

# Playing with Genre and Queer Narrative in the Novels of Malinda Lo

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## ABSTRACT

Malinda Lo has been an invaluable voice in the emerging field of queer YA fiction, both for her accessible statistics on the representation of LGBTQIA+ identities in traditional publishing, and for the content of her novels. Her fictional works place sapphic protagonists into genre narratives – sci-fi, fairy tale, thriller – that are traditionally presumed to be the realm of straight heroes. But the queer rebellion in Lo’s writing goes beyond simply casting queer characters into genres and roles that have historically been considered heteronarrative: Lo’s work is an example of what I define here as ‘queer narrative play’, a process of deliberately and visibly troubling, tweaking, and upturning readers’ expectations of the roles and functions of queer characters within recognisable genre frameworks, deftly challenging the historical binary that has existed between ‘mainstream’ genre fiction and ‘marginal’ queer coming-of-age stories.

Following from Tzvetan Todorov’s suggestion that “genres function as ‘horizons of expectation’”, this paper will explore how Lo’s body of work playfully challenges the traditional representation of LGBTQIA+ characters in a variety of methods; from creating speculative worlds that remove the need for narratives such as the coming-out story, to drawing readers’ attention to tragic queer tropes in order to make later subversions of them

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visible. Queer narrative play is an example of the ways in which contemporary YA writers may enact a rebellious conversation between author and reader, creating playful and progressive new works by reshaping the pre-existing materials of literary expectations, and Lo's work makes for a stellar example of the craft.

## INTRODUCTION

Coming out stories are still important, but I do think straight people sometimes forget that the LGBTQ experience can also involve happiness, adventure, saving the world/slaying dragons/solving mysteries. You know, LIFE.  
(@MalindaLo n.p.)

Tzvetan Todorov noted that in fiction, genres “function as ‘horizons of expectation’ for readers” (18): the presence of certain codes, conventions, and character types sets up certain expectations for the direction in which the story will advance, the elements it will contain, and the sort of conclusion the reader may find at the end of the text. As genre scholar Farah Mendlesohn suggests, “[i]n one sense, this is almost the definition of genre, the building up of that common bible of expectations” (99). Just as spaceships signal science fiction, faeries signal fantasy, and tense *in media res* opening scenes signal thriller, the presence of queer characters likewise comes with a traditional set of “horizons” and narrative conventions. Repeated exposure to a certain type of narrative containing certain tropes has created historical associations in readers: a coming-of-age story with a queer protagonist traditionally follows an arc that involves them coming out, their experiences with homophobia and prejudice, and generally revolves around that character's otherness within a heteronormative world (Crisp; Wickens; Jenkins and Cart). Historical conventions also create the expectation of these narratives ending in tragedy or unhappiness (Russo; Ahmed; Deshler). These stories have historically been grounded in realism and exist within their own isolated realm with no crossover into other genres – genre stories such as those of fantasy or science fiction have been presumed to be for ‘mainstream’ society rather than the isolated, othered stories associated with LGBTQIA+<sup>1</sup> people and their marginal experience. However, as many contemporary writers including the focus author of this study prove, this need not be the case. Within the borders of those horizons of expectation is a playful space in which to

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1 Here standing for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual/aromantic, with the plus connoting any other non-heterosexual or non-cisgender identity that falls into the ever-evolving queer spectrum. ‘Queer’ will in this paper be used synonymously with the LGBTQIA+ acronym as “an umbrella term for people outside the heterosexual norm” (Barker 7).

challenge these expectations, and create something familiar yet – because of that familiarity – recognisably rebellious.

In 2011, American YA author Malinda Lo wrote an essay for the website *Gay YA* (now *YA Pride*) titled “Taking the Homophobia Out of Fantasy” where she expresses the possibility – and the importance – of creating genre fiction in which queer characters may “feel what a straight person might feel” (n.p.) in their plotlines and their general place in society. Lo brings this up in the context of worldbuilding, emphasising that while social attitudes such as homophobia or narrative conventions such as the coming-out story are somewhat taken for granted, it is an author’s choice whether or not to include these in their work – and how to treat these elements if they do. This is just one instance of Lo’s quiet but deft rebellion against the traditional trappings of queer coming-of-age narratives, and her brief essay foregrounds the playful nature with which she acknowledges but then subverts expectations of queer narrative and genre narrative in various ways in her fiction. While Lo seamlessly hops between genres, her YA novels all have a key factor in common in the form of their queer female protagonists. These sapphic<sup>2</sup> heroines are placed in roles that have, historically, been presumed to be mainstream rather than marginal, and thus presumably reserved for heterosexual characters: they have fairy-tale romances, save the Earth from aliens and corrupt governments, and serve as unreliable narrators in murky noir thrillers. The presence of these characters in genre fiction is noteworthy on its own, but what I seek to examine in this paper is how Lo specifically pinpoints and then troubles the horizons of expectation that traditionally hang over queer characters and their narratives, skewing these conventions of tragedy and marginalisation in ways that her readers (and particularly her queer readers) will recognise, inviting them into a space of queer and playful storytelling.

