

# Asexuality and the Potential of Young Adult Literature for Disrupting Allonormativity

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the representation of asexuality and norms around sex and sexual orientation in contemporary English-language UK and US YA literature. In its multiplicity and radical potential for transforming regimes of compulsory sexuality, asexuality challenges the pervasive allosexual regime of allonormativity (the assumption that all human beings ‘naturally’ experience sexual attraction to other people). In light of the pervasive histories of erasure of asexuality and the still relative scarcity of explicit representations of asexuals in entertainment media and literature, inclusive representation and the explicit naming and recognition of asexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation worthy of respect and recognition are crucial. While sexual attraction is pervasively assumed to be inherent to all humans, sex and sexual attraction have especially been regarded as inherent and necessary to adolescence. Allonormative traditions and conventions have predominantly underpinned Western YA literature, although this has been increasingly changing with the growing recognition and representation of ace (asexual) and acespec (people on the asexual spectrum) characters in recent YA fiction, especially in independent publishing and e-publishing. This article aims to contribute to the recognition and analysis of the representation and mediation of asexuality in contemporary YA literature, and to

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explore the liberatory and inclusive potential of YA fiction to expose, problematise, and disrupt allonormative norms and hegemonies around sex and sexual orientations.

## INTRODUCTION

In this article, I explore the representation of asexuality in recent YA novels to establish the potential of YA fiction to interrogate, problematise, and disrupt norms around sexuality, sexual orientation, and allonormativity (the assumption that all human beings experience sexual attraction to other people). Initially defined as “having no sexual attraction to a partner of either sex” (Bogaert 279), understandings of asexuality have evolved and an asexual is now broadly defined as “someone who experiences little or no sexual attraction” (Siggy n.p.). Ace (asexual) and acespec (asexual spectrum) people experience little, no, weak, or infrequent sexual attraction, or only under specific circumstances. It is estimated that roughly one percent of the world’s population identifies as ace or acespec (Bogaert 284). In its fluidity and multiplicity, asexuality challenges the allonormative regime of “compulsory sexuality”, which infuses both heteronormative and queer spaces and which assumes that “to participate fully in social life, a person must perform both sex and a desire for sex” (Przybylo 188). Though asexuality disrupts both heteronormativity and homonormativity, it is “almost entirely absent in queer, feminist, and critical sexuality studies” (Przybylo and Cooper 298). I aim to contribute to the recognition and analysis of the representation and mediation of asexuality in contemporary English-language YA fiction, and to explore the liberatory and inclusive potential of YA fiction to expose, problematise, and challenge allonormative norms and hegemonies around sex and sexual orientations.

Asexuality can be said to have come into public consciousness as an orientation around 2001, although as a concept, it can be traced back to at least the late nineteenth century. Yet, the existence, complexity, and diversity of the asexual spectrum and its treatment in the literary imagination are still insufficiently addressed and under-researched. Indeed, as asexuality is “one of the most under-researched, misunderstood, underrepresented sexualities of the 21st century” (Pinto 333), I want to begin this article with a brief overview. Asexuality is as much a specific orientation within a spectrum of (a)sexuality as it is a spectrum itself. For example, demisexual people experience sexual attraction specifically for people with whom they have an emotional, romantic bond, while graysexuals (gray-A, gray ace, or grace people) “expect their relationships to not involve sexual attraction, don’t see their relationships in terms of sexual attraction, or very rarely experience sexual attraction” (Decker 36). Simultaneously, asexuality is an orientation that cuts across gender identities and other sexual identities, and ace and acespec people may also identify as bisexual, lesbian, gay, pansexual, straight, monogamous, and/or polyamorous. In addition to the axis of sexual attraction, many ace communities deploy the framework of the “split attraction

model” (Sexuality Wiki n.p.), which sees both sexual and romantic orientations as being separate entities that can, but do not have to, conform with one another: e.g. aromantics (aros) experience little or no romantic attraction to others, homoromantics are attracted to the same sex or gender, and a demiromantic is attracted to a person only after forming a deep emotional bond with that person. Any combination of sexual orientation and romantic orientations can exist: e.g. graysexual/aromantic, asexual/demiromantic. The long-held tradition in the Western imagination of conflating sexual orientation with romantic orientation is pervasive and it is unfortunately still relatively rare for literature and media to explicitly distinguish between these different orientations and to see them as separate from one another.

