

Recognition Plots and Intercultural Encounters in Aidan Chambers' *Dance on My Grave* (1982)

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a new interpretation of Aidan Chambers' novel *Dance on My Grave* (1982) by pointing to the interconnection between representations of cultural others in fiction and the recognition plotlines that are so important to YA storytelling. It also proposes the relevance of the method of literary genetics to YA studies, and vice versa. Literary genetic analysis in this article shows how Chambers developed *Dance on My Grave's* adolescent characters Hal and Barry, flagging key decisions that the author made to create a dynamic of otherness between them. Archival material from Seven Stories, the British National Centre for Children's Books, can be used to reconstruct Chambers' decision to differentiate Barry from Hal by religious tradition. Investigating his engagement with Judaism during *Dance on My Grave's* genesis leads to this article's discussion of authorial positionality, intention, and the interrelation between intercultural encounters and otherness and plot development in the novel. *Dance on My Grave's* reliance on tropes of anagnorisis, which Chambers calls "recognition" (*The Age Between* 91), constructs Hal's encounter with Barry's Judaism as a cultural learning experience that enables both Hal's growing-up process and Chambers' writing process. This is problematic because this intercultural encounter happens at Barry's expense: he dies; Hal dances on his grave. Judaism emerges during *Dance on My Grave's*

genesis to deepen Hal's understanding of death, life, love, and himself. A means, not an end, cultural learning contributes to a recognition plotline that enables spiritual enlightenment in Chambers' construction of adolescence.

INTRODUCTION

"For a sharp split second I saw my own face" (180), sixteen-year-old Hal reflects in *Dance on My Grave* (1982) by Aidan Chambers. Hal is remembering a moment during the breakup fight with his eighteen-year-old boyfriend, Barry. Hal threw a paperweight. Barry ducked, so it hit the mirror behind him instead, shattering the glass and its reflection of Hal's face – "my face fell in splinters to the floor", writes Hal (180). The reflection and its splintering transform this "sharp split second" into a moment of self-recognition for Hal, which Barry neither shares nor experiences over the course of *Dance on My Grave*. Instead, immediately after their breakup, Barry dies in a motorcycle crash. Barry's death gives Hal a grave to dance on in fulfillment of an arcane vow that the boys made while they were in love: "whichever of us dies first, the other promises to dance on his grave" (151). This dance at the novel's dénouement leads Hal to realise, with relief and a feeling of closure after catastrophe, that he could dance "in celebration of what [Barry] had been to me, which no one else could ever be again" (249). After his dance, Hal also realises that "[y]ou have to contemplate what you were and make something of what happened to you. Doing this seems to make you see yourself differently" (222). Hal experiences these epiphanic moments at Barry's expense, which I want to raise as a problem in light of Barry's cultural otherness from Hal, because halfway through the novel it turns out that Barry is Jewish.

This study of *Dance on My Grave* offers a new interpretation of the novel by pointing to the interconnection between representations of cultural others in fiction and the recognition plotlines that are so important to YA storytelling. It also uses a methodology relatively new to YA studies, literary genetics, to show how Chambers developed his characters Hal and Barry during his process of writing *Dance on My Grave*. Since 'genesis' means creation and 'genetics' has to do with the components that make up an identity, like biological genes, literary genetics reconstructs the decision-making process undertaken when an author creates each component part of a work of literature. This approach involves examining an archive of literary genetic material, which may include drafts, character sketches, research notes, marginal doodles, and other documents that an author created throughout the process of writing. This material can be read as evidence of authorial positionality – blind spots or bias as well as cultural learning and intercultural sensitivity that an author may develop during the genesis of a text in which diverse cultures are represented. I will explore the limitations as well as the possibilities of this method through a genetic analysis of the archive of *Dance on My Grave*. When an author's archive is available for research, as Chambers' is,

genetic analysis delving into that archive and the writing process that its documents preserve can give insights into plot and character developments that the novel-as-published keeps hidden.

Genetic analysis offers new approaches to YA studies because our texts are relatively recent, many of our authors are available for dialogue, and literary archives such as the collections at Seven Stories, the National Centre for Children's Books in Newcastle, UK are becoming ever more accessible.¹ Having looked into the *Dance on My Grave* notebooks, I will examine the development of Barry's character as one differentiated from Hal by religious tradition, insofar as the manuscript shows Chambers' work on Barry's genesis. Looking for indications of Judaism in the novel before and after Barry's death, I will use them to interpret how Barry's religious difference enables Hal's recognition moments, for better (for Hal) or for worse (for Barry). As I will show, the method of genetic analysis allows for an examination of *Dance on My Grave* that interrogates why recognition plotlines and intercultural encounters in YA may require injustices: I cannot wrap up without asking why Barry had to die so suddenly and young.

YA RECOGNITION PLOTLINES AND INTERCULTURAL RECOGNITION

Subtitled "A Life and Death", *Dance on My Grave* describes growing up as a confrontation with your own personality, recognising yourself in the ways that you perform your relationships with others. The novel narrates adolescence through recognition plotlines that construct Hal's growing-up process as gradually becoming better acquainted with himself, his emotions, his body, his sexuality, his plans for the future, and his expectations of the other people in his life. "Recognition" is what Chambers calls this familiar YA trope (*The Age Between* 91). In his poetics of youth fiction, *The Age Between*, Chambers calls recognition "[a] major theme of youth fiction" because "at the heart of youthhood is the compelling impulse to identify who and what you are, and could be, and why" (91). Recognition plotlines put this soul-searching into narrative form and create dénouements that combine the acquisition of new or forgotten knowledge with new self-awareness. The dénouement is the catastrophe, often a plot twist, the climax, and a scandal, that untangles the story's threads. The dénouement is also a recognition moment, when a character's true identity emerges. Recognition and dénouement play key roles in creating closure for the explorations of life, death, love, and otherness from an adolescent point of view in *Dance on My Grave*.