Lo has been an instrumental voice in the rise of queer YA literature during the past twelve years. Her debut novel, *Ash*, is a retelling of “Cinderella” where the main character falls for the King’s Huntress rather than the handsome prince – and this queer romance is allowed to play out to its fairy-tale happy ending unimpeded by any homophobic social forces. Published in 2009, *Ash* sits atop the cresting wave of queer representation in YA fiction that would move through traditional publishing over the following years. Lo has made contributions aplenty to this wave with her novels: high fantasy *Huntress* (2011); aliens-and-conspiracies science fiction duology *Adaptation* (2012) and *Inheritance* (2013); thriller *A Line in the Dark* (2017); and historical drama *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* (2021). From 2011 onwards she has also catalogued valuable statistics (for the YA studies academic and for the more general member of the audience) regarding the publication of queer YA, charting the

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2 ‘Sapphic’ (from the poet Sappho) is used in this paper as an inclusive term for women attracted to other women. As some of Lo’s protagonists are identified in-text as lesbians (for example Jess in *A Line in the Dark*), but others as bisexual (Reese in *Adaptation*), and some not identified using any contemporary terminology (*Ash* and her love interest in *Ash*), a catch-all term is appropriate for the purposes of describing the general identity category into which these characters fall.

uptick in LGBTQIA+ representation across the years. In 2019 she published ten years' worth of findings in the article "A Decade of LGBTQ YA Since *Ash*", compiling her annual findings with a broader examination of the evolution of queer YA publishing. From 2009 to 2018, Lo charts a "300% increase" ("A Decade of LGBTQ YA" n.p.) in queer YA titles published by mainstream American publishers. As well as a numerical increase in the presence of queer YA, across Lo's decade of study there is a notable increased variety in terms of the genres these novels inhabit. Lo notes that while *Ash* was not the only queer science fiction/fantasy (SFF) title in its publication year, it was one of a select few, reflecting the trend that "[h]istorically, LGBTQ YA books have mostly been contemporary realistic novels" (n.p.). While contemporary realism remains a mainstay, there is now much more genre fiction on the table alongside it: plenty of tales of teenagers exploring their identities and coming out in realistic settings, but also plenty of tales of queer teenagers, in Lo's own words, "saving the world/slaying dragons/solving mysteries" (@malindalo n.p.).

In the ever-emerging field of queer YA studies, it somewhat goes without saying that increased – and increasingly varied and nuanced – representation of marginalised identities is important. Rudine Sims Bishop's metaphor of "windows, mirrors, and sliding doors" (ix) underpins much of the discussion of diversity in children's and adolescent literature (Booth and Narayan; Corbett). It is widely noted that "representation in media is a vital site of political struggle, through which the experiences and perspectives of marginalized identities might find greater purchase" (Harper et al. 7) and, in the case of YA and children's fiction, that "young people have a particularly urgent need to see their own faces reflected in the pages of a book and find the corollary comfort that derives from the knowledge that one is not alone in a vast universe, that there are others 'like me'" (Jenkins and Cart 3). The presence of Lo's sapphic heroines on bookshelves is significant for the validation, affirmation, and education they may provide to young readers, but the method in which these stories are constructed and the ways that they subvert, frustrate, and play with traditional expectations of both genre narratives and queer narratives warrants investigation as well. As "Taking the Homophobia Out of Fantasy" nears its tenth anniversary, and Lo's newest novel (*Last Night at the Telegraph Club*) hits shelves in an entirely different publishing climate to that of her debut, I wish to return to Lo's body of work and examine the various ways that these genre narratives play with convention, skewing the traditional expectations of both genre fiction and queer fiction by blending the two together and creating something recognisable yet recognisably subversive. While Lo is by no means the only YA writer to undertake this form of queer narrative play, I have chosen her works specifically because of her long-standing and ground-breaking position in the field of queer YA, and because her works function as such savvy and neat examples of the process.

I will examine four novels from Lo's catalogue: *A Line in the Dark* for how it acknowledges and then troubles historical tropes like the tragic lesbian character; *Ash* for how it uses the playful putty-like possibilities of fantasy worldbuilding to create a queer

romance unfettered by the traditional tropes of realism; and *Adaptation* and *Inheritance* for how they artfully blend the supposedly incompatible narratives of the sci-fi adventure and the contemporary coming-out story.