Allonormative traditions and conventions have predominantly underpinned Western YA literature, although this situation has been changing with the increasing recognition and representation of ace and acespec characters in recent YA fiction, especially in independent publishing and e-publishing. YA literature to date that involves asexual characters has tended to present aromantic asexual (aroace) characters or characters on the asexual spectrum whose romantic orientations are not explicitly identified or stated; although more acknowledgment and representation of a diversity of romantic orientations has been increasingly occurring in YA fiction, especially in the last five years. Affirmation of the legitimacy and diversity of the asexual spectrum is vital for ace, acespec, aro, arospec, and questioning young readers to feel seen and welcomed, as well as for accomplishing validation and acceptance of these still misunderstood and marginalised orientations by allosexuals (people who are not asexual). First, I will examine the challenges which allonormativity poses for YA literature’s efforts to conceptualise asexuality and to represent ace and acespec characters in light of the deep-rooted paradigm of associating adolescence with compulsory sexuality. I will then explore the importance of explicit, authentic representation of ace and acespec characters in light of the relative gap in recognising and affirming asexuality and the asexual spectrum in society, media, and culture. I will then examine how recent YA fiction has been increasingly representing ace and acespec characters as well as the extent to which contemporary YA novels involving ace and acespec characters perpetuate, resist, or disrupt allonormative practices which have been traditionally involved in representing asexuality in literature. In my conclusion, I observe that, while some allonormative ideas and discourses do still persist, YA fiction offers a powerful and empowering potential for interrogating allosexual regimes and for affirming asexuality as a legitimate and respected orientation.

## ADOLESCENCE AND ALLONORMATIVITY

While sex and sexual attraction are widely assumed to be inherent to all humans, these have been particularly regarded in Western societies as ‘natural’ and ‘necessary’ parts of adolescence, and widely used to symbolise the border crossing between adolescence and adulthood. Although sexual content in literature for children has traditionally been resisted and not overtly recognised, sexual attraction and innate interest in sexual attraction are expected and assumed aspects of the ostensibly hormone-driven teenager and of YA narratives. In her influential Foucauldian study of the power relations between adults and teenagers, *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (2000), Roberta Seelinger Trites explored how sexuality as a locus of power is both exalted and shamed in YA literature. She also charted how this power structure is based upon adults’ desire to see adolescent sexuality as part of their own sexual pleasure as well as their wish to regulate this part of adolescence to maintain hierarchical power. Asserting that literary representations of adolescent sexuality are primarily intended for the didactic purposes of controlling youngsters’ libidos and patrolling the borders of adulthood, and because “sexual potency is a common metaphor for empowerment” in YA literature, she concluded that YA texts are “replete with sex” (84). Trites’ model conflates sexual attraction, sexual activity, sexual desire, and sexual curiosity and, regardless of sexual orientation, it presents sexual attraction and sex as naturally and innately central to adolescence and adolescent experience:

Teenage characters in YA novels agonize about every aspect of human sexuality: decisions about whether to have sex, issues of sexual orientation, issues of birth control and responsibility, unwanted pregnancies, masturbation, orgasms, nocturnal emissions, sexually transmitted diseases, pornography, and prostitution. The occasional teenage protagonist even quits agonizing about sexuality long enough to enjoy sex, but such characters seem more the exception than the rule. But for many characters in YA novels, experiencing sexuality marks a rite of passage that helps define themselves as having left childhood behind. (84)