A twentieth-century version of the narrative event that Aristotle named "anagnorisis" (*Poetics* II, 4, qtd. in *The Age Between* 92), recognition plotlines are the backbone of all of

1 I wish to thank Aidan Chambers and Seven Stories for giving permission to quote archival material in this article. Thanks also to Hazel Sheeky-Bird for making Aidan Chambers' archival material available.

Chambers' YA novels. For Aristotle, anagnorisis initiates an encounter that provokes dénouement by revealing a piece of knowledge that was once known, but lost, then recovered. Acquiring or recovering that knowledge crystallises characters' identities, determines everyone's fate in a story, and produces enough closure for an ending. These are the qualities of recognition plotlines that Chambers studied in his reading of Terence Cave's critical work *Recognition*, which traces the history of anagnorisis throughout Western literature. While Cave's study stops short of applying anagnorisis to the nascent category of YA fiction, Chambers has asserted ever since that recognition is a definitive plotline of the form that he prefers to call "youth fiction" (*The Age Between 19*). Chambers developed his own versions of the tropes and motifs of recognition plotlines for the six YA novels that comprise his Dance Sequence, of which *Dance on My Grave* is the second.² *Dance on My Grave* predates Cave's book and Chambers' study of anagnorisis, which he deliberately applied while writing his later novels after having written a more intuitive version of anagnorisis in *Dance on My Grave*. Each novel includes a web of recognition plotlines that lead up to dénouements when the adolescent protagonists are poised to move on to the next stage in their lives because they have achieved a new or richer self-awareness over the course of the story. Chambers sometimes uses othering to produce his novels' dénouements, with the added effect that cultural others in the Dance Sequence have to double up on their role as supporting characters by serving as enablers for the recognition plot.

Recognition gives a plot arc to the frameworks that define YA storytelling, which Alison Waller has identified as "developmentalism, identity formation, social agency, and subjectivity within cultural space" (1). Furthermore, as Roberta Seelinger Trites argues, "if growth is defined as an increasing awareness of the institutions constructing the individual", then YA recognition plotlines depict adolescents' growing self-awareness as a ripening "ability to grow into an acceptance of their environment" (19). Katelyn Browne observes that "[d]eath remains a useful plot point to spur developmental work" in YA when adolescent characters experience other characters' deaths, while for queer adolescent characters death can be a likelier outcome than growing up into adulthood (4). Recognition plots frame YA's "developmental work". The YA recognition plotline is indeed complicit in a developmentalist attitude toward adolescence in which closure often means maturity and ending often leaves adolescent characters on the brink of adulthood (if they survive their youth). Developmentalist tropes such as transition, crisis, return, intergenerational bonds, and navigating brand new relationships or relationships where dynamics have changed are also tropes of the recognition plotline. In light of the critique that developmentalism in YA tends to garner, thinking about YA story arcs through recognition, as Chambers does in his novels,

2 Though the Dance Sequence is named after *Dance on My Grave*, its name should be written as you would write the name of a dance rather than the title of a book series. After all, the books form "an intricate kind of dance" (Chambers, "The Dance Sequence"). Describing the books this way too, Betty Greenway concluded that "[i]f Chambers' six novels for young adults are a dance sequence, then Chambers himself is a master choreographer" (x).

might be a welcome alternative (Gubar 454; López-Ropero 192). Where the recognition plotline differs from developmentalist portrayals of growing up is in not being tied only to constructions of age. Vanessa Joosen's analysis of intergenerational solidarity in Chambers' later novel *The Toll Bridge* (1992) shows that it is possible for YA to tell growing-up stories for characters of all ages by using the recognition trope of "re-knowing something once known" (210).

Recognition plotlines in YA take two different forms: recognition through encountering yourself and recognition through encountering someone else, whose difference from you leads you to realise something about yourself anew. The difference can be cultural, religious, or based on class, age, first language, or nationality, among others. Notwithstanding this range of categories of difference, I will call this form of the recognition plotline an 'intercultural encounter'. In an intercultural encounter, you and another person undergo a process of cultural learning to supply the knowledge gap between you. Framed in this way, intercultural encounters in recognition plotlines blur the difference that Edward Saïd observed "between knowledge of other people [...] that is the result of understanding, compassion, careful study and analysis for their own sakes" and knowledge gained to be used for just one party's benefit, which Saïd calls "self-affirmation" (xv). When characters with different cultural backgrounds in YA narratives face cultural knowledge gaps while working out their relationships to themselves and others, we might ask if cultural learning activates a recognition plotline too, who the recognition involves, and who it excludes. Which characters get to grow up with a deepened self-awareness, like Hal? Which characters die, like Barry? When characters are "marked for good or ill" (Aristotle, *Poetics* II, 4, qtd. in Chambers, *The Age Between* 92) in a story that represents intercultural encounters or other forms of diversity, how the recognition plotlines play out can seem to affect characters with certain identity categories more harshly than others.

