

Beyond the Binary:

Queer (Im)possibilities of Bisexual Desires in Selected US Young Adult Novels

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ABSTRACT

There has been rapid growth in the representation of bisexual characters in US YA since 2010 in both genre fiction that has traditionally been dominated by the stories of heterosexual protagonists, and in popular YA trends, particularly the teen love triangle plot. Improvements in bisexual representation in happy, loving, meaningful queer relationships, however, still requires critical vigilance against the equation between homonormativity and queer futurities in YA, as the latter “will not be achieved by simply retelling and celebrating a single story” (Matos and Wargo 8). A particular challenge for queering conventional romance plots is the stereotyping and essentialising of bisexuals as selfish, hyper-sexual, attention-seeking or undecided, in a system of bi-erasure underpinned by monosexism. This belief that all sexualities are located at either end or at some point along the homo-heterosexual scale remains a powerful force of bi-erasure, such that tensions can arise when romance conventions and dichotomous plot structures are used to depict characters whose desires are beyond this binary. I examine four recent YA novels for their representation of bisexual characters within love triangle plots in genre fiction to highlight how these queer characters remain constrained by essentialised views of bisexuality. Despite each novel resolving the love triangle dilemma in different ways, they offer bisexual teen readers little hope for acceptance or understanding, even within relationships, and, that current political and social systems, including monosexism, are unassailable.

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“ALL THREE OF US LIE THERE”: BISEXUAL DESIRES AS QUEER POSSIBILITIES

In Lauren Oliver’s YA dystopia *Delirium* (2011) the protagonist Lena describes the happiest moments of her 17 years of life as those spent with Hana (female) and Alex (male). Despite living in a society that forbids all sexual interaction among under-18s, these teenage characters seek out ways to spend time together in secret, such as picnics during which “all three of us lie there, sometimes for hours, talking and laughing” (*Delirium* 229). Importantly for a queer reading of this novel, Lena’s freedom from the dystopian control of adolescent desire is not in having a secret boyfriend but in “the three of us” (*Delirium* 226). Lena explains she is happiest when the three of them are together or when she sees Alex and Hana in turn on the same day: “I’m happier than I can ever remember being. I’m happier than I can ever remember even dreaming of being” (*Delirium* 230). Despite Lena’s obvious delight in these two significant relationships, the word ‘bisexual’ is never used in the trilogy, nor are any lesbians depicted. Lena is a YA protagonist who grapples with the tension between what she feels and what the dystopian regime tells its citizens about the dangers of love. Although Lena rebels against the regime, as per the convention in YA dystopias, she never questions the government’s strictures on gender or sexuality and she consistently refers to government propaganda to understand her desires. But neither the dystopian government nor the ‘free’ society beyond its walls admit that desire for more than one gender is a possibility. This is a noteworthy omission in a text that constructs its dystopia on the basis of political control over sex and sexuality in general, and female and adolescent sexuality in particular. This lacuna is where I begin: by considering the queer (im)possibilities of gender-plural desires.

I use the term “gender plural desires” (Kneen 363) as alternative and in addition to the more familiar term ‘bisexuality’, particularly when referring to YA characters who do not identify as any specific sexuality. ‘Bisexual’ remains a complex and contested term, although it is familiar from LGBTQIA+ acronyms. In a survey of online comments, Jennifer Coletta finds evidence that adolescent readers want to see the word ‘bisexual’ used to support bi-visibility, and the use of a familiar term in YA novels and marketing materials can assist teens who are searching for particular characters or content. Some resistance to the term emerges from its suggestion that there are only two genders and/or that desire is (or can be) experienced for only two genders. However, I understand bisexuality as a queer way of being that destabilises boundaries rather than reifying them, such that ‘bisexual’ can be considered as “essentially interchangeable with *pansexual*” (Coletta 87); this is my usage of the term. Common to all these terms is the central importance of desire for more than one gender. However, this plurality invokes a host of negative stereotypes of bisexuals as hyper-sexual, undecided, ‘in the closet’, unfaithful, promiscuous, and attention-seeking that, through their endless repetition, have constructed these traits and behaviours as “essential” to bisexuality (Kneen 361). What is notable about the essentialised traits of bisexuality is that none of them are particularly queer. Queerness is contingent and open to new meanings and tensions, as

while “queer offers elasticity, it always hinges on bodies, pleasures, relations, or desires at cross-purposes with heteronormativity” (McCallum and Bradway 3). Although queerness defies any one definition or methodology, it always troubles the terms, expectations, and parameters of the normative. However, the essentialised bisexual as self-absorbed and unfaithful does not suggest queer transgression or unpredictability, but rather a selfish and unreliable person and partner, regardless of their gender or sexuality.

The elision of the queerness of gender-plural desires occurs through mainstream social structures, particularly those that reinforce monosexism: the current dominant Western belief that “people are only ‘truly’ straight or gay or lesbian [... therefore] only ‘truly’ attracted to people of one gender” (McLean n.p.). Monosexism underpins the common perception that homosexual and heterosexual are the only legitimate sexualities. Attempts to complicate this binary include the development of the Kinsey Scale in the US in the 1940s and 1950s, which allowed people to position their sexual experiences along a scale between the two points (McLean n.p.). However, the idea that all sexualities are located at either end or at some point along the homo-heterosexual scale still constrains how sexualities are understood, limiting understanding of gender-plural desires and other sexualities that are not on this scale at all. Monosexism is thus a powerful force of ‘bi-erasure’, a term which describes the ways that bisexuality, bisexual people, and bisexual experiences are erased from social systems, public discourse, and popular culture, as well as through personal interactions that pressure bisexuals to assimilate to the binary. Even when attempting to claim a bisexual identity or create their own label to express plural desires (Callis), bisexuals report that straight, gay, and lesbian friends continue to mislabel them and deny they ‘really’ desire more than one gender (Bostwick and Hequembourg; Hayfield et al.). Mislabelling the bisexual partner, whether in a same- or other-gender relationship, thus enforces the idea “that people who are attracted to or have sexual relationships with more than one sex are merely switching between two mutually exclusive sexual options” (McLean n.p.). These processes of assimilation and appropriation thwart understanding of gender-plural desires or how these might queer normative relationship expectations.