Significantly, but not very surprisingly in light of allonormative trajectories and histories, there has been relatively little YA scholarly recognition of, and attention to, asexuality as a sexual orientation in YA literature to date. Again and again, compulsory sexuality seems to be assumed in ideological frameworks and concepts of adolescence and adolescent being. In their 2006 volume, *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004*, Christine A. Jenkins and Michael Cart posed important challenges for twenty-first-century YA “GLBTQ” literature: “Does it offer fresh insights into the lives of GLBTQ people? [...] Or is it the same old story, told in the same old

way that readers have encountered countless times in the past?” (166). Significantly, the existence or terms of asexual or asexuality are not recognised or included in that influential publication. The same authors’ updated and expanded 2018 version, *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature*, does contain a reference to Julie Sondra Decker’s 2014 non-fiction text, *The Invisible Orientation: An Introduction To Asexuality*. However, there is no mention of asexuality in fiction in *Representing the Rainbow*, despite the increasing number of novels for young people with ace and acespec characters and the growing community of #ownvoices ace and acespec authors during the twelve years since the publication of Jenkins and Cart’s first volume. Similarly, while the third edition of Cart’s *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism* (2016) offers an “updated and expanded coverage of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex fiction” (xi) and argues that “we need [...] to look at the cautious and halting evolution of young adult literature’s attitude toward and treatment of sex” (176), there is no acknowledgement or analysis of asexuality in YA literature in the book. Likewise, Cart and Joan Kaywell’s 2018 article, “The History of Queer Young Adult Literature”, makes no mention or recognition of asexuality or the asexual spectrum despite its affirmation of the “growing number of queer books [that] described life after coming out and featured characters who ‘just happened’ to be gay and whose homosexuality was only one aspect of their character”, and its celebration of queer YA fiction “commanding a place at the center stage of YA literature” (5-6).

The majority of YA scholarship on adolescent sexual orientations and sexualities has continued to assert similar allonormative and allosexual assumptions about sexual attraction and sex symbolising the border crossing between adulthood and adolescence. In her 2013 book, *Fictions of Adolescent Carnality: Sexy Sinners and Delinquent Deviants*, Lydia Kokkola briefly explains that “texts which celebrate the adolescent’s right to be asexual have not featured in the corpus since it was comprised of texts depicting sexually active and/or carnally desiring teens” (213). Yet, this does not resolve Kokkola’s underlying allonormative assumptions of the centrality of sexual attraction (which she terms as desire) for humans and especially for adolescents: that “carnal desire is as basic a human need as the need for physical shelter” (23), and that “adolescent fiction suggests that carnal desire is one of the best routes to self-knowledge” (97). Similarly, Gabrielle Owen in her 2015 article, “Toward A Theory of Adolescence: Queer Disruptions in Representations of Adolescent Reading”, states that “the category of adolescence itself, like the categories of gay and lesbian, cannot be untangled from sex, from desire, from the vulnerability that results from being defined so visibly by one’s sexuality” (114). The pervasive framing of sex and sexual attraction as fundamental to both adolescence and life itself is movingly exposed in the grim moment during Kathryn Ormsbee’s 2017 YA novel, *Tash Hearts Tolstoy*, when the heteroromantic ace protagonist’s English teacher declares during a lesson “that the motivation behind every single piece of literature is sex or death” which leads Tash to wonder if that means that “the only driving force left to me is *death*?” (268). Lee Edelman’s 1976 argument that an ideology

of “reproductive futurism” still tends to underpin the majority of YA literature – including “gay adolescent novels” – and that this doctrine strives to preserve the “absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations” (2) holds true.

The allosexual assumptions informing much of YA scholarship indicate the extent to which allonormativity can be so deeply embedded and normalised that even research dedicated to exploring and affirming queerness in youth literature may unconsciously or consciously contribute to overlooking, neglecting, or even erasing asexuality in youth narratives. The gravitational pressures of allonormativity are indeed formidable. While YA literature has not fully recognised the diverse spectrum of asexuality and it has, to date, had mixed success in confronting and dismantling allosexual assumptions, YA literature nevertheless affords a powerful opportunity and radical potential for challenging and disrupting the “same old story” of allonormativity. The next section thus expands on the importance of visibility of asexual representation and examines issues involved in the recent mediation and presentation of ace and acespec characters in popular culture and YA literature.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF ASEXUALITY REPRESENTATION**