Identifying where – and to what end – recognition and representations of otherness overlap in *Dance on My Grave* entails reconstructing Chambers' authorial process of producing cultural diversity in a literary text. It can reveal an underlayer of attitudes or messages about selfhood, otherness, and identity formation that runs counter to, or even undermines, messages about diverse societies that the story conveys. However, for the purposes of this study, I would prefer to cast any possible contradictions in Chambers' representation of intercultural encounters in *Dance on My Grave* as indications of the author's own positionality, his inclination to associate more closely with his narrator-protagonist than with supporting characters, and the obstacles involved in depicting cultures that are not your own. While Barry is a somewhat privileged, British Jewish teenage boy, my investigation builds on Sybil Durand and Marilisa Jiménez-García's call to "examine how authors construct [...] literary representations [of youth of colour] and to what extent these representations reflect current scholarly discussions about identity discourses" (1). In the twenty-first-century American YA that Durand and Jiménez-García discuss, identities in

which youthhood and ethnicity overlap can resist stereotypes when their representations in fiction “unsettle typical categorisations” (19). Chambers’ fiction, written in another historical context, also represents ethnic diversity and intersectionality, but differently. Zooming in on recognition plotlines to identify and examine literary representations of ethnicity as well as cultural otherness can reveal what attitudes toward diverse societies a text produces or reproduces, as well as the potential impact that the social surroundings or political climate in which an author writes can have on the resulting text. After all, writing an intercultural encounter is also the author’s experience of an intercultural encounter.

Chambers’ cultural positionality vis-à-vis his representation of an intercultural encounter with Judaism in *Dance on My Grave* can also be thought of as his own encounter with Judaism through plot and character development, intercultural research, and the act of writing. Authorial positionality is the bias or the blind spots in the author’s knowledge (in this case of another religious tradition), which a text will reflect because bias and blind spots can seep into a piece of writing. Using literary genetic analysis to investigate authorial positionality, I can reconstruct the intercultural encounters that contributed to Chambers’ writing process, rather than try to expose authorial intent. After all, in genetic criticism it is understood that “[o]ne of the most interesting aspects of authorial intention is its mutability” (Van Hulle, “Genetic Editing” 60). The approach an author takes to curating their intercultural experience while researching a novel set in a culturally-diverse society will affect the way that the work-in-progress represents diversity and otherness.

AIDAN CHAMBERS’ INTERCULTURAL YA

As I have suggested, *Dance on My Grave* is the second instalment of Aidan Chambers’ Dance Sequence, six YA novels that were published in English in the UK between 1978 and 2005. With every novel translated into at least three languages – *Dance on My Grave* into eleven – the Dance Sequence has had an influence on YA internationally. Encounters with other cultures have also globalised the reach of Chambers’ long literary career. While Chambers’ most recent fictional works *Il Vermo* (2017), *Confessioni del giovane Tidman* (2018), and *Non parlarmi d’amore* (2019) were released in translation by the Italian publisher Rizzoli instead of in English, Chambers’ Italian encounter is just the latest instalment in a longstanding trend. For example, between 1988 and 1993, he edited the Turton & Chambers imprint of The Thimble Press, which published international YA fiction in English translation. His novel *Postcards from No Man’s Land* (1995) stages an English boy’s encounter with Dutch language and culture across time and space in 1990s Amsterdam and wartime Arnhem. Chambers began making international tours and engaging with his multilingual, worldwide readership after the success of *Dance on My Grave*. Despite being four decades old, *Dance on My Grave* continues to resonate in YA media through adaptation, translation, and its status as a cult

classic, especially among LGBTQ+ readers. For example, the novel has influenced a younger generation of YA authors, including the Belgian author Bart Moeyaert and the Dutch author/poet/illustrator Ted van Lieshout. Also, François Ozon's film *Été 85* (2020) translates and adapts *Dance on My Grave* by transplanting the novel's setting in Southend-on-Sea, England to a city in the south of France. The film prompted an outpouring of reviews that remark on *Dance on My Grave's* lasting impact on many of its readers, not only Ozon, who encountered the novel in translation.

Chambers' whole Dance Sequence explores relationships between white, British, often Christian, working-class teenage protagonists and other people of various ages and diverse nationalities, religions, and classes. As Chambers' protagonists narrate these intercultural encounters in the first-person voice, the Dance Sequence always depicts diversity with a tinge of otherness that involves the narrator-protagonists in a journey of cultural learning that eventually lifts a curtain on the exotic other by using knowledge about their cultures to understand something about them, whether they are a Jewish boyfriend or a Dutch grandmother or a Japanese best friend. In turn, encountering the other and their culture helps Chambers' teenage narrator-protagonists to reach a new understanding about themselves – the recognition moment that they require to grow up in developmentalist constructions of adolescence.