The narrative possibilities for challenging monosexism and exploring gender-plural desires, in relationships or otherwise, have developed significantly in YA published over the last 10 to 15 years. In the 2010s, the alarming rise in, and media attention to, queer teen suicides in the US exposed the urgency of demonstrating the possibilities and potentialities for liveable queer lives. Public responses included both high profile public campaigns aimed at teenagers and steeper growth in queer YA publishing (Matos and Wargo 6-7), marking 2010-2011 as “a noteworthy turning point in contemporary queer YA discourse” (Mason 6). The growing number of YA narratives that explore new possibilities for queer characters has continued in dialogue with greater cultural and social acceptance of non-heterosexuality, including legal changes such as marriage equality. It is now relatively easy to find queer protagonists and romance sub-plots in YA genre fiction that previously typically relegated

queer characters to secondary roles, if they were included at all, such as fairy-tale re-tellings, adventure stories, science fiction, high fantasy, dystopia, and romantic comedies. Queer protagonists in genre narratives can redress earlier conventions of “characterizing homosexuals as lost souls doomed to either premature death or the solitary life of exile at the margins of society” (Jenkins and Cart xii). However, the narrative exploration of queer lives and experiences cannot be limited to substituting queer characters in place of the expected cis-het protagonists, but requires productively troubling the expectations of both genre and queer narratives (Henderson). As such, it is important to celebrate queer representation that includes happiness, love, romance, and fulfilling relationships as alternatives to the trope of “doomed” non-heterosexual lovers, while keeping a critical eye on how narrative conventions and social expectations may yet constrain queer characters’ trajectories.

Despite improvements in the availability and range of queer YA, there remains a dearth of bisexual adolescent protagonists (Jenkins and Cart). Even more problematically, research into YA’s “missing bisexuals” (Epstein) and the “missing B word” (Coletta) reveals that even when bisexual characters are included, they typically uphold damaging stereotypes rather than challenging them. For example, YA romance narratives that conclude with two characters committing to a loving, meaningful sexual relationship typically involve the “compulsory binarization” (Coletta 86) of bisexual characters, who then become mislabelled or interpreted as either straight, gay, or lesbian depending on the gender of their partner. Compulsory binarisation thus reifies monosexism by designating gender-plural desires as temporary and/or unimportant to a character’s ongoing identity and experiences, such that the inclusion of bisexual characters can be insufficient for queering romance conventions or challenging stereotypes.

The intertwining of genre narratives with new possibilities for queer characters’ lives and experiences can also test or reinvent other popular tropes. One prevalent current YA trope that appears in a broad range of genres is the love triangle in which two potential lovers are attracted to the same protagonist. This trope also serves important narrative functions: for example, Kim Wilkins argues that “the ubiquitous teenage love triangle” (21) in fantasy YA supports the depiction of female protagonists not merely as desirable but as complex characters with wider “obligations not just to herself and the private world of her heart” (22). The love triangle can be an important element in how YA protagonists come to understand themselves in relation to other characters and society, as their ultimate choice of partner is not only informed by love or mutual attraction, but shaped by political and social contexts. Queer love triangles within genre fiction thus offer potential disruptions to generic expectations and romance conventions through the depiction of, resistance to, or complete reimagining of, oppressive political and social systems.

In this article, I extend previous analyses of stereotyped or essentialised bisexual characters by examining how romance conventions might be productively troubled by the

queer possibilities of gender-plural desires. I have selected texts that depict a love triangle including at least one bisexual character, published during the rapid rise in queer YA since 2010 and falling within categories of genre fiction that have traditionally featured heterosexual protagonists. In the following sections, I analyse Oliver's dystopian *Delirium* trilogy (2011-2013), TJ Klune's gay superhero action comedy *The Extraordinaries* (2020), Malinda Lo's *Adaptation* (2012) and *Inheritance* (2013) science-fiction duology, and Nic Stone's contemporary romantic comedy *Odd One Out* (2018). In these novels, the protagonists and love-interest characters are variously female, male, white, Black, and/or biracial, yet each novel differs significantly in its engagement with stereotyped gender roles, or intersections of race and sexuality. As my selection of texts and their analysis seeks to offer a broad view of the possibilities of gender-plural desires that might disrupt narrative and social expectations, there are many other themes within these texts, and queer YA more broadly, that merit further critical attention and many gaps remain. Finally, I have mostly chosen texts that have not already received significant scholarly attention. However, I have made an exception for *Delirium* because the authors of previously published criticism that I have been able to find have all assumed that Lena is heterosexual and it is pertinent to consider these readings in contrast to my queer interpretation.

BOY CRAZY? COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY AND THE POLITICS OF BI-ERASURE

Oliver's *Delirium* trilogy was published during the trend for YA dystopias that spanned from roughly 2008 to 2015. YA dystopian societies typically extrapolate the imagined consequences of recognisable political and social issues, such as climate change, consumerism, war and violence, reproductive rights, and biotechnological alterations to bodies, minds, and abilities, to "caution against the destructive politics and culture of the author's present" (Basu et al. 2). Furthermore, through the convention that the oppressive mechanisms of the regime are revealed, resisted, and possibly overthrown, adolescent readers are invited to consider the transformative potential of social action. However, these novels often limit which aspects of the society it is necessary to rebel against by centring adolescent protagonists who are typically "white, able-bodied, heterosexual, cis-gendered girls" (Green-Barteet and Coste 82). Where these protagonists only notice oppressive aspects of the regime that impinge on them personally, other systems, such as racism or ableism, go unnoticed and thus are not the target of the rebellion, nor portrayed as in need of transformation. Furthermore, the inclusion of a romance plot for the typically heterosexual protagonist leads to rebellions that privilege heterosexual freedom, rather than overthrowing the marginalisation of non-heterosexuality familiar in queer readers' "present dystopia" (Bacigalupi n.p.). As such, these supposedly liberatory endings can be problematic in assuming that once this 'freedom' is won, then somehow equality in general will follow without ever having to address the

specific ways that political and social power rests on the ordering of culturally constructed categories. Differences between heterosexist and queer readings of the *Delirium* trilogy illuminate differences in the perception of the mechanisms of oppression and, therefore, what it is necessary to rebel against.