In light of the extensive tactics and histories of erasure of asexuality, visibility and the reinterpretation of this orientation – “not as pathological deviance, faulty perception, or a product of oppression but as a source of different lives, pleasures, knowledge, and embodiments” (Kim 484) – are crucial. The equitable recognition and acceptance of asexuality within queer identities has been a key issue in this process: for example, transforming the frequent marginalisation of asexuality as an existing, valid sexual orientation within the traditional umbrella terms such as LGBT. Asexuality and the existence and experiences of ace and acespec people disrupt both heteronormativity and homonormativity, and the recognition of asexuality “can have explosive, widely generative effects, necessitating the addition of an ‘A’ in the sexuality studies field, in courses on gender and sexuality, in activist movements, and in discussions of minority representation and visibility” (Milks and Cerankoswki 3). Even in the more recent and ostensibly more inclusive acronyms such as LGBTQIA and LGBTQIAP+, the A, when explicitly included, usually appears at the end and is one of the few letters that represents multiple sections of the multiple communities – asexual, aromantic, and agender – and people do not always agree on who is being represented (for example, the belief that A stands for “ally” can still be widespread). Moreover, in the recent past, notable gay-rights commentators have literally laughed at the asexual awareness movement, saying: “you have the asexuals marching for

the right to not do anything. Which is hilarious! Like, you don't need to march for that right, you just need to stay home and not do anything" (Dan Savage qtd. in (A)sexual n.p.). Despite increasing representation and awareness of asexuality and this spectrum, visibility politics and the importance of respectful and authentic representation of asexuals in society, media, and culture are still key for the development of asexuality as a legitimate and affirmed orientation for both asexuals and allosexuals.

While there has been a slow but increasing number of canonical and explicitly-named characters in contemporary Western Anglophone television and animated television series (for example, the first explicitly asexual character on New Zealand TV during 2007-2012 in the soap opera, *Shortland Street*, and the asexual main character, Todd, in the 2014-2020 dark comedy Netflix series, *Bojack Horseman*), there are still relatively few figures who unambiguously and explicitly self-identify as ace or acespec or who describe their asexuality as a sexual orientation. Anna Kurowicka argues that the

ubiquity of the 'love plot' in popular culture contributes to the pervasive negative self-image of asexuals in two ways: firstly, it results in a very limited number of asexual characters and thus possible role models for people coming out as asexual, and secondly it determines the way the few existing asexual characters are constructed and presented. ("What's Sex Got to Do With It?" 5)

When characters do appear who do not have sex or who seem uninterested in sex, they all too often are represented as villainous, aberrant, or "broken" in some way and portrayed as "serial killers, aliens, mythical creatures, robots, or deeply damaged people who either have their lack of sexual interest used by the writers to show how strange or inhuman they are or are later 'saved' or 'made whole' by human emotion (in the form of a romantic relationship and sex)" (Decker 82). For example, the character of Sherlock Holmes has almost always been represented as uninterested in romantic or sexual activity and interested in his work to the exclusion of everything else. The sentient android Data from the television series, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and Sheldon Cooper from the US sitcom, *The Big Bang Theory*, exemplify this allonormative stereotype and the portrayal of asexuality as aberrant and inhumane. Tracing literary representations of this asexual figure of the "male genius, whose towering intellect prevents him from forming close emotional relationships with other people", Kurowicka notes the disturbing "conflation of this sexual identity with, if not always sociopathy, then at least emotional distance and coldness" ("Lost and Confused?" 1, 8). In her article, "Contradictions in the Representation of Asexuality: Fiction and Reality", Gwendolyn Osterwald likewise observes the allonormative paradigm of how asexual characters in contemporary film and television all too often have "something odd and extraordinary that sets them apart from the average person and makes them interesting. Without these

extraordinary traits, screenwriters seem to say, the viewers cannot look at asexual characters as whole, interesting or compelling” (42).