Dance on My Grave's representation of a gay romance without the trappings of a problem novel nor the tragedy of an AIDS story also distinguishes this novel as a precursor to more recently-published YA that prioritises positive and diverse LGBTQ+ representation (Cart and Jenkins 67; Flanagan 31). Chambers makes this kind of representation possible in *Dance on My Grave* through a number of postmodern narrative techniques that Victoria Flanagan observes still cropping up in YA “to represent lesbian and gay subjectivity as dialogically constructed by a variety of social and political discourses” (32). One of those discourses in *Dance on My Grave* is cultural diversity, as LGBTQ+ attraction in the novel pulls characters of different backgrounds into intercultural sexual encounters. Hal Robinson is British of the white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant variety. Hal falls for the British, Jewish Barry Gorman, but breaks up with him after Barry sleeps with Kari, a Norwegian “Working Holiday” tourist employed as an au pair in Southend. According to Chambers, he deliberately omitted stereotypes in his descriptions of culturally diverse characters, especially of Barry, even though Kari's foreignness seems to amplify her feminine appeal to bisexual Barry and even homosexual Hal (Horwitz n.p.).

Dance on My Grave's sexuality-sensitive storytelling tends to overshadow its openminded, if voyeuristic, depiction of intercultural encounters in a culturally-diverse society, even as sexual and cultural identities overlap and even reinforce each other to develop one of *Dance on My Grave's* themes. As Hal puts it, “we invent the people we know”, without being able to understand anyone but ourselves (246). This overlap is especially interesting given that Chambers wrote *Dance on My Grave* in a socio-political climate that

constructed both “multiculturalism” and LGBTQ+ sexualities with similarly othering discourses as “anti-British concepts” (Smith 60). Chambers manipulates the visibility of Barry’s Jewish identity in the exact same code he uses to represent Barry’s homosexuality. It was necessary to hide gay sex in *Dance on My Grave* because the couple is under the legal age of consent, which was twenty-one years old until 1994. Furthermore, as in many twentieth-century YA novels with LGBTQ+ content, sex between the teenage gay couple is written in “linguistic codes” (Wickens 156) because positive, pleasurable depictions of homosexuality in YA fiction were as yet unprecedented. One example of that code for hiding sexual information is also a key link in Chambers’ chain of authorial decisions about Barry’s characterisation:

“Like a plate of ham?” Barry said one night.

“Thought you was a ten-to-two, squire.”

“Don’t mess about.”

I [Hal] hadn’t a clue what he meant, so “Help yourself,” I said. (157)

This is the final version of a passage that evolved from draft to draft. If you can’t crack the Cockney slang, you also won’t have “a clue” what Barry is offering. Likewise you will not know that Barry is a Jew (rhymes with “ten-to-two”).

In fact, you will not know Barry is Jewish until nearly the end of *Dance on My Grave* unless you guess it at the novel’s halfway point when Barry ends a telephone call with the greeting “Shalom” (112). Barry might just say “Shalom” to Hal to be cool – Barry is cool, sailing his own boat, driving his own motorcycle, working in his own record shop, and capable of reciting W.H. Auden off by heart. He is handsome too, with “a head of streaming jet-black hair above a broad and handsome face split by a teasing grin atop a tidy body, medium height” (22). Because Chambers characterises Barry as what Nathan Abrams calls a “normalised” Jew “in a pluralist nation” (7), rather than using the stereotypes that Madelyn Travis finds to be unfortunately common in descriptions of Jewish characters written by non-Jewish authors in British youth literature (75), you cannot know from his physique that Barry is Jewish. Barry exists in *Dance on My Grave* as either alive and assimilated into British society, which matches the values of Thatcherite Britain, in which Chambers wrote, or dead and exposed as an other.

PORTRAIT OF A CULTURAL OTHER

Barry is the othered character whose role as Hal's lover is to be his mirror, to borrow Lissa Paul's metaphor describing the characters in Chambers' novels as "mirrors set facing each other" (65). Dark-haired and muscular, middle-class, self-confident, accepting of his own sexuality, owning a sailboat, certain of his future plans because he has virtually taken over management of his family's business (a music store called Gorman Records, how cool), and Jewish, Barry differs from Hal in many identity categories. Hal claims to have known all along that Barry was Jewish, but it is only after Barry's sudden death that their religious difference exposes Hal's knowledge gap about Judaism. Judaism is such new territory for Hal that he mistakenly says, "[Barry] didn't go to church, I mean synagogue" (199). Kari gives him a crash course on Jewish funerary traditions and explains the ways that Hal has violated them, most of all by telephoning the Gorman family while they were sitting *shiva*. Because the Gormans' traditions defy Hal's expectations, the sudden need to recognise Barry's religious difference becomes a plot twist and a turning point in Hal's personal growth towards self-recognition at the end of *Dance on My Grave*. Seeing himself in Barry's mirror, Hal's self-recognition entails an existential process of distinguishing himself from Barry. Barry's cultural difference to Hal sets the recognition plotline in motion – something that Barry accomplishes posthumously when the fact that he is Jewish becomes newly relevant to the story by throwing a wrench in Hal's plan to dance on Barry's grave. Accommodating Jewish traditions that he is not familiar with means Hal has to adjust his grieving actions to a set of values that he does not anticipate or understand.