## THE HORIZONS OF HETERONARRATIVE: DEFINING QUEER NARRATIVE PLAY

Queerness and playfulness have been conceptual bedfellows for a long time in many fields. In academia, “[q]ueerness as playful or explorative is a common theme in queer theory; in essence, queer theory describes ‘a space of possibility’ for our concepts of gender, sexuality, identity, and power” (Harper et al. 4). Fiction, likewise, can serve as a playful “space of possibility” in which queer identity’s “relationship – and often an adversarial one – to existing power structures” can play out in creative and subversively joyful ways (4).

Seeking to define the slippery concept of play in a ludic sense, game scholar Eric Zimmerman suggested “the free space of movement within a more rigid structure” (159) as a potential working definition. I will be drawing on Zimmerman for my own definition of ‘narrative play’, while folding in the above articulation from Harper et al. about the adversarial and rebellious “space[s] of possibility” presented by queer playfulness. If we consider Zimmerman’s “rigid structure” to be analogous with Todorov’s “horizons of expectation”, the structure that frames queer narrative play is made up of the traditional expectations of genre narrative and queer narrative. According to Zimmerman, play “exists in opposition to the structures it inhabits” yet “is at the same time an expression of the system, and intrinsically part of it” (159). To ‘play’ with genre and tropes is, therefore, to recognise those expectations and to move within them, while deliberately twisting and troubling them to create something simultaneously new and familiar. The play could not exist – nor be meaningful – without a pre-established literary tradition that writers and readers both know, and genre (and likewise the concept of what a queer narrative is) could not continue to evolve without transgressions from and adjustments to its components. It is the familiarity of genre codes and tropes that makes this tweaking and upturning of them so effective, as they can be used to challenge norms; in this case the norms of representation of queer characters and their personal stories within fiction. In other words, a reader’s knowledge of how things are ‘supposed to’ go will prime them to notice and appreciate the subversions when they occur, and it is this awareness of the rigid structure that makes the play within it visible and valuable.

If, in a heteronormative society, heterosexuality in readers, writers, and fictional characters is presumed to be the “default” (Kubowitz 201), the presence of queer protagonists in fiction could inherently be considered a subversion of expectations. In her examinations of queer narratives in the 1990s, Judith Roof coined the phrase “heteronarrative” – an efficient portmanteau of ‘heteronormative’ or ‘heterosexual’ and

‘narrative’ – to describe the pervasive issue of heteronormativity’s influence on genre and storytelling itself and the built-in presumption of straight characters as the heroic default in a story that was not entirely about queerness. However, Roof argues that even the coming-out story, a narrative pattern uniquely for queer people and queer characters, can only exist within a greater heteronarrative. After all, “[p]eople wouldn’t have to come out if heterosexuality wasn’t the assumed norm” (Barker 92). The coming-out story, while unique to queer readers and empowering in its own way, requires a status of otherness within a heteronormative setting to function, so “[w]hile for lesbian [and other queer] cultures the coming-out story might be liberating, in a more inclusive cultural picture it limits the potential roles and functions of lesbian [and other queer] characters” (Roof 104).

As noted above, there are still many YA works of contemporary realism that feature coming-out plotlines and examine the various struggles queer youth may face in a world that marks them as other, but there are also an increasing number of works that skew this trend – either avoiding or omitting those elements altogether, or making them a background plot to an alpha narrative that is more obviously in line with genre fiction. Many contemporary YA writers are switching young queer characters into narratives usually considered mainstream or commercial and thus heteronarrative. Novels such as April Daniels’ *Nemesis* series (2017-present) and C.B. Lee’s *Sidekick Squad* series (2016-present) place queer protagonists into superhero narratives; Cori McCarthy and Amy Rose Capetta’s *Once & Future* (2019) and M.K. England’s *The Disasters* (2018) feature diverse bands of space-faring rebels flying at warp speed through many familiar science fiction tropes; and romances such as Amy Spalding’s *The Summer of Jordi Perez (and the Best Burgers in Los Angeles)* (2018) and Julian Winters’ *Running with Lions* (2018) place same-gender love stories at the heart of the sweet and sappy tropes of the summer rom-com, where the conflict comes from interpersonal fractures and character flaws rather than homophobic outside forces threatening to keep the couple apart. These works are all noteworthy and may be considered ‘playful’ in their own ways, but from simply looking at this list, the question may arise: is the act of casting queer protagonists into the structure of genre fiction queer narrative play in and of itself, or is there a deeper metatextual layer required?

Arguably, the very process of taking a recognisable genre historically embedded in heteronarrative and ‘making it gayer’ can be considered a playful act of queer subversion in and of itself. However, some may find this surface-level act of substitution problematic. In her discussion of “Unhappy Queers” in *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed acknowledges that “[t]here are of course good reasons for telling stories about queer happiness, in response to and as a response to the very presumption that a queer life is a necessarily and inevitably unhappy life” (94), yet also warns that by supplanting queer characters into what is usually heteronarrative, writers might inadvertently suggest “that queers are rewarded with happiness in return for approximating signs of straightness” (155). However, for my definition of queer narrative play I argue that it is not so simple as “approximating signs of

straightness” by placing queer characters into heteronarratives – there is an additional layer of metatextual critique and textual queerness required, a conversation of recognition between text and reader which may be implicit or explicit in the work. *The Summer of Jordi Perez* does not place its lesbian heroine into the role of romantic lead without comment; it draws the reader’s attention to the fact that this is not traditionally expected. The novel opens with the protagonist, Abby, reflecting that by the usual rules of fiction, she is more likely to be the fat, sassy best friend character than the (skinny, straight) lead: “I’m pretty sure I’m not the heroine. I don’t even think I’m in my own story” (Spalding 3), she muses. Having articulated this horizon of expectation and enhanced reader familiarity with it, the subversion that occurs later – Abby getting her swoon-worthy summer romance – stands out all the more. Abby does not approximate straightness by being cast as the lead in a genre associated with heteronarrative, for her very presence and her engagement with the tropes she inhabits queers them in a way that makes her lesbian identity inextricable from the plot, even if, on its surface level, *The Summer of Jordi Perez* may appear to be a classic romance where the main characters ‘just happen’ to be gay.

The queering of tropes and their playful subversion can also rely on reader expectations while being less explicit: Lee’s *Sidekick Squad* series features an array of diverse identities that the reader, if familiar with the mainstream (dominantly white, straight, and cisgender) vision of the superhero genre, will recognise as a break from traditional expectations. The underdog status of the titular sidekicks has an understated dual layer of meaning for the queer reader, as they may recognise that these LGBTQIA+ youths are marginalised twice over in both the text and the metatext, and that Lee is quietly exploring the nature of marginalisation itself through this colourful, playful sci-fi narrative of masked heroes and caped villains. Finally, sometimes the playful, queer subversion comes not from removing those traditional expectations of queer narrative, but by stubbornly proving that they can exist alongside story elements that would usually be considered heteronarrative. *The Disasters*, for instance, has its queer ensemble cast face biphobia and transphobia (as well as various alternate, context-specific forms of othering), but it also has them defiantly save the galaxy, proving themselves unlikely heroes to both the in-text authority figures who did not expect them to be capable, and the reader whose horizons of expectation have now been troubled in a playful and positive sense. The narrative that England constructs around these characters – marginalised in many ways, yet defiantly placed at the centre of this story – upends the notion that heteronarrative is the default, and suggests the horizons of expectation are elastic rather than immovable.

These novels are all playful in that they set their stage as entertaining works with familiar plot beats and tropes, yet upon that stage they tweak and trouble the audience’s expectations in ways that are made visible by the set pieces around them and by a quiet but rebellious conversation between author and reader via an understanding of those horizons of expectation. The Malinda Lo novels I discuss in the following sections each exemplify one

of these methods and provide a more detailed blueprint for various forms of authorial narrative play.

### ***A LINE IN THE DARK: REFUSING TO BURY YOUR GAYS***

Lo's 2017 novel *A Line in the Dark* is noteworthy for being a story about murder in which none of the lesbian characters die. This is significant, as death tends to follow queer characters when they appear in fiction. As in the above example of *The Summer of Jori Perez*, Lo takes care to draw the reader's attention to the relevant horizons in a scene early in the novel to make the later subversion more visible and thus more visibly playful. Early in the novel, the main characters, narrator Jess and her best friend/long-time crush Angie, settle in to watch an unnamed movie together. While Jess and Angie are not out to everyone, both characters identify as queer, which gives Jess a specific, personal, and apprehensive reaction to the film:

When I realize it's about two women who fall in love with each other, I'm not sleepy anymore. I watch the unfolding of their romance with a pit in my stomach. Like any romantic comedy, the movie throws all sorts of obstacles in their path, but I feel a sense of dread. The odds aren't good that it will end well. The curly-haired girl will probably go back to her man, or the lesbian could get hit by a car. At the end, the two women run toward each other through the traffic on a busy street, and I brace myself for tragedy. (Lo, *A Line in the Dark* 18)

Jess bracing herself for tragedy is not an unwarranted reaction, given that "the history of [fictional queer] representation is littered with the corpses of gender and sexual deviants" (Love 1). Jess' worry that "the curly-haired girl will probably go back to her man, or the lesbian could get hit by a car" references the historical trend of queer characters either renouncing their sexuality or dying by the end of the story, what Vito Russo calls the "kill 'em or cure 'em" narrative policy (162).

As Kira Deshler points out in her (aptly named) thesis *Not Another Dead Lesbian*, "[f]or many years, queerness, as portrayed in fantasy and as the lived experience of individuals, has been linked to death" (33). This recurring trajectory of tragedy, known colloquially as the 'Bury Your Gays' trope, speaks of a long history, recognised by audiences and part of their generic expectations, of dead queer characters. Many cite the Ur example of this contemporary convention of queer narratives "end[ing] with funerals rather than weddings" (A. M. Butler 55) as Radclyffe Hall's influential (and at the time scandalous) 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness*. Critic Lisa Walker notes that "*The Well's* status as *the* lesbian novel is inseparable from its reputation as *the most depressing* lesbian novel ever written" (21). The

queer narrative is, historically, by nature a depressing one, in which “[t]hose who identified with same-sex desire most often end up dead; if they manage to survive, it is on such compromised terms that it makes death seem attractive” (Love 1). During the gay pulp-fiction boom in the middle of the twentieth century, the perceived need for books to be seen as not condoning nor encouraging deviant behaviour meant that an unhappy ending – be it the characters dying, being declared insane, renouncing their queerness, or ending up lonely – was often a requirement for queer romance novels to be published (Stryker; Ahmed). Film censorship such as Hollywood’s Hays Code also established a convention of tragic queer stories for the same reasons, which has inevitably bled over into other visual media such as television.

Deshler notes that while this trope theoretically has its roots in the homophobia of realism, it pervades speculative fiction as well: in her roundup of dead sapphic characters she links the “random, horrible death” (Wilts 49) of the openly queer Tara from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to the scene where the openly queer Lexa is “unceremoniously shot and killed” (Harris 2) in the science fiction drama *The 100*, which was released some 14 years later. Both characters were hit by a stray bullet not intended for them, both shortly after the character was depicted being affectionate with a romantic partner of the same gender. Deshler adds that that “just weeks after Lexa’s demise on *The 100*” a lesbian character in zombie thriller *The Walking Dead* “was killed by an arrow not meant for her, much like the bullet that killed Lexa” (57). Her comparison suggests that the association of queer narrative with tragedy is acting as a sort of magnetic force even within these speculative worlds, attracting deadly projectiles to queer characters (particularly, but not limited to, queer women). While these tropes and narratives stem from the history of queer fiction, they have not been abandoned to the past. This observation is statistically reflected in sources such as the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation’s (GLAAD) yearly “Where We Are on TV” reports, which demonstrate that while improvements are being made and writers are gradually edging away from these unhappy tropes, they are nevertheless persistent – as recently as November 2020, the popular television series *Supernatural* killed off (or, more accurately but not reassuringly, banished to Hell) a main character instantly after he confessed his love to another man. The embedded expectation of these tropes – that instinct to “brace [your]self for tragedy” – continue to cast a shadow over the queer community’s experience with fictional media.

Lo reflects and articulates this fear through Jess. When the movie ends in *A Line in the Dark*, Jess is genuinely surprised to see that it has a happy resolution where the two women are not only both alive, but are together: she blinks in shock, while “Angie says dreamily, ‘See, it can totally happen for non-straight people’” (*Dark* 19). That Lo chooses to have her characters respond to the film this way suggests that she is intentionally commenting on the ingrained and harmful nature of these tropes and narrative associations, and highlighting the importance of positive and varied representation of queer characters in fiction,

particularly mainstream representations such as film, for the emotional wellbeing of queer audience members. But this is not the final instance of Lo's savvy play with the 'Bury Your Gays' archetype, as this moment proves as foreshadowing to draw the reader's attention to the trope so that its later subversion is more visible.

*A Line in the Dark* is a murder mystery featuring multiple queer female characters, yet it is not any of the queer female characters who get killed. The murder victim at the heart of the drama, Ryan, is a self-described straight girl (115), whereas all three queer characters (Jess, Angie, and Angie's girlfriend Margot) get to live until the end of the novel and continue with their lives. This fact will be pleasantly surprising to a reader used to the tragic horizons of expectation noted above. The identity of the murder victim, however, plays into other conventions traditionally attached to the murder mystery/thriller. With Ryan's death, Lo plays out the trope of the sexually-active bombshell blonde being the first to die, a historical staple of many a thriller and murder mystery (Clover). *A Line in the Dark* follows the conventions already accepted within the genre, but avoids the conventions that would usually have the writer kill off the story's resident lesbian(s). In one sense, Lo even switches the traditional roles and character tropes of queer and heterosexual characters: the straight girl is the comparatively shallow side character who dies after being antagonistic, and it is the multiple queer characters whose complex interpersonal drama drives the story. This subversion is especially clear and deliberate given how the story draws the expected queer tropes – such as Bury Your Gays – to the reader's attention during the movie-watching scene described above.

The genre framing also makes this subversion especially clear, given that death lurks in the very foundations of the story. *A Line in the Dark* is situated within the thriller genre in many ways: a tense *in media res* opening scene, a foreboding wintry backdrop, an unreliable narrator, and of course the murder that occurs at the midpoint of the novel with the tense mystery surrounding it. The novel's position as a work of gritty *noir* realism, however, makes its defiance of the historic, 'realistic' tragic queer narrative stand out all the more, and its firm situation within the structure of the thriller makes the individual tropes being played with all the clearer and more intriguing to the savvy reader. Lo keeps these genre tropes intact and uses that familiar framework as a stage on which to play with conventions of the genre, namely by substituting queer characters into roles they are not usually given and subverting the historical trope of who will die – while, at the same time, playing right into the historical tropes of who will die in a psychological thriller about murder. The choice of murder victim is at once a defiance of the expected narrative (the queer characters usually die) and a total adherence to the expected narrative (the beautiful young woman usually dies). *A Line in the Dark's* method of subversion and play thus happens at an individual trope level, significant aspects changed while operating within the intact framework of genre convention and plot, and with the audience's attention drawn deliberately to that subversion

in the opening acts to make the juxtaposition between their expectations and the novel's twist on them visible and meaningful.

### **ASH: FANTASY WORLDBUILDING AS QUEER NARRATIVE PLAY**

Lo's debut novel, *Ash*, conducts its play in a more understated – but no less visible – way. *Ash* is a retelling of the “Cinderella” fairy tale; a loose and inventive retelling, but one that maintains key familiar aspects to ground the reader and spark certain expectations. There is a wicked stepmother and two nasty stepsisters, a fairy guardian, and costume balls from which the protagonist must return by midnight: familiar “compass points” (Sellers 30) from the original fairy tale that function as a guide for the reader's expectations. Lo sets the story of *Ash* up around “Cinderella”'s familiar plot beats, but subverts expectations by giving this traditionally and recognisably heteronarrative to queer characters instead, with the titular Ash finding her happy ending with a female love interest rather than a handsome prince. While this act of substitution and subversion seems to be mostly concerned with narrative, Lo's playing with genre conventions in *Ash* truly takes place at a worldbuilding level, with the setting of the novel constructed specifically to create a story that questions and challenges presumptions of queer narrative and genre narrative, and creates a space for the queered fairy tale to play out unobstructed.

As Lo wrote in “Taking the Homophobia Out of Fantasy”, when constructing an imaginary setting “[t]he author simply has to decide: Are the people in this fantasy world homophobic? Or not?” (n.p.). The setting of *Ash* is one where homophobia simply does not exist, and this is what allows the central romance to flourish unobstructed in its fairy-tale structure. The queer-friendly nature of the story world is set up in worldbuilding details throughout the book: same-gender couples in the background cast help to establish them as a norm rather than an oddity (*Ash* 106), as do queer love stories within the story world's own canon of fairy tales (142-145) – and it is a queer fairy tale that Ash's female love interest, Kaisa, reveals as her favourite, a metatextual nod to queer readers' desire for texts they can personally relate to (Kubowitz; Lloyd). When a side character notices Ash's affection for Kaisa, her response is gentle teasing and encouragement, rather than homophobic remarks or even surprise (*Ash* 184-185). It is a fictional setting where “being gay doesn't matter” and so characters “don't have to come out, because sexual orientation is never assumed [...] and falling in love with someone of the same sex is seen as perfectly natural” (Lo, “Taking the Homophobia Out of Fantasy” n.p.).

As Lo's essay makes clear, there is potential aplenty of playful subversion and queer escapism in speculative fiction such as high fantasy. When fantasy stories take place in secondary, imagined settings, “the audience is given the illusion of the suspense of the social rules of the society in which they live” (Roberts and McCallum-Stewart 2). Science fiction,

too, can “[offer] a vision of potentiality” (Betz 56) by looking to speculative futures or worlds that do not align with the rules and sensibilities of modern Earth. This gives SFF the unique potential to “challenge and disrupt received notions and allow and encourage their audiences to imagine ways of being outside the constitutive constraints of socialized gender and sexual identity” (Roberts and McCallum-Stewart 1).

Of course, SFF’s subversive potential does not make it immune to problems with queer narrative, and while the genre has its queer classics there remains ample space for trope subversion and LGBTQIA+ representation within the field. Stephen Kenneally writes that traditionally, searching for representations of queer characters in speculative fiction is “a process akin to panning for gold” (13), so few and far between are they in the field of genre publishing. “Despite fantasy’s potential as a literature of difference and its potential for dealing with the queer, actual engagements with these themes within the genre has historically been noticeably limited” (Kenneally 8), owing to a feedback loop of presumptive heteronormativity. If queer characters do exist in the fantasy setting, they often “inhabit the margins” (Kenneally 8) as minor characters, comedic relief, or bizarre magical creatures (Prater), echoing Russo’s observation that queer characters have historically been “villains and fools, but never heroes” (122). When queer characters are the heroes of their fantasy narratives, for example the works of Mercedes Lackey discussed by Anne Baly in her paper “‘Incloseto Putbacko’: Queerness in Adolescent Fantasy Fiction”, they are often still faced with a coming-out story with homophobia embedded into the fantastical worldbuilding “as a literary mechanism to invoke ‘realism’” (Crisp 337). While Baly praises some of these texts and their fantastical closets for “bring[ing] actual queer people – our problems, our subcultures, our fears – into the narrative [...] mak[ing] queerness visible and powerful” (932), stories where queerness is a taboo subject and queer characters are subject to homophobic violence or forced secrecy “fail to provide any other ways of thinking” (Wickens 156) even in a magical secondary world.

This negative history suggests that that there remains room for narrative play within speculative genre fiction, and further, that this play serves an important function. While this is the historical expectation, *Ash* is an example of how authors may use its horizons and the tools that come with the genre to skew this. For all of *Ash*’s internal conflicts across the novel, a stricken coming-out narrative is not one of them, because in her world there is no overarching heteronarrative marking her as other and thus she does not have to fall into the usual unhappy arcs reserved for queer characters (Crisp; Wickens). It is a fantasy world where heteronarrative and the heteronormativity that created it never came into being, something taken for granted by the characters within the speculative world but something that is recognisably subversive and unusual for its readers. Lo uses *Ash*’s fantastical setting “to critique an existing social structure or condition by, ironically, refusing to refer to the critiqued element”, in this case prejudice against LGBTQIA+ people; “describing an ideal social or political circumstance, [calling] attention to or mak[ing] visible the conditions that

disallow the emergence of this ideal” (Pattee 168). The social commentary is built into the setting but is unspoken in the story itself, as opposed to the previous example *A Line in the Dark*, where the ‘Bury Your Gays’ trope explicitly exists in that story world and the characters as well as the readers are aware of it. Narrative play that hinges on worldbuilding is a metatextual exercise: the subversion will be obvious to the readers themselves, playing with their familiarity with genre and narrative as well as challenging it by taking things in a different direction to what they may expect.

### **ADAPTATION/INHERITANCE: BLURRING THE BINARY OF QUEER NARRATIVE AND GENRE NARRATIVE**

Where *Ash* creates an escapist world where the coming-out story does not need to exist, *Adaptation* and *Inheritance* acknowledge the importance of such reality-rooted narratives alongside the importance of representation in genre narrative. *Adaptation* and *Inheritance* challenge the divide between queer narrative and genre narrative by weaving the two together and making them inextricable from one another within the story of the duology, blurring the binary and demonstrating that they can coexist.

Just as there is validation in recognising oneself in the “shared archive” (Ahmed 90) of traditional queer narrative such as the coming-out story and the struggle with heteronormativity, there is also validation in recognising oneself in speculative narratives rather than realistic ones, comedic rather than tragic, and seeing the potential for change therein. There is escapism to be had to story worlds like that of *Ash* where the expectations of heteronarrative simply do not exist in the first place as a deliberate act of playful rebellion on the author’s part, and there is catharsis in stories of realism that reflect experiences young queer readers may have had. These statements may be seen as representing two disparate categories of text, but this final section will explore how Lo blends the two and blurs the distinction. There is a particularly playful current through works that suggest that the shared archive of uniquely queer narratives can and should exist intertwined with the escapist, adventurous horizons of expectation of genre fiction, and it is present in this duology.

*Adaptation* is set in the USA in the present day, and draws on American cultural mythology surrounding Area 51 and government conspiracies as well as specific genre texts such as *The X-Files*. The duology follows protagonist Reese after she and her classmate (and love interest) David are injured in a car accident in the middle of the desert, and wake from a classified medical procedure to discover they have developed a supernatural healing capacity and telepathic abilities. Reese becomes embroiled in a quest to discover the truth about what happened to her, as well as navigate her own complicated interpersonal relationships, including her budding romantic relationship with a girl named Amber. Amber

is revealed towards the end of *Adaptation* to be a humanoid alien, one of many who have made contact with Earth; contact which has been covered up by the American government until it is revealed to the world at the end of the novel. *Inheritance* follows the characters attempting to navigate this new reality where humans and aliens coexist, seeing Reese targeted by the government while simultaneously grappling with the love triangle that has emerged between herself, David, and Amber.

Amber's alien civilisation takes a fluid and accepting view of gender and sexual orientation, with Lo using a futuristic alien race to challenge the norms of contemporary society as in classic science fiction novels such as Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and Octavia E. Butler's *Lilith's Brood* trilogy (1987-1989), both of which feature progressive alien societies interacting with Earthlings and challenging their comparatively rigid views on gender, sexuality, and monogamy. Amber's accepting alien society, however, is situated on a distant planet and is not the primary setting for the books. Reese lives in a world where heterosexuality is considered the norm, a norm she presumes she fits into, reacting with surprise and embarrassment when Amber suggests Reese is not straight (*Adaptation* 144-146). Kissing Amber and enjoying it prompts Reese to wonder: "Did this make her gay?" (149). Reese is caught in obviously romantic situations with Amber by both her best friend Julian and her mother, and is subsequently forced to come out to them, something that causes her stress and humiliation even though both of them are accepting (223-229). Even when Reese, with Julian's encouragement, begins to think of herself as bisexual, she is reluctant to come out to David since she fears the biphobic stigma she might face from a straight man (350).

These conflicts, however, are notably just one aspect of Reese's journey as a protagonist. Her story is not solely one of coming out, facing prejudice, and otherwise struggling within the expected confines of the queer narrative; she also has aliens, psychic powers, and government conspiracies to deal with. Lo thus weaves a uniquely queer story of coming out and self-discovery in with a genre story, blurring the supposed binary of designated queer narrative and genre heteronarrative.

The duology also puts a queer twist on the YA staple of the love triangle. Not only does this one feature a bisexual protagonist with a male and a female love interest, but the love triangle is resolved at *Inheritance's* conclusion as a polyamorous relationship, rather than by having Reese choose one suitor. As with Reese's internal conflict about coming to terms with her sexuality, the development of this queer polyamorous relationship runs parallel to the speculative genre narrative, and the two are required for the story of the duology to be whole. *Inheritance* has a happy ending where the love interests get together and the heroes are triumphant against all odds – the expected outcome of a sci-fi adventure while not necessarily the expected outcome of a coming-out story. With the plots intermingled, Reese is able to "feel what a straight [protagonist] might feel" (Lo, "Taking the Homophobia Out of

Fantasy” n.p.) at the culmination of her genre adventure, while also fulfilling a personal arc unique to a queer character.

The genre play – and its challenge to the norm – comes here in the form of this narrative fusion. The interweaving of recognisable queer narrative and recognisable genre narrative demonstrates that they are not so incompatible; challenging both science fiction’s presumed mainstream/commercial place as heteronarrative and the notion that queer narrative can only exist in its own isolated genre. It is in a way the ultimate combination, providing the catharsis and validation of realism while also demonstrating that it is not beyond the limits of possibility for queer experience nor queer storytelling. To return to the quoted post from Lo at the beginning of this paper, Reese is able to exist in her uniquely queer personhood while also experiencing “happiness, adventure, saving the world/slaying dragons/solving mysteries. You know, LIFE”.

## CONCLUSION

Malinda Lo’s work – both her novels and the accessible presentation of her publishing statistics – make her an invaluable voice in the field of queer young adult literature, across its emergence in the past decade and into the future. Lo’s novels are exemplary of the writing method I have defined here as queer narrative play, and function as a useful case study of an author acknowledging and toying with the “rigid structure” (Zimmerman 159) of the “horizons of expectation” (Todorov 18) that are built by reader familiarity with genre and queer storytelling. This narrative play may occur in the deliberate and visible twisting of individual tropes within an intact generic structure, within the author’s deliberate use of speculative setting, and within the intermingling of narrative arcs traditionally considered to not belong together – all methods which are here used to challenge the barriers between mainstream narrative and queer narrative.

Lo’s work responds to a history of embedded expectations of both queer stories and genre stories, and the construction of her novels simultaneously upholds and defies genre expectations. To achieve this, Lo draws on familiar generic conventions to safely locate her stories within their genre while also playing with genre and blurring its edges. She uses the familiarity and elasticity of reader expectations to question dominant narratives and presumptions – the shape of the narrative will be familiar to readers, though the details are different. The end result is fiction that pushes the historical boundaries that queer representation has been defined by, providing vital validation for young queer readers and a variety of perspectives for heterosexual ones. Writers like Lo are contributing to a movement that pulls queer literature out of the mire of its historically tragic and problematic tropes and into a broad new playful and queer “space of possibility” (Harper et al. 7).

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