In light of the relative gap of explicit representations of asexuality in society, media, and culture, representation and explicit naming of asexuality matter hugely to ace and acespec people. As Kristina Gupta states, the only difference between “an asexual character and a character that just doesn’t pursue sex, is that one of them is named. Because naming is so vital to asexual representation [...] saying that one word – asexual – offers a progressive intervention into legitimating this identity position” (44). Yet, because of asexuality’s absence, which acts as “symbolic annihilation” (Gerbner and Gross 182) in popular culture, the perception of asexuality as an absence of sexuality, and the conflation of asexuality with celibacy, most characters in literature and media who do not exhibit sexual attraction and therefore could be interpreted by viewers and readers as being asexual are not explicitly described or identified as ace or acespec. Instead, “most characters that could exist on the asexual spectrum do so through coded hints, clues and insinuations, not outright statements” (Gupta 16). This pattern of relative invisibility and erasure is consistent with Sarah Sinwell’s argument that “whereas narratives of homosexuality, bisexuality, transgenderism, and transsexuality often revolve around the idea of ‘coming out’”, asexual characters “do not often ‘name’ themselves as such. Indeed, one of the reasons asexuality may be unseen (and unheard) [in media] is precisely because it is not recognised as a cultural category or a sexual identity” (168).

One possibility for asexual readers seeking representation in YA texts is to adopt the practice of seeking out asexual moments and “asexual resonances”: what Ela Przybylo and Danielle Cooper refer to as a “queerly asexual reading method” in which asexuality can be understood “outside of its current definitional parameters of unchangeability, inherentness, nonchoice, self-identification, heteronormativity, and maleness” (303). This practice of seeking asexual resonances includes ace coding. As Lynn O’Connacht observes, “heavily implying yet never outright stating that a character is asexual” creates a situation of most books on recent asexual reading lists falling “into three different levels of representation: explicitly labelled (or ‘I’m asexual!’), ace coded (‘I’m not interested in sex!’) or Word of God (‘I, the author, say this character is asexual even though it’s not clear on the page’)” (“Asexual and Aromantic Tropes in Fiction” n.p.). For example, Katniss Everdeen of *The Hunger Games* has been ace coded by readers and critics who have noted her profound discomfort with being forced to perform romantic and sexual interest for her survival, and how important family and friendship are to her rather than potential lovers. In a series of tweets over three weeks in 2019 hashtagged #TheAceSpecGames, YA author Rosiee Thor presented textual evidence from the first book to undermine the allosexual perception that Katniss is “unemotional and cold” (@RosieeThor n.p.). Arguing that Katniss is “just not into your allonormative shit. Learn the difference”, Thor concluded that “Katniss is arospec for sure – most likely demiro or grayro – and ace” (@RosieeThor n.p.). Other characters in YA literature

who have been coded as ace or acespec by readers seeking asexual representation include Luna Lovegood and Charlie Weasley from the *Harry Potter* books, and Artemis from Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* series (Karlan n.p.). Similarly, the protagonist in Ellen Wittlinger's *Hard Love* (1999), James Sveck of Peter Cameron's *Someday This Pain Will Be Useful to You* (2007), and Valentine Simmons in Riley Redgate's *Seven Ways We Lie* (2016), may be read as acespec and/or arospec, although the terms are never used in the books and these characters never explicitly name or identify their orientation as asexual.