This adjustment forces Hal to observe himself. Chambers illustrates Hal's newfound self-awareness through the metaphor of being "beside" yourself and therefore able to observe yourself from another perspective. Chambers foils the concept of being "beside" with details in Hal's description of Barry's grave in a Jewish cemetery. First of all, the Jewish cemetery is a real place in Southend, located beside or "at the back of the main cemetery, separated by a hedge" (232). According to an arcane private vow that Hal and Barry made while they were a couple, separate from Barry's religious traditions, Hal has to dance on Barry's grave. However, according to Jewish tradition, Barry's grave will not be marked until one year after his death. This means that Hal has to find Barry's unmarked mound of earth. He guesses that Barry's mound is next to the headstone of Barry's father – the first instance of being "beside". The second one is that, during this search and the dance, Hal describes himself feeling "beside myself" in two senses: in a frenzy of emotions and in the way that he is hyperaware of his behaviour, as if observing himself from a different point of view (238). This is recognition in real time. Being beside himself makes it possible for Hal to realise that the headaches and stomachaches he has been experiencing since Barry's death "aren't only about Barry's death. They're about me" (243), and how Hal feels about himself after a tumultuous and tragic romance. Hal's better self-awareness is intertwined with his

awareness of knowledge gaps and cultural learning about his ex-boyfriend's religious traditions.

The fact that all these realisations happen posthumously – after Barry's death – means that the fact of Barry being Jewish does not matter in the story while Barry is alive and able to be affected by them himself: in *Dance on My Grave*, Barry's culture is only shown having an effect on Hal. Hal even shouts at one point: "why should out-of-date customs [Barry] didn't believe in matter now?" (200). The reason is actually because they are encounters with an other – an unknown in the form of another culture – that Hal has to experience to achieve the self-awareness that Chambers calls "recognition" before *Dance on My Grave* can accomplish its dénouement. Hal's cultural learning deepens his awareness and his potential for appreciation of Jewish funerary traditions, his local Jewish cemetery, and Barry's Jewish family, whose mourning traditions run counter to Hal's will to dance. As Hal's need to dance motivates his interactions with the Gormans after Barry's death and his visits to the Jewish cemetery, representations of Judaism in the novel use cultural learning as a means for Hal to achieve closure to his grief and confusion, rather than as an end in and of itself.

Making it a matter of knowledge and knowability, Chambers hides Barry's Jewish identity through most of Hal's narration up until Barry's death. As long as Hal did not believe it to be important, Barry's religion stayed invisible in his narrative. Hal suddenly needs to learn how Jewish families mourn so that he can understand the collapse of his good relationship with Mrs Gorman and how to honour the pact he made to dance on Barry's grave. With new cultural knowledge about sitting *shiva*, which he learned the hard way by having intruded on Mrs Gorman's mourning, Hal then visits the "Jewish part" of the cemetery, describing it as "a ruckled white sheet laid over the centre of a square field of cropped grass" (233). A photograph of Southend's Jewish cemetery in Chambers' archive gives the same visual effect (AC/01/36). Likened to a "ruckled white sheet" (233), the Jewish cemetery seems specifically to replace Hal's bed as a place for ruminating up until the achievement of recognition.³ Hal's bed may be considered centre-stage in the second half of *Dance on My Grave* because Hal spends so much time there grieving, thinking, and writing up the text of the novel before and after his dénouement dance.

"Literature gives us images to think with", Chambers wrote in *Dance on My Grave's* companion novel, *Breaktime* (8). Both in Chambers' word choice and the visual effect of this description of the cemetery, a Jewish place becomes what Chambers would call an "image to think with", meaning that it is another springboard for readers' personal reflection that might lead to new recognitions alongside Hal's. Rather than speculate about readers of *Dance on My Grave*, however, I want to connect Hal's recognition plotline to the author's own intercultural encounters during the process of writing, or literary genesis, of Barry Gorman and the Jewish funerary traditions that become so key in Hal's story. Hal's recognition of

3 Incidentally, that bed with its "ruckled" sheets features on the cover of *Dance on My Grave's* first Dutch-language edition (*Je moet dansen op mijn graf* 1985).

himself through posthumous intercultural encounters with Barry illustrates the link between imagistic prose like descriptions of the Jewish cemetery based on photographs, recognition plotlines, and the act of writing in *Dance on My Grave* as well as in Chambers' literary practice. In the next part of this study, I will present a genetic analysis of the intercultural encounters that Chambers curated for himself while he created Barry's character during the genesis of *Dance on My Grave*. As a method of literary analysis, genetics can elucidate authorial positionality. Authorial positionality can offer an approach to literary authorship that makes it possible to unpack representations of cultural diversity and intercultural encounters in fictional texts.

AUTHORIAL POSITIONALITY

Genetic literary criticism envisions writing as a process and a series of decisions that produce "a series of versions" of a text that eventually would be finished and possibly published (Van Hulle, *Manuscript Genetics* 22). Extant documentary traces of writing can be used to reconstruct this process and to make a genetic dossier that investigates a specific topic or specific feature of the process. In the Dance Sequence collection of Aidan and Nancy Chambers' archive at Seven Stories, there are at least four complete versions of every novel that Aidan Chambers wrote. In the archive, every novel has at least one notebook in which Chambers planned the novel and three complete drafts, as well as incomplete drafts. In addition, the archive contains even more partial versions, which Chambers wrote while he was still deciding what belonged in the novel and what did not. Chambers created these in-process versions of *Dance on My Grave* between 1968 and 1982, with the bulk of the work beginning in 1979. Chambers' decision-making process throughout *Dance on My Grave*'s genesis affected how the novel's recognition plotlines unfold and how those plotlines deal with otherness in the form of intercultural encounters. Therefore, I will use Chambers' archive documenting these decisions as a guide for critically reading *Dance on My Grave*. Decisions that led up to writing the recognition plotlines, specifically, can reveal the ways in which Chambers crafted *Dance on My Grave*'s themes and narrative styles for an adolescent readership.

It appears from his archive and the dossier that I have assembled from it that Chambers did not know during *Dance on My Grave*'s planning stages nor while writing the first half of the manuscript that Barry would be Jewish or that his religious tradition would have such an impact on the dénouement. However, he knew that Barry would have to die. He also knew that funerary traditions and religious reckoning would feature as themes in one way or another. In fact, the manuscript draft contains scrapped chapters showing Hal employed for the summer at the cemetery instead of the Gorman family's music store. These chapters include passages that elaborate on Hal's religion – Anglicanism – instead of Barry's.

Anglicanism also happens to be Chambers' own religious heritage. In a 2021 interview, contrastingly, Chambers declared that he had decided Barry would be Jewish alongside deciding that *Dance on My Grave* would be set in Southend-on-Sea, a vacation city at the mouth of the Thames, near London (Horwitz n.p.). Barry and his family would represent Southend's Jewish community, which Chambers got to know while he lived in Southend between 1957 and 1960. Instead of choosing a single interpretation of all the contradicting and missing information behind Barry's ultimately-significant religious tradition, the rest of this study will wade through the variety of ways that the archival evidence versus Chambers' descriptions of his process could be interpreted, sometimes with my own inference and finally with a return to evaluating the place of intercultural encounters in *Dance on My Grave's* recognition plots.

Also, although Chambers typically conscientiously researched his settings and themes, any notes about Judaism, the Jewish cemetery in Southend, or the Jewish funerary traditions that Kari needs to explain to Hal in the novel are conspicuously absent. As Chambers himself is not Jewish, his knowledge of Judaism comes second-hand. In a personal communication, Chambers told me that to learn about Jewish funerary traditions in the UK: he consulted a book he had inherited from his father, a funeral director, called *The Disposal of the Dead* by C.J. Polson, R.P. Brittain, and T.K. Marshall (email, 21/07/21). This is an example of a gap in the archive rather than being necessarily a gap in Chambers' cultural knowledge or sensitivity, because among notes that Chambers made while reading Barbara Jones' *Design for Death*, John Lahr's *Prick Up Your Ears*, and Graeme Greene's *The End of the Affair*, alongside other books that informed the way he has Hal talk about death in *Dance on My Grave*, he never recorded his reading of *The Disposal of the Dead* (AC/01/36, "Memo 1" and "Memo 3").

As just one way to interpret *Dance on My Grave's* archive, understanding these absences from the notebooks as indicators that adding a Jewish character and hinging the dénouement on Jewish traditions did not factor into Chambers' early planning of *Dance on My Grave*, it becomes possible to guess from *Dance on My Grave's* drafts approximately when Chambers decided that Jewish tradition and culture belonged in the story. According to the archive and the dossier I assembled from it, the decision that the Gormans would be Jewish was made as early as when Barry ends a telephone call with "Shalom" and as late as when Chambers planned the ending in the process of writing Part 3.

The first time that Chambers drafted the passage when Barry offers Hal oral sex (now you know) was in the third of the three notebooks. He used the notebooks to work through ideas while he was writing the first draft. It went like this:

"Care for a plate of ham?"

"Help yourself," I said. (AC/01/36, "Memo 3" 8)

This short passage is one of several snatches of dialogue between Hal and Barry that Chambers drafted experimentally in the notebooks. It is only two lines long. No response here from Hal to suggest that Barry eats kosher – whereas Chambers added “[t]hought you was a ten-to-two squire” in the first complete draft of the novel, the manuscript (AC/01/36, “Dance Manuscript” vol. 4, 61). Making Barry Jewish partway through the first draft may have solved a plotting problem that Chambers discovered he needed to give *Dance on My Grave* its dénouement, if indeed this was when that decision was made, contrary to how Chambers remembers it.

This choice also gives verisimilitude to the tightness of *Dance on My Grave*’s timeline, raising narrative tension, as only one week passes between Barry’s death and Hal’s opportunity to dance on Barry’s grave. The clueless reader only discovers that Barry is Jewish after he has tragically died, when Kari, the third point in *Dance on My Grave*’s love triangle, explains to Hal that Barry’s body must be interred as soon as possible:

“It’s their rule—their custom.”

“Whose custom?”

“The Jewish custom, of course. Barry was Jewish, Hal, you must have known that!”
(199)

If you missed the hints scattered earlier, this recognition moment is a plot twist. “I knew, I knew”, Hal replies to Kari (199), but his obliviousness about the relevance of religion and about the Jewish funerary custom of burying the deceased quickly and leaving the family alone to sit *shiva* instead of offering immediate condolences turns Hal’s encounter with death into a cultural encounter too. Hal’s cultural knowledge gap allows Chambers to leave it unclear (if there is a sure single reason) why Mrs Gorman gets angry at Hal for telephoning and visiting her after Barry’s death. Does Kari’s accusation – “[y]ou’ve upset her with your phone calls” (201) – explain enough? Or does Mrs Gorman blame Hal for Barry’s death? Or for the broken mirror and the mess Hal made during his breakup fight with Barry? Or is it his violation of *shiva* that changes her opinion of Hal? Leaving his readers with the task of deciding for themselves how to fill a knowledge gap such as this is what Chambers calls storytelling by “tell-tale gaps”: when “authors leave gaps which the reader must fill before the [story’s] meaning can be complete” (“Reader” 46).

In a novel entitled *Dance on My Grave* and inspired by a newspaper clipping about a real teenage boy who damaged his friend’s grave, Chambers required: a dance instead of damage, a pact to dance, a grave to dance on, and enough obstacles – knowledge gaps included – to make a plot. These last two requirements may ultimately have motivated Chambers’ decision to make Barry’s religious identity Jewish. Resulting knowledge gaps facilitate the scandal and

dénouement of anagnorisis in the form of an intercultural encounter. Prior to that decision, an early version of *Dance on My Grave*'s plot hinged on the problem that "the dead boy is cremated. There will be no grave to dance on" (AC/01/36, "Notebook 1" 4). Thwarted attempts to perform Hal's dance in this early version apparently also thwarted Chambers' ability to find a satisfying ending to the story, so he abandoned this plotline. He decided that there would have to be a grave to dance on. No cremation. By law, cremation after death is optional in the UK, but since the 1980s it has been opted for in 70% of deaths (Jupp 156). Perhaps Chambers wanted to have a solid reason for Barry to be among the other 30%? Traditionally Jews do not choose cremation.

Chambers has always fact-checked real details for his novels. For example, he decided to remove a scene from *Dance on My Grave* when Hal and Barry ride the Tunnel of Love together because he discovered that there was no Tunnel of Love at the local funfair in Southend (AC/01/36, "Memo 3" 2). Bemoaning that this particular fact-check caused him writer's block, Chambers wrote out in one of his planning notebooks:

Maybe part of the problem is allowing the plot-narrative to become a tyranny. There is a strong impetus, as one goes on, towards more and more detailed a sequential tramline-like, plotful narrating. (AC/01/36, "Memo 3" 2)

Bitter words from an author who believes that characters come first, plot second in the genesis of a novel. Not only the hard truth of facts, but the demanding "tramline-like" movement of plot may have pressured Chambers in the act of authorship to make unplanned decisions to make the plot and its obstacles fit into a dénouement.

Chambers decided to mark his characterisation of Barry with a recognition moment to make hamartia that can lead to a dénouement in *Dance on My Grave*. Hal experiences the hamartia when he realises that he must rethink who he thought Barry was, not only to grapple with his grief at Barry's death and the end of their relationship but also to face the logistics of the dance he had promised to perform on Barry's grave. "So why should out-of-date customs he didn't believe in matter now?" Hal demands to know (200) – a demand somewhat ambivalently in between the desire to learn about other cultures for the sake of it and for the sake of self-affirmation. The sudden importance of Jewish customs at the dénouement of *Dance on My Grave* transforms Barry posthumously into someone Hal never did get to know, at least according to Hal's perception. Faced with this transformation, Hal must also learn how to face himself by filling up his knowledge gaps. As Hal's author, Chambers both created Hal's intercultural encounter and endeavoured to resolve the problems that it raises in the text. Whenever during *Dance on My Grave*'s genesis they arose, the resolutions are narratological: dénouement, closure, recognition plotline. The problems, however, remain as long as Hal's personal metaphorical mirror also reflects Barry and the

culturally-diverse society that *Dance on My Grave* realistically depicts and that Barry being Jewish represents.

The plot-twisting appearance of Judaism in *Dance on My Grave* renders spirituality an intercultural knowledge gap, just as it translates death's role in this novel from problem to puzzle. Hal's encounters with Barry, literature, love, death, and religious traditions transform him into a mature person with better self-awareness, or at least better control over his private thoughts and feelings. This reading gives closure – but why did Hal's recognition plotline have to be so deadly? The sudden, unexplained death of a young person is a tragedy that deserves a thoughtful pause, even when it happens in fiction. Some questions are as relevant to ask about a fictional death as they are for any investigation of a real death. Why has this person died? Who was this person, and did their identity make them more susceptible to an early death? While death in fiction can have a plot function that habituates even the most tragic death to the heterotopia of fictional worlds where everything happens for a reason, fictitious deaths do not have to be read that way. Reading against the death trope common in YA fiction in which a supporting character's death enables adolescent survivor characters to realise something affirming about life – or to achieve the “acceptance of losing others and awareness of mortality” that Trites has observed (119) – is also an option. Barry's grave becomes Hal's dance floor and diving board from which to leap into the rest of his life.

The fact that Barry's death also launches Hal into an intercultural encounter with Barry's religious tradition, which Hal has to get to know to be able to cope with the loss of Barry, illustrates well the “kaleidoscopic turn” that Karen Coats observes in the portrayal of death in YA fiction at the turn of the twenty-first century (2). Coats finds that death has begun to feature in YA as a solvable problem whereas, in earlier fiction, Trites found mortality to be disempowering (140). In a 1982 novel, sixteen-year-old Hal experiences death as more get-to-knowable than it is solvable. Instead of solving the problem of death, Hal faces his ignorance of mortality through an analogous ignorance of Judaism, which he has to resolve in lieu of finding a solution to death. Moreover, becoming acquainted with death via cultural learning about Judaism empowers Hal even though this plotline is fatal for Barry. With *Dance on My Grave's* plot twist and Barry's posthumous revelation of his cultural difference from Hal, Judaism becomes the entry point for understanding problems of death, life, and love in *Dance on My Grave* – by means of an openminded intercultural encounter.

Being Jewish in *Dance on My Grave* means being able, posthumously, to surprise. The ability to exert yourself over someone after death is a form of haunting that gives Barry new agency and visibility in the narrative after his death. At the same time, Barry's posthumous power over Hal in the form of a Jewish other must transfer to Hal himself for *Dance on My Grave* to achieve its recognition plotline's dénouement, finally leaving Barry to rest in peace while Hal goes on to another boyfriend and the grown-up life that lies ahead. While I want to refuse to vindicate Barry's death by giving it a positive spin, death does bring Barry's cultural

and religious identity to the fore in this 1982 novel that depicts Judaism in Britain as a tradition worth learning about, part of the diversity of British society, and, even if only by a twist of fate or plot, as important to an Anglican like Hal Robinson as to the Gorman family.

CONCLUSION

Recognition as it features in YA should be subdivided into two separate, but coexistent, plotlines: recognition by encountering oneself and recognition by encountering an other. Hal's concluding thoughts about how he has transformed over the course of *Dance on My Grave* are an example of the first – and of how this version of the recognition plotline can be inextricable from the other. The second plot features in *Dance on My Grave* as a (posthumous) intercultural encounter between Hal, a Christian, and Barry, a Jew. Hal's relationship with Barry makes him see himself more clearly, as he did in Barry's mirror during their breakup. Through writing about his relationship with Barry, Hal “learned something” about himself: that “I am no longer what I was when it all happened” (221). In contrast with Hal's increasing self-awareness, Barry features as other from Hal by virtue of his age, class, cultural, religious, and sexual differences from Hal. Comparison and contrast with Barry throughout their romance, breakup, and Hal's grief after Barry's death enables Hal to grow into better awareness of how he fits into the institutions of age, class, culture, religion, and sexuality. Among all the identity categories in which Barry differs from Hal, the fact that Barry is Jewish becomes the definitive difference between them, posthumously. Forced to learn about Jewish traditions so that he can mourn Barry and complete the vow to dance on his grave, Hal achieves his recognition moment through an intercultural encounter.

Anagnorisis activates a spiritual response, which Chambers defines in his study of youth and literature as “enlightening, enlivening and uplifting” (*The Age Between* 79). *Dance on My Grave* exhibits this kind of spirituality as something fit for YA fiction by connecting creative, communicative, and thoughtful spaces with revelations of Judaism, whether the religious aspect of Judaism is overt or encoded. I mean the Jewish cemetery, the site of Hal's self-affirming recognition, as well as the bed on which Hal developed his understanding of himself and Barry, wrote, and hatched his plan to infiltrate the Jewish cemetery and dance on the grave. Emerging from moments when the encounters with self and other entwine, spirituality is a youthhood experience in all of Chambers' novels, even if it only happens at the narrative peripheries or in liminal spaces like a cemetery, a grave, and a bed. *Dance on My Grave* instantiates spirituality as knowledge gaps and opportunities for communication, an essential part of encountering love and death as well as religion, and an attitude that can lead to anagnorisis. Spirituality is something other than religion, but encounters with

Judaism in *Dance on My Grave* use religious traditions for Hal's secular recognition of himself and, in another sense, of others like Barry.

The YA recognition plotline both is enabled by and enables diversity among a novel's cast of characters. This is the classical reading of anagnorisis, in fact. Recognition plotlines unfold with different consequences for different characters, depending on their relationships with each other and the roles that they play in the story. Aristotle's definition of the discovery of anagnorisis centres its variability depending on the subjects it involves: "it's a change from ignorance to knowledge" and "producing friendship or enmity among those marked for good or ill" (Aristotle, *Poetics* II, 4, qtd. in *The Age Between* 92). So, to read recognitions we should examine not only the flashpoint of the discovery itself, but also the relationships involved in precipitating it and the dénouement that it hastens. For example, in *Dance on My Grave*, the characters are distinguished not only by their destinies but by the identity markers that pertain to them in the novel's setting, mid-twentieth-century Southend as written by Chambers in Thatcherite Britain: the protagonist is a white working-class Anglican boy, the tragic love interest/sidekick is a white middle-class Jewish boy.

The recognition plotlines set in motion by the intercultural encounter in intimate relationships in *Dance on My Grave* produce the death of the other as the flip-side of the protagonist's new outlook on life. Hal expresses this in the act of writing. Examining Chambers' act of writing *Dance on My Grave* complicates Hal's metafictional authorship of the novel. While Chambers' writing process invites many possible interpretations and no certainties, Hal's character development follows a clear trajectory from crisis to anagnorisis. Although Hal experiences this trajectory as a spiritual struggle, the metafictional genesis of his *Dance on My Grave* is an ideal in contrast with Chambers' reality. In between Barry's death and Hal's dance on his grave, Hal struggles with physical illness until he experiences the intercultural encounter, dénouement, and spiritual and narrative closure to his relationship with Barry. Learning about Jewish spirituality happens for Hal at the same time as he scribbles his feelings into a private document that he calls his "Mad Diary" (239): his intercultural learning doubles as spiritual learning doubles as identity formation through writing, all of which become the trifecta that leads Hal to his recognition moment in the cemetery.

"In the reality of our life within our culture", Chambers once reflected years after *Dance on My Grave's* publication, "the exchange of writing is the closest you can get to another person. It is more intimate than the sex act. It's a religious matter. It is the experience which transcends the individual" (qtd. in Fox). The exchange initiated by intercultural encounters also exemplifies this knot of writing, reading, love, and the spirituality that can make sense of life, death, and others.

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