The existing scholarly analyses of *Delirium* have focused, broadly, on either the dystopian control of adolescent female bodies and sexualities (Day; Childs; Hentges), or on the dystopian control of powerful emotions (Davis; Dudek). In the first category, the analyses of gender relations and/or control of adolescent female bodies and sexualities highlights important tensions in the text whereby the oppressive regime is overthrown but without overt resistance to structural gender inequalities. In the second category, Rocío Davis and Debra Dudek each consider the erasure of emotions as a powerful tool of dystopian control, highlighting the role of emotions in social cohesion and as a force for political change. While these works offer important critiques, and any text is open to numerous interpretations, the assumption that Lena is heterosexual diverts attention away from the dystopian construction of heterosexuality as inescapable. The premise of *Delirium* is that in the future, US scientists discover a disease called *amor deliria nervosa*¹ and, due to its dangerous effects, everyone undergoes the ‘cure’ (mandatory brain surgery) as close as possible to their 18th birthday. Around the same time, all 18-year-olds are issued with a list of opposite sex² matches from which they must choose someone to marry and produce the required number of children (*Delirium* 9-10). Women in this dystopia are expected to cook a family meal every evening, support their husband’s career, and raise the children they have been coerced into producing. Lena’s society is not only heterosexist, in that heterosexuality is assumed and privileged, but goes to draconian lengths to eliminate all possible desires, experiences, and relationships other than heterosexual. This political system can be understood as a portrayal of “compulsory heterosexuality [...] as a *political institution*” (Rich 637). Compulsory heterosexuality is useful concept for analysing the political, social, legal, and economic forces that have been used to convince citizens that heterosexual marriage and children are inevitable.

The ‘cure’ is depicted as a tool of political and social control that enforces the heteronormative life course, that is, the life course constructed as a teleological line of development that begins in childhood and continues through adolescence into a heterosexual adulthood of marriage and family life with children, who are raised to be heterosexual (Ahmed; Edelman). In mandating the heteronormative life course, Oliver’s dystopia constructs the cis-het nuclear family as the fundamental social unit, necessary for the perpetuation of a safe and stable society, thus legitimising the regime’s coercion of the population into heterosexuality. In the well-known and influential monograph *No Future:*

- 1 There is no specific definition of this disease. Although it is often interpreted as a term that conflates romantic love and desire, the ‘cure’ removes all emotions, including interest in hobbies, music, dancing, family, friendships, and so on.
- 2 The dystopian government identifies each individual as either male or female.

Queer Theory and the Death Drive (2004), Lee Edelman considers queer temporalities and proposes that queerness, or queer lives, do not conform to this “reproductive futurism” (3). Edelman suggests a “death” (30) of queer futurities and an emphasis on queer lives in the present that refute the normative life course and its reification of heterosexuality. Such a focus on queer experiences as events unfold destabilises monosexist pressures that appropriate bisexual desires as gay, lesbian, or straight, to render previous, or subsequent, desires for other genders as unimportant or temporary. Instead of alignment to stable binary categories that erase or de-legitimise the possibilities of gender-plural desires, the queer present delights in moments of disruption to normative expectations.

One such moment occurs when Lena’s perspective queers the formal events at her high school graduation. Although both Sara K. Day and Ann M. M. Childs analyse Lena’s friendship with Hana on heterosexist terms, Lena’s repeated lingering descriptions of Hana admit the possibility of queer desire. For example, Day interprets both Lena and Hana as heterosexual and, therefore, finds that Lena compares herself unfavourably to “her beautiful best friend Hana” (86) in terms that “privilege longstanding Western standards of beauty” (89), enforcing girls’ and women’s “experiences of doubt and insecurity about their physical appearances” (89). However, after they have their official photographs taken at graduation, Lena describes the picture of herself and Hana facing each other, Lena with her “mouth open, surprised, about to laugh” (*Delirium* 85) while Hana “has her eyes shut and her mouth open” (85). This description suggests that the girls appear as if they are about to kiss, offering a joyful disruption to heteronormative expectations. Looking at this image, Lena does not compare herself unfavourably to Hana, but sees herself as “[m]ore than pretty. Beautiful, even” (85). In perceiving herself as both desirable and desiring, Lena explains that the effect is because “Hana rubbed off on me” (85), using a phrase that is open to interpretation as a sexual innuendo and thus to a queer reading that associates Lena’s positive response with a pleasurable sexual experience. And yet, as they will be ‘cured’ shortly after graduation, Lena’s queer delight is forever suspended in the photograph as an unfulfilled possibility.

The absence of queer possibilities under compulsory heterosexuality is emphasised when Lena explains the binary construction of sexualities under the dystopian regime. Lena explains that sometimes ‘uncured’ teenagers act on their desires because

it’s biological, a result of the same kind of chemical and hormonal imbalances that occasionally lead to Unnaturalism, to boys being attracted to boys and girls to girls. These impulses, too, will be resolved by the cure. (47)

As only people under 18 are ‘uncured’, it is adolescent sexuality that is constructed as dangerous and in need of control, reprising a recurring theme in YA (Mason; Day; Kokkola). However, not all teenage sexuality is dangerous, as in Lena’s society the only possibilities are homosexuality or heterosexuality. Furthermore, the idea that homosexuality only happens

“occasionally” emphasises heterosexism that constructs heterosexuality as ‘natural’ and, therefore, homosexuality as unusual, unexpected, and somehow requiring explanation, while gender-plural desires, or other sexualities beyond the binary, do not exist at all. Many contemporary readers are likely to recognise the harmful stereotypes that rest on the “assumption of homosexuality as being unnatural” and “historic associations between homosexuality with forms of pathology and disease” (Gonick 131). These readers are also likely to be aware of dangerous and damaging conversion therapy programmes in the US that claim to ‘cure’ non-heterosexuality. As such, perhaps the narrative purpose of the description of “Unnaturalism” is to prime readers to anticipate what Lena herself will realise: that rebellion against this oppressive regime is necessary.