Recent controversies around the character Jughead Jones from various media related to the *Archie* comics and especially the popular YA TV show *Riverdale* demonstrate some of the complexities around the importance of representation, the issue of possible ace erasure, the impact of explicit naming of sexual orientations, ace coding, and the introduction and treatment of asexuality in youth literature. Comics scholar Bart Beaty, for example, notes that, in the "hormonal Archie universe, Jughead is unique for his asexuality" (64), and, in 2016 with the re-launch of *Archie* comics, creator Chip Zdarsky wrote Jughead as an explicitly-stated canonically asexual character in *Jughead* #4. However, Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, the executive producer of *Riverdale*, chose not to present Jughead as asexual in the TV show, even though he has acknowledged his awareness that Jughead is ace in the comics (Alexander n.p.). This decision has upset many in the ace communities as well as Cole Sprouse (the actor who plays Jughead in the show) who has pushed for his character to be depicted as ace and has stated that he hopes that the show will eventually show Jughead discovering his asexuality (Tsirbas n.p.). Characters in YA novels who have been retrospectively identified and named as being on the asexual and/or aromantic spectra by their authors include Darcy, the main character in Scott Westerfeld's *Afterworlds* (2014), Clariel of Garth Nix's 2014 eponymous novel, Ozzie in Shaun David Hutchinson's *At The Edge of the Universe* (2017), and Keldry (Kel) from Tamora Pierce's *Protector of the Small Quartet* (1999-2002). Pierce has retrospectively stated in response to readers' questions on her website that: "in short, Kel is both aromantic and asexual" (n.p.). While there is some conflation of asexuality, androgyny, and aromanticism, Pierce's series is one of the first (if not the first) known English-language YA works with confirmed aroace representation, the first to explore asexuality as a spectrum, and the first to consider the idea that sexual orientation may be fluid over time.

While it is encouraging progress to see more asexual representation and asexuality awareness from established YA authors, such "Word of God" recognition after the fact does little to increase visibility or radically challenge allosexual regimes of allonormativity. Stating on social media after the book's publication that a character is ace or acespec allows for the "claim to have representation while not actually making the audience confront the fact that a character they like and identify with is not straight – but it would be much better to see it explicitly in the text" (Aletha n.p.). The hashtag #DontErasetheAces was deliberately established on Twitter in 2016 in order to help raise awareness about the lack of asexual

representation and the still prevalent erasure of asexuality in literary texts, popular culture, and international entertainment industries, especially as “reviewers often forget to mention ace rep in their reviews and too often these books fly under the radar” (Jellyfable n.p.). Other recent initiatives committed to promoting asexual and aromantic representation in literature include online resources such as Claudie Arseneault’s *AroAce Database* of aromantic and asexual characters in prose fiction, the *LGBTQ Reads* website, which is dedicated to promoting curated LGBTQIAP+ literature for all ages, and the *Queer Books For Teens* website’s recommended lists of books with asexual characters and books with aromantic characters.

The difficulty in identifying ace and acespec characters in YA fiction is complicated by the indirect ways in which many YA texts might talk about sexual attraction and sex in order to maintain ‘suitability’ of sexual content for teenage readers. Historical literature poses an interesting dilemma for fulfilling this important role of visibility and explicit naming of asexuality while still being authentic to historical context and contemporaneous terminology. YA novels such as Justine Ireland’s *Dread Nation* (2019) and the 2020 sequel, *Deathless Divide* (set in an alternate nineteenth-century US history), Libba Bray’s 2017 novel, *Before The Devil Breaks You* (set in 1920’s New York), Mackenzi Lee’s 2018 *The Lady’s Guide to Petticoats and Piracy* (set in mid-1700’s Europe), and Nilah Magruder’s 2018 short story, “And They Don’t Kiss In The End” (set in 1976 Maryland) all take place in times when terms such as asexual are not yet available to their asexual characters. While historical literature may be extended understandable latitude in not using the contemporary lexicon of asexuality, this does not mitigate the importance of clear naming of ace, acespec, aro, and arospec characters’ orientations in texts and media. Lynn O’Connacht has called out the harmful impact of not using identity labels, suggesting that this practice:

explicitly and *deliberately* devalues asexual identities because ‘why does it need a label anyway?’ and is, frankly, one of the most hurtful and harmful narratives about asexuality that I’ve encountered in fiction. But, truthfully, this narrative doesn’t exist only in fiction. It’s a very common tactic among anti-ace rhetoric to cast the asexual spectrum as a ‘degree’ of allosexuality rather than [as] an identity in its own right and to discredit asexuality in general because ‘it doesn’t exist as a separate thing’ or whatever the argument of the month is. (“Asexual and Aromantic Tropes in Fiction” n.p.)

After surveying the presence and representation of sexual orientations in youth literature during the turn of the millennium, Corrine Wickens optimistically proposed in 2011 that a “shift toward more progressive inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning characters [...] has gradually been occurring” (149). While, ten years later, this inclusive momentum has not yet fully or equivalently extended to ace and acespec characters in YA literature, contemporary YA fiction has been “making notable ground”

(Henderson 3) in explicitly recognising and affirming asexual characters, and in resisting allonormative tactics of asexual erasure and dismissal. Although the deep-seated presumption of compulsory sexuality does still tend to underpin much of youth literature and wider media, YA fiction possesses a radical capacity for confronting and dismantling allonormative regimes, and for representing asexuality as a legitimate and respected orientation. In the next section, I will explore the representation of asexuality in recent Anglophone YA fiction, and the potential of YA novels for disrupting allosexual traditions and equitably affirming asexuality and the diversity of the ace spectrum.

## ASEXUALITY AND/IN YOUNG ADULT FICTION

Over the last decade, an increasing momentum of Anglophone YA novels (many of which are by queer and #ownvoices authors) involving explicitly-stated representation, the use of the terms asexual and acespec within these texts, and affirmation of ace and acespec protagonists, narrators, and secondary characters has been taking place. Examples include: RJ Anderson's *Quicksilver* (2013), Erica Cameron's *Deadly Sweet Lies* (2015), Calista Lynne's *We Awaken* (2016), Claire Legrand's *Sawkill Girls* (2018), Lillian Clark's *Immoral Code* (2019), Lisa Jenn Bigelow's *Hazel's Theory of Evolution* (2019), Linsey Miller's *Belle Révolte* (2020), Alice Oseman's *Loveless* (2020), Corinne Duyvis' *The Art of Saving the World* (2020), and Emily Victoria's *This Golden Flame* (2021). Ebooks and independent publishing have opened the way for ace and acespec authors committed to representing asexuality in their works and this has helped to increase the number of YA books with explicitly-identified characters. For example, The Kraken Collective is an alliance of indie authors of LGBTQIAP+ speculative fiction who are committed to building a publishing space that is inclusive and positive. Members of the collective include Claudie Arseneault (arospes asexual author of the crossover *City of Strife* trilogy) and Lyssa Chiavari (biromantic asexual author of YA speculative fiction).

Although YA fiction is still grappling with the tensions between allosexual regimes and the field's radical potential for disrupting allonormativity, there has been an increasing recognition and explicit confrontation of the realities and impacts of aphobia/acephobia: that is, "a particular strand of queerphobia" whereby asexual and aromantic people are "at risk for the same violences suffered by other queer people, including discrimination, erasure, abuse, pathologization, and corrective rape. On top of this, ace and aro people are assumed, by other queer people, to not experience oppression" (Holleb 30). Common aphobic microaggressions and responses of pity, disbelief, suspicion, and exclusion in both heteronormative and queer spaces include: "you'll change your mind when you meet the right person"; "you don't know what you're missing!"; "were you abused in the past? Maybe it's just fear"; "so you're a prude? Or just celibate?." Gabriel Vidrine's 2018 novel, *On A*

*Summer Night*, addresses aphobia by both queer and heterosexual characters. The 14-year-old narrator, Casey, is bisexual and transgender while his best friend, Ella, is explicitly represented as asexual. Ella experiences vindictive harassment by the homophobic bully, Ryan, who calls her a “freak” (140) due to her apparently inexplicable disinterest in him, while Casey has spent much of his friendship with Ella ostensibly supporting her asexuality yet privately “wishing she should just go out and get a boyfriend already” (28).

As part of the “common narrative in our society – that sex is part of the package deal” (Decker 61), asexuals may be subjected to threats of “unwanted or coercive sex, particularly in relationships with nonasexual individuals” as well as the everyday “strain of maintaining their relationships through sex, of meeting their partners’ sexual needs, and of doing performative work to convince their partners that they are enjoying sex” (Przybylo 188). Billy Merrell’s 2017 verse novel, *Vanilla*, explores these intersections of rape culture, compulsory sexuality, and aphobic assumptions that ace and acespec people are ‘broken’ in some way. Homoromantic and asexual Vanilla is sex repulsed and the novel explores the aftermath of his break-up with Hunter who is allosexual and gay. Hunter uses shaming and emotional blackmail as coercive tactics to try to pressure Vanilla into sex and throughout the novel he complicitly supports the allonormative suspicions and resentments of their queer peer group: “‘your boyfriend’s a homophobe,’ they say. Or, ‘Who does he think he is?!’ Because no one wants to feel defensive at a gay party, where they thought they’d be free from that kind of judgment, finally” (29). While sensitivity is crucial when including distressing and potentially triggering content for ace and acespec readers, it is also key that aphobia and aphobic discourses and behaviour are acknowledged, unmasked, and condemned.

Science fiction offers an intriguing opportunity for problematising and dismantling allonormative regimes and for affirming the full and diverse spectra of asexual, as well as allosexual, orientations and identities. As Katelyn Browne observes, queer YA “has, for its entire existence, wrestled with the tension between depicting the queerphobic world as we know it and offering more optimistic roadmaps to both queer and nonqueer readers” (20). Recent YA science-fiction novels have had mixed success in being able to successfully imagine “roadmaps” (Browne 20) of a queer-friendly society where ace and acespec people can just exist as themselves rather than always having to explain or defend the legitimacy of their orientations. YA science-fiction novels that feature explicitly-identified asexual characters and which aim to present queer-inclusive societies do not always manage to fulfil their inclusive promise, and allosexual norms do still continue to inform some of these imagined worlds. Amy Rose Capetta and Cori McCarthy’s #ownvoices *Once & Future* (2019) involves a wide range of gay, queer, and genderfluid characters and the sexual orientations and attractions of these allosexual characters are normalised throughout the novel. The mysterious Jordan is the only asexual character (her romantic orientation is not stated) and, significantly, the point-of-view protagonist, Ari, spends most of the novel distrusting and resenting Jordan due to Jordan’s apparent closeness to Gwen, the protagonist’s love interest.

While the novel aims to enact and give voice to a queer-inclusive future, Jordan is only given one page late in the novel in which she herself briefly talks about her asexuality (276) and the revelation of her asexuality is treated as a plot twist in order for Ari (and presumably allosexual young-adult readers) to feel reassurance that Jordan is no longer a sexual (and presumably romantic) threat. Despite Tristina Wright's 2017 novel, *27 Hours*, being set several centuries in the future, it is only the asexual main character, Braeden, amidst all of the novel's queer cast of bisexual, gay, and pansexual characters, who encounters misunderstandings and microaggressions, feels that he does not fit into his society, and is still struggling to have his sexual orientation fully accepted and respected. Although Lyssa Chiavari's 2015 novel, *Fourth World*, features two asexual characters and there is explicit inclusion and exploration of different experiences on the asexual spectrum, the sex-repulsed asexual Nadin feels internalised shame about being "broken" (205) and Isaak's demisexuality is dismissed with an eye-roll by his father as an "oddball thing" with "a weird, complicated name" (276).

While there can still be a tendency for allosexual characters in YA science fiction to perform conscious and unconscious microaggressions against ace, acespec, aro and arospec characters, some recent novels manage to challenge the aphobic presumption of compulsory sexuality, and to ultimately create and sustain asexual-inclusive speculative worlds. For example, Janelle (Ellie), the biracial, plus-size, explicitly-stated biromantic and demisexual protagonist in Alechia Dow's 2020 *The Sound of Stars*, is dynamic and multi-dimensional. The novel features reflective discussions about consent, bodily autonomy, colonisation, and discrimination, and emphasises hope and resistance to reactionary and marginalising regimes and discourses. CB Lee's *Not Your Sidekick* series (2016-present) presents a rich diversity of gender expressions and sexