship, Loss, and What I Learned* (2000) by Judd Winick

Another autobiographical account, this graphic novel chronicles Winick’s experience on MTV’s popular reality show “The Real World,” and how it led him to meet Pedro Zamora. Pedro, who was gay, had been diagnosed as HIV positive at the age of 17, and spent the remainder of his life making a difference and educating people about AIDS and safe, consensual sex. This book details the author’s relationship with Pedro, with a focus on Pedro’s experience as an immigrant, and his battle with AIDS. This text is a fantastic intersectional snapshot into an incredible life.

- *Runaways* (2003) created by Brian K. Vaughn and Adrian Alphona

This series follows a group of teens who learn that their parents are actually ruthless supervillains. Featuring a diverse range of race and sexual identity (two of the main characters, Xavin and Karolina, are in a same sex relationship), this series presents an intriguing moral dilemma: what would you do if you found out you were supposed to end up a supervillain?

LGBT-themed graphic novels, by their very nature, are a political argument, and the conversation surrounding LGBT issues is anything but simple. Graphic novels provide a way into that conversation in a way that typical literature sometimes does not, or perhaps indeed cannot. Not only must students comprehend the words on the page, but how the images work together with the text to create layers of meaning. Including LGBT-themed texts in English Language Arts curricula allows students with a range of sexual and gender identities a chance to see themselves represented in their classroom among their peers. Overwhelming evidence from the 2013 NSCS suggests that positive representations make a noticeable difference. Over 75 percent of LGBT students in schools with an inclusive curriculum said their peers were accepting of them, compared to less than forty percent of those without an inclusive curriculum (NSCS). They were also:

- less likely to hear negative remarks about gender expression often or frequently
- less likely to feel unsafe because of their sexual orientation
- less likely to miss school
- more likely to report that their classmates were somewhat or very accepting of LGBT people than other students
- more likely to feel a deeper connection to their school community (NSCS).

Incorporating LGBT-themed graphic novels in the classroom will provide a way for students to see themselves represented. It will help to combat the standards of heteronormativity and homophobia. It will genuinely and critically engage students in an active, intersectional conversation. And on top of all that, there's evidence to suggest that it will be a highly enjoyable experience. In order for LGBT texts to become the norm, and for heteronormativity to be defied, they must be implemented throughout the school year in relation to other relevant topics and units; it is with this determination and dedication that heteronormativity may be challenged (Blackburn & Clark 2009). If we want true change to occur, these themes, issues, and texts must become an integral part of the curriculum—not simply as an exception to the rule.

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