Yet Lena’s account of this government propaganda queers its binary construction of homo- and heterosexual. What prompts Lena to explain “Unnaturalism” is not a homosexual scandal, but a heterosexual one. Instead of positioning homo- and heterosexuality as opposites, Lena repeatedly associates them. Both desires are “a result of the *same* kind” (*Delirium* 47, emphasis added) of physical responses, *equally* likely to result in adolescents acting on their “impulses” (47), and both will be ‘cured’. This perspective is perhaps particularly revealing of bisexuality, whose desires “do not necessarily fall into the normalized gay/straight binary” (Coletta 86). Lena’s queerness admits the possibility of desires not confined to her society’s oppositional construction of sexualities such that, by paying attention to Lena’s descriptions of Hana and Alex, it becomes noticeable that she perceives and responds to them in remarkably similar ways. Lena frequently details how both Hana’s and Alex’s hair, eyes, mouths, and clothing draw her attention to each of their bodies, and both Hana and Alex use the same secret hand signal to indicate their secret feelings for Lena (*Delirium* 18, 141). Lena expresses a similar sense of connection to each of them, first describing how she feels with Hana as “[e]ven when we’re not talking, it’s like there’s an invisible cord tethering us together” (49) then, later, explaining that when she sees Alex, “there’s an invisible thread tethering us together” (213). The repeated idea of an invisible connection cannot simply refer to dangerous heterosexual adolescent desire because Lena describes her feelings for Hana in the same way, even using exactly the same phrase of “tethering us together”. If Lena’s narration is interpreted as articulating her desire for Alex, then the use of the same words and imagery demonstrates that she desires Hana, too.

However, under compulsory heterosexuality and monosexism, Lena recognises the impossibility of gender-plural desires and that she must orient towards Alex. This shift away from queer possibilities requires a process of “alignment” (Ahmed 562) towards the heteronormative life course, inviting consideration through Sarah Ahmed’s well-known phenomenological approach to orientations that theorises how lived experience directs attention to certain things while relegating others to the background. Through the ways that heterosexist contexts emphasise heteronormativity while ignoring or re-interpreting queer

perspectives, connections and relationships that depart from the “straight and narrow” (554), Ahmed posits “heteronormativity as a straightening device” (562). As Lena lives in such a heterosexist context, she recognises that orienting towards heterosexist expectations requires turning away from the lines, connections, and trajectories of gender-plural desires, such that she repeatedly associates her desire for Alex with death and dying: when Lena sees Alex unexpectedly she remarks: “blood stops flowing in my veins. My breath stops coming” (*Delirium* 118). Similarly, the first time Lena sees Alex shirtless she is aroused by his body (199) but, as she comments on his closeness, she thinks: “I can’t breathe, can’t move or speak or think” (200). Her physical response to Alex renders her in a death-like state. Lena’s submission to compulsory heterosexuality is emphasised as she relies on government propaganda to self-diagnose being ‘in love’ with Alex by reviewing her responses against a government-issued check list of the symptoms of *deliria* (*Delirium* 211-12). Although Lena desires Alex, she accepts the heterosexist authority of the regime to define this as the only legitimate trajectory and, thus, she also experiences the death of her queer desires.

For Lena’s best friend Hana, however, the forces of compulsory heterosexuality go unnoticed, such that she perceives the only curtailment to her freedom in this dystopia as a lack of choice. Concern with this choice dominates Hana’s narrative: she criticises the government because she wants to be able to “choose” (*Delirium* 18) her own (male) partner and she encourages Lena to attend illegal parties before they are ‘cured’ as it is their “last chance to choose” (96). Hana risks the *deliria* for a chance to choose a boy herself, rather than choosing a boy from the list issued to her by the government (18), but does not rebel against the heteronormative life course, mandatory child-bearing, or brain surgery without the patient’s consent. From this heterosexual character’s perspective, there is nothing but her own lack of choice to rebel against and this limited view dominates the rebellion in the trilogy. Even though Lena meets numerous ‘uncured’ characters as she travels around the East Coast, she encounters only one gay couple, no lesbians, and no queer characters who are not in a couple; everybody is cisgender, and no characters so much as reflect upon gender or sexuality despite escaping from a society entirely shaped by the cure and fear of the *deliria*. The lack of queer lives, identities, relationships, and experiences in the ‘uncured’ population enforces the construction of heterosexuality as the default, leaving Lena with no experiences that challenge dystopian heterosexism.

Furthermore the ‘choice’ of heteronormativity is constructed as inevitable in any society, troubling interpretations of the rebellion’s victory as ushering in the “freedom to choose who to love” (Dudek 168). Instead of imagining a “future society that evolves into one that has outlawed love” (Hentges 251), I suggest that Oliver’s trilogy imagines a society that has outlawed queerness. Indeed, explaining why the power of love and the desire to choose motivate a rebellion almost exclusively in the heterosexual population requires critical attention to the “straightening devices” (Ahmed 563) of compulsory heterosexuality. The trilogy concludes with Lena and Alex committing to a relationship and taking on the

guardianship of Lena's young niece, such that Lena accepts the same traditional heterosexual family arrangement that was previously mandated by the regime, suggesting a dismal view of the possibility that queer trajectories have opened up. The rebellion that ends the dystopian regime thus leaves readers to speculate about whether and how the start of "joy and freedom" (*Requiem* 341) might extend to all genders, sexualities, and relationships, when their previous marginalisation and erasure has gone unnoticed.

HEROES, VILLAINS, AND IS THE 'GOOD' BISEXUAL GAY?

In contrast to bi-invisibility in Lena's dystopia, the other novels I discuss depict characters who identify as bisexual and who are familiar with bi-negative stereotypes. Klune's superhero romp *The Extraordinaries* (2020) is narrated by the gay, 16-year-old protagonist, Nick, and is set in a fictional contemporary US city in which there are a small number of people with superpowers called 'extraordinaries'. Klune reprises conventional superhero and teenage love triangle plots by casting Seth and Owen as the 'extraordinaries' who occupy Nick's fantasies, and as rivals for Nick's affection in their 'everyday' personas. At first Nick is unaware that Seth is Pyro Storm or that Owen is Shadow Star, generating much of the comedy and charm in Klune's novel as these secret identities are obvious to Nick's friends, as well as to readers familiar with superhero conventions. Similarly, the romance plot plays out the YA convention of best friends falling in love as Nick is also unaware that Seth is in love with him. The novel is structured to contrast Seth and Owen in both plots, such that Nick not only has to work out who is the hero and who is the villain, but must also decide who is the best choice of romantic partner. As both Seth and Owen are bisexual, the depiction of these rival love-interest characters on the dichotomous terms of 'superhero versus supervillain' creates a problematic opposition in its construction of the 'good' and 'bad' bisexual.

In line with YA romance conventions, Nick must learn that attraction based on Owen's physical appearance, confidence, and flashiness are not what he really desires in a boyfriend, and that Owen is not a good choice of partner for him. To assist Nick in this realisation, Owen is portrayed to reinforce the bi-negative stereotypes of hyper-sexuality, selfishness, and attention-seeking. Nick admits that his desire for Owen is mostly physical as he "didn't necessarily like Owen as a person" (Klune 39). Similarly, Owen is more interested in attention than in a meaningful relationship as he attempts to provoke responses from Nick by wearing revealing clothing (234), making innuendos, and pretending that he and Nick are on a date despite knowing that Seth and Nick are beginning to explore their mutual attraction (290). Owen's questionable values as both supervillain and potential partner are reinforced when he tries to make Nick his side-kick (300, 304), emphasising that Owen can only imagine an unequal relationship in which he has greater power than his partner. Unlike Seth, Owen never comes out or identifies as any specific sexuality, although Nick explains

that “Owen had girlfriends [...] and then, somehow, he had Nick” (39).³ As such, although Owen dates Nick, he is not described as being particularly queer. Unlike Seth and Nick who, along with their two lesbian friends, form a core group of teenaged “queers of Centennial High” (61), Owen is part of the straight crowd. Owen only joins the protagonists during lunch breaks to taunt and provoke Nick and Seth, further emphasising that he is not ‘really’ queer but an attention-seeking “douchebag” (40, 121). This stereotyped depiction of Owen, who does not fit in either straight or queer spaces, demonstrates that a character does not need to identify explicitly as bisexual for readers to recognise the essentialised traits associated with bisexuality.

In contrast, Seth is portrayed as both ‘good’ bisexual and superhero, such that the reader anticipates that Seth will be the right choice of boyfriend for Nick. Seth is carefully disassociated from bi-negative stereotypes, for example through his wardrobe. Nick is physically attracted to Seth, but Seth’s choice of bow-ties provides an endearing alternative to Owen’s overtly sexual clothing. Seth similarly avoids attention in his superhero persona, unlike Owen/Shadow Star who conducts television interviews in an attempt to cast Seth/Pyro Storm as the villain. As a consequence, Nick only belatedly realises that Seth’s acts of heroism have gone unreported (240-241). In their discussions about starting a possible relationship, Seth truthfully assures Nick that he is not dating anyone and is still a virgin (e.g. 33, 136). Nick is also repeatedly assured by friends and relatives that Seth is only in love with him (e.g. 154, 193, 236, 286). Yet Nick is keenly aware that Seth is not gay and constantly demands to know if he has a “secret girlfriend and/or boyfriend” (33, 87, 122, 128, 135, 137, 148, 185, 252). Rather than accepting that Seth is attracted to more than one gender, this refrain emphasises that Nick does not believe the repeated assurances of his obvious devotion. Nick’s persistent questioning suggests that, having come out as bisexual, Seth’s desires must be relentlessly scrutinised by his potential lover. Even though Seth is disassociated from many bi-negative stereotypes, these stereotypes are simultaneously evoked as Seth’s bisexuality constructs his faithfulness as constantly in doubt.

The conventions of the romance and superhero plots that position Seth and Owen as opposites and rivals elide the tension between gender-plural desires and normativity. As Owen is both prototypical bisexual and violent supervillain, he is not only portrayed as unlikeable but as a queer danger to normativity, particularly as his hyper-sexuality is incompatible with Nick’s desire to find a loving partner with whom to “live happily ever after” (211). The attainment of “happily ever after” in the romance plot is important in portraying a happy, loving, fun, and meaningful queer relationship to teen readers, simultaneously evoking heterosexual romance narrative traditions and opening up fairy-tale endings to queer possibilities. Yet caution is needed to guard against the equation between homonormativity and queer futurities in YA, as the latter “will not be achieved by simply retelling and celebrating a single story” (Matos and Wargo 8). In *The Extraordinaries*,

3 Later scenes also infer that Owen has had sex with these girlfriends (Klune 142).

homonormativity is emphasised in Nick's first-person narration and the novel concludes with a sweetly romantic depiction of Nick and Seth, who start their loving relationship after sharing "the only first kiss that mattered" (Klune 372). However, the treatment of bisexuality in this conventional ending is problematic, creating a tension between positive queer representation and the use of romance narrative conventions that uphold monosexism and privilege a normative life course of marriage and family. Although Seth is in love and faithful to Nick, his social acceptability is achieved by rendering his bisexuality invisible, particularly as he never mentions attraction to other genders, eliding queer possibilities and the plurality of desires as fundamental to bisexuality. In the context of bi-negativity, many bisexuals attempt to avoid stigma and the loss of community by assimilating to the hetero-homosexual spectrum and 'passing' as another sexuality (McLean n.p.). As bi-negative stereotypes are part of Seth's world, and as Nick seems to be the only character who knows that Seth is bisexual, Seth's ability to 'pass' as gay not only ensures his inclusion in the queer community, but is crucial to the depiction of his character as a good partner for Nick within normative romance conventions.

"HUMANS... WE DON'T NORMALLY DO THIS": BISEXUALITY AS NON-HUMAN DESIRE

Lo's science-fiction duology, comprising *Adaptation* (2012) and *Inheritance* (2013), also depicts a bisexual character who has super-human abilities. The experiences, desires, and dilemmas of Lo's queer characters are intertwined with the science-fiction narrative as Reese, the bisexual teen protagonist, negotiates both the discovery that the US government has covered up the existence of aliens, and her attraction to both David and Amber (who is an alien). Alex Henderson provides an adept discussion of the duology to argue that Lo "weaves a uniquely queer story of coming out and self-discovery in with a genre story" (14). In *Adaptation*, David and Reese are almost killed in a car accident but are saved by an alien "adaptation procedure" (380) that transforms them into human-alien hybrids, after which Reese meets Amber and begins to experience gender-plural desires. (Interestingly, David remains heterosexual despite undergoing the same procedure and developing the same alien abilities as Reese.) The coming-out narrative is thus initiated by the encounter with aliens that changes Reese's and David's physical and mental abilities and their expectations for, and experiences in, sexual relationships. However, designating bisexuality as non-human limits queer disruptions to normative expectations as the novels depict mainstream social structures as immutable and inevitably human.

Although the duology imaginatively explores the presence of aliens and alien technology on Earth, it is set within a recognisable contemporary US society. As such, when Reese begins to realise that she desires Amber as well as David, she grapples with heterosexual male privilege that has fetishised and appropriated women's bisexuality. Reese

associates the term 'bisexual' with "girls on reality TV making out in front of guys" (*Adaptation* 153) and worries that David (as a straight man) "might think that she'd be up for threesomes or that she'd dump him for a girl" (254). These essentialising assumptions that de-legitimise women's gender-plural desires reflect that threesomes between one (heterosexual) man and two (bisexual) women are "encoded as heterosexual through the iconic, hegemonic sexual narrative" of heterosexual men's "ultimate fantasy of sexual satisfaction and supreme proof of his sexual prowess" (Sheff 626). This well-known cultural narrative erases the queerness of bisexuality, only legitimising women's desires in so far as they can be co-opted for straight men's gratification. Reese is understandably reluctant to identify as bisexual as she explains: "I don't want people to think that about me" (*Adaptation* 153). However, like Seth, Reese is disassociated from bi-negative stereotypes, particularly hyper-sexuality. Reese begins the first novel not wanting to date or kiss anyone, although she has a crush on David. After Reese comes out as bisexual, she assures Amber "I don't want to date people. I want to date you, and I want to date David" (*Inheritance* 443), emphasising her interest in Amber and David as specific people over the assumption that she would be interested in sex with anyone.

This choice of partners creates a dilemma for Reese as she realises that she cannot date either David or Amber without feeling dishonest, as she would be denying her feelings for the other one (Amber and David are not involved with each other). Reese spends a lot of time considering David's and Amber's feelings, and her discussions with Amber make explicit for adolescent readers relationship structures other than coupledness. Testing such alternatives in YA opens up possibilities that include "queer people who cannot or do not want to succeed and thrive within the normative parameters of their respective cultures" (Matos and Wargo 7). As such it is not unproblematic that the only alternatives to normativity in Lo's duology exist outside of human⁴ culture as the alien, Amber, makes the suggestion that Reese dates both her and David. Amber explains that triadic relationship structures and gender fluidity are "not that unusual. Not for us [aliens]" (Lo, *Inheritance* 341). Reese protests that such experiences and relationships are unusual for humans, apparently unaware of cultures and social groups outside the US mainstream in which monogamy is not a given. The separation of the aliens' queerness from the universalised 'human' culture is emphasised as David and Amber can only accept Reese dating both of them specifically because they are not humans. Although Reese's desires for Amber and David are legitimised in the terms of romance conventions, as they are both in love with her (440, 444), it is only due to their alien psychic and empathetic abilities that Amber and David can be confident that Reese really does love them both in return, leading to their acceptance of the triadic arrangement. Overall, the

4 Lo's novel follows the US YA speculative fiction convention that universalises contemporary US culture as 'human' culture. See also, for example, *Supergirl* in which saving 'humans' and the 'planet' usually revolves around saving Americans living in one US city.

marginalisation of bisexuality is reinforced, as only non-humans can desire more than one gender, or be assured of their bisexual partner's feelings.

Although Lo deploys the “futuristic alien race to challenge the norms of contemporary society as in classic science fiction novels” (Henderson 14), this tactic is problematic as the two cultures do not reassess their norms and conventions in light of their knowledge of alternative possible systems, but are constructed in rigid opposition to each other. This division is emphasised through universalising claims about humans, as well as through the racist abuse that Reese, David, and Amber experience after their alien presence is reported on the news. Lo carefully delineates the racism that each of the three characters experiences as inseparable from the hatred directed at their genders and sexualities. The specificity of each attack recognises that “sexuality is intersectional, not extraneous to other modes of difference” (Eng et al. 1). As Reese is white and has not previously experienced racism, she is shocked by the viciousness of the attacks, particularly against David who is Asian-American and alien-hybrid, and she comes to realise her own white privilege (Lo, *Inheritance* 150). Even though David is heterosexual and adheres to the traits of hegemonic masculinity in the US high school YA context, such as being good at sports, the abuse he is subjected to incorporates racist myths to attack his sexuality and masculinity (15, 287). Amber is particularly targeted, as she is exoticised as teenaged girl, alien, and lesbian. Amber is subjected to racist, sexist, and homophobic abuse and only saved from a violent assault and attempted rape by the interventions of David and another character (394). As the attack is carried out by the soldiers who kidnap Amber, Reese, and David because the US government wants to weaponise their alien abilities, racism, sexism, and queerphobia are depicted as legitimised within mainstream institutions.

However, the oppositional narrative constructs these oppressive social systems as immutable and enduring, rather than contingent and open to social transformation, and, thus, racism and queerphobia are reduced to issues of individual personal feelings. Amber emphasises this perspective as she tells Reese that non-heteronormativity is discriminated against “because humans are jealous all the time” (341). In other words, bi-erasure is not produced through political or social forces of monosexism and white male heterosexual privilege, or stereotypes that enforce common misperceptions, including the notion that the bisexual partner's desire for another gender will bring about the end of the relationship. Rather than using the more advanced alien race to queer or disrupt, resist, or reimagine culturally constructed categories, or using their access to the mainstream media for queer activism in coalition with anti-racism, Reese, David, and Amber leave Earth for Amber's home planet. The potential for social transformation in the duology is thus limited by its structure that sustains an opposition between human, white heteronormativity versus the queer and/or non-white aliens. The protagonists' departure completes the dislocation of queer desires from liveable human society, although queer possibilities await in Amber's galaxy. The cold offer of hope in this conclusion is that de-contextualised personal feelings of

racism and queerphobia will just go away, because aliens have mixed their DNA with humans' so it is only a few million years before everyone will share the protagonists' ability to sense other people's experiences and emotions. The alien elements unhelpfully suggest that a more queer and less racist future requires no political or social activism, eliding the constructedness and thus mutability of political and social systems to offer queer teen readers a bleak perspective on prospects for change.

“NOT THAT THERE’S ANYTHING WRONG WITH BISEXUALITY”: SOCIAL ACCEPTABILITY AS BI-ERASURE

Stone's romantic comedy, *Odd One Out* (2018), similarly features queer and non-white protagonists in its love triangle plot. The novel begins with a familiar romance set-up: Coop is waiting for his best friend (Jupiter) to notice that he is in love with her so that they can begin a relationship. However, Jupiter identifies as a lesbian. When a new character, Rae, joins their group, she is a potential partner for Jupiter but, as she previously had a boyfriend, Rae is also a potential partner for Coop. Coop, Rae, and Jupiter each narrate one third of the novel, with comedy and drama produced through each storyline as the teens negotiate their friendships and desires. In contrast to a multiple-point-of-view novel that might alternate or intertwine the perspectives of its main characters, Stone uses the triptych structure to sustain the centrality of the character Jupiter. Both Coop's and Rae's narratives buttress Jupiter's shift from identifying as a lesbian, to enjoying sex with both male and female partners, and then deciding that “no labels fit” (Stone 289). Jupiter's perspective completes the last third of the book, lending this character the final authority over the narrative. Jupiter is also bestowed with the greatest authority on matters of gender and sexuality as she repeatedly proclaims herself to be a feminist, is an active member in the queer community outside of school as well as at school as the president of the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA), and has gay parents. However, Jupiter's purported knowledge of sexual labels and identities constrains her from imagining queer possibilities that would destabilise these culturally contingent categories. Rather than promoting a notion of queer that celebrates and revels in its distance from constructed norms, Jupiter works hard to ensure that queer never disrupts the construction of the homo-heterosexual scale, or the privileging of certain sexualities over others.

The emphasis on personal concerns and experiences in the protagonists' love lives within romantic-comedy conventions has the effect of relegating social contexts to the background. Whereas Lo detailed the queerphobic and racist abuse directed at her protagonists, Stone maintains the familiar beats of romantic comedy by quickly dispensing with negative and harmful experiences from sources external to the protagonists' preoccupation with their relationships. For example, the protagonist Jupiter is called a

“dumb dyke” by another child at school when she is seven years old, but after Coop “kicked his ass [... Jupiter] hasn’t heard a homophobic slur since” (11). However, Stone acknowledges that the fictionalised setting of Atlanta is perhaps unusually progressive, as Rae explains that both she and her sister were subjected to “standard anti-Asian” (114) bullying in their previous school in Alabama. This experience is suggested as contributing to Rae’s concern with conforming to normative social expectations, as she explains that the racism only lessened “because I started to look less Asian, [and...] I got into cheering” (114). In response, Jupiter remarks: “Those fuckers” (114). This comment evades deeper consideration of the structures and systems of the dominant social order, including white privilege, that produces both the abuse and the expectation of abuse as “standard”. Yet this evasion also leaves space for Stone to portray the protagonists’ positive experiences of growing up in Black and bi-racial households; for example, in scenes in which the teens and their parents prepare and share food for celebrations and special occasions (e.g. 115). Again, a tension is created in Stone’s novel between positive representation and inclusion of queer and non-white protagonists in genre fiction that traditionally centres heterosexual stories, and the positioning of these characters within romantic-comedy conventions that diminish attention to wider political or social contexts.

In particular, the narrative convention of taking socially constructed categories as given while the protagonists’ love-lives unfold within these normative parameters is problematic for the depiction of bisexuality. In *Odd One Out*, bisexuality is marginalised at both character and structural levels as not being a ‘real’ sexuality, particularly compared to hetero- and homosexuality. Although the protagonists are aware of sexualities other than gay, lesbian, or straight, they do not question the idea that categories along the homo-heterosexual scale contain all possible sexualities. In an early conversation with Coop about Rae’s sexuality, Jupiter speculates that Rae might be “equal-opportunity” (59). Jupiter’s comment erroneously locates bisexuality at the mid-point of the homo-heterosexual scale, thus marginalising bisexuality as the point furthest away from the two legitimate sexualities. This characterisation of bisexuality as ‘in the middle’, along with the slang term “equal-opportunity”, reinforces stereotypes of undecidedness and promiscuity, and is emphasised in the novel’s structure that places Rae’s narrative in the centre, literally in between Coop and Jupiter. Although the novel includes discussions of different possible sexualities, there is no consideration that some sexualities are not located on the homo-heterosexual scale at all, or of queer possibilities not delimited by labels.

As gender-plural desires can be seen as a threat to monosexism and the cultural valorisation of monogamy, bisexuals often experience stigma, marginalisation, and bi-phobia from queer as well as heterosexual communities. This de-legitimisation also occurs in the bi-negative attitudes that are expressed by adolescent lesbian (Kneen 365) and gay (Epstein 111) YA characters, and Jupiter is one such character who enforces the marginalisation and erasure of gender-plural desires. When Rae realises she is attracted to

male characters as well as to Jupiter, she begins to question her assumption that she is heterosexual and attempts to discuss these feelings with Jupiter. However, Jupiter repeatedly silences and mislabels Rae as straight, even after Rae kisses her (e.g. Stone 197, 202, 211). In another scene, Jupiter constantly interrupts Rae's attempts to articulate her gender-plural desires, and tells her seven times that she is not really attracted to both men and women (164-167). As a lesbian, Jupiter legitimises her repeated denials that Rae is able to desire more than one gender because of her own sense of social responsibility to challenge the construction of female-female desire as temporary, experimental, or 'just a phase'. In other words, Jupiter's repeated, significant acts of bi-erasure are produced by, and reify, her monosexist belief that the only legitimate sexuality in which women desire other women is lesbian. Rae, in contrast, is denied the authority to articulate her gender-plural desires from beyond this binary. Although being silenced by Jupiter leaves Rae "shaking [...] angry [...] *I can't even be vulnerable with the one person who could help me navigate it*" (173), her gender-plural desires remain unspoken. Rae only comes out as bisexual in a letter to Jupiter, after Rae has moved away and thus restored the dyad of Jupiter and Coop at the end of the novel. Rae's silence, liminality, and ultimate absence not only affirm Jupiter's greater voice and authority but also ensure the stability and immutability of the homo-heterosexual scale.

In this context, it is not surprising that Jupiter faces a dilemma over her label after she enjoys sex with Coop, and then her lesbian friend, Bre, then confesses: "I know I'm supposed to like one more than the other" (263). However, what Jupiter knows is that monosexism excludes the possibility of 'really' desiring more than one gender. Jupiter does not challenge bi-negative stereotypes or reflect upon the hierarchical ordering of sexualities that privileges heterosexuality, accepts homosexuality, and erases bisexuality. Nor does she attempt to discuss her feelings or fears with her best friends or parents, despite acknowledging that she is in the remarkable situation of having "gay dads and super-accepting people like Coop [...] that] made it possible for me to not really struggle with that part of myself [identifying as lesbian]" (112). Instead, Jupiter lies to them all. This behaviour is rationalised in the novel as Jupiter expects that, if it became public knowledge that she had sex with Coop as well as Bre, then the lesbian community would shun her (242-43) and her heterosexual "friends will treat me like some vile betrayer" (242), proposing a hollow construction of allyship dependent upon homosexual conformity with heteronormative expectations. Jupiter anticipates that everyone she knows, regardless of their gender or sexuality, would call her "a slut and a fraud and [she will be] treated like days-old dog shit on the bottom of someone's shoe" (242). These fears make clear that Jupiter is well aware of bi-negativity but submits to this as inevitable without reflecting on stereotypes or considering the possibility of resisting normative social expectations.

Jupiter finally admits to herself that it is dishonest to continue to identify as a lesbian as she enjoys sex with men and women, so she begins to search for a new label, but one that will not jeopardise her social status. Jupiter looks up 'bisexual' and 'pansexual' on the

internet, then decides not to use the term bisexual as she claims that she does not know what it means (265, 280). In light of the depiction of Jupiter's gender-plural desires, active role in the queer community, position as the GSA president, and numerous discussions about desire and sexuality throughout the novel, this claim seems remarkable, particularly as her sudden denial of knowledge about sexualities occurs only when she would otherwise have to consider a possibility beyond the entrenched monosexist scale. The refusal to recognise that 'bisexual' articulates gender-plural desires "sends a strong message [...] that bisexuality is not an available or legitimate identity option" (McLean n.p.). Jupiter reinforces the delegitimisation of bisexuality as she concerns herself with shopping for labels, rather than queering culturally constructed categories either in public or in her private relationships. At the conclusion of the novel, Jupiter announces at a GSA meeting that she is "dropping my label" (Stone 288), no longer identifying as lesbian. Although any person or YA character may identify as any sexuality, the multiple acts of bi-erasure in this novel emphasise that Jupiter's announcement is aimed at distancing herself from the stigma of openly identifying as bisexual. Jupiter is a particularly problematic character as she does not attempt to mobilise her supportive family, queer network, or social status to discuss or disrupt the construction of sexualities along the hetero-homosexual scale, offering little hope for less confident queer teens living in less accepting circumstances. Through its sustained scrutiny of sexual identity labels, desires, and relationships, Stone's novel contemplates constructed categories but, ultimately, ends up reinforcing rather than challenging them. Indeed, the final claim that there is no label that describes desire for more than one gender emphasises that Jupiter's social status can *only* be sustained if she publicly upholds the constructed hetero-homosexual scale.

CONCLUSION

I have discussed four novels that depict bisexual characters in teenage love triangles, including queer teen readers in this popular trend and improving queer representation in genre fiction traditionally dominated by heterosexual characters. However, tensions can arise between inclusion and positive representation when romance conventions and dichotomous plot structures are used to depict characters whose desires evade binary relations. Both Lena and Seth have the plurality of their desires rendered invisible as they commit to relationships while Jupiter denies her desires in public, and although Reese is able to find love with two partners, they are unable to live on this planet. Seth and Reese identify as bisexual and challenge bi-negative stereotypes in being neither selfish nor promiscuous, yet both characters are depicted as the exception, and as exceptional as they have superhuman abilities. Throughout, the depiction of bisexuality remains essentialised by its association with hyper-sexuality, such that gender-plural desires are either rendered

invisible (Lena and Seth) or else require multiple partners whether characters are single (Jupiter) or in a relationship (Reese). Limiting the significance of bisexual experiences to implications for normative relationship expectations suggests that the only queer thing about having a bisexual partner is either constant vigilance against their attraction to someone of a different gender, or accepting that they will have sex with other people, obscuring an understanding of the variety and complexity of bisexual experiences. Further positive representation of gender-plural desires could include the hurt of distrust, being mislabeled or 'passing' as a different sexuality, and the potential loss of queer community when in a seemingly heterosexual relationship, as well as the playful negotiation of desire in relationships without defaulting to open, triadic, or poly relationship structures.

Finally, essentialising bisexuality effectively disavows that stereotyped traits are culturally constructed, thus naturalising the social and personal forces that pressure bisexuals to align with or 'pass' as gay, lesbian, or straight. Despite each novel offering a different resolution to the love triangle dilemma, they each suggest that current social systems, including monosexism, are immutable and enduring. In *Delirium*, heterosexism and monosexism survive the rebellion, while in *The Extraordinaries* the 'good bisexual' ensures that mainstream society continues undisturbed by the supervillain. In both Lo's duology and Stone's romantic comedy, bi-negativity, homophobia, and racism are overwhelming and impossible to speak back to, even with the assistance of an advanced alien culture, an extensive support network, and from a position of authority within both queer and straight communities. There is, and can be, no monolithic story of bisexuality or the bisexual life course. Yet the queer possibilities of gender-plural desires remain to be explored beyond the boundaries of stereotypes, monosexism, and normative relationship expectations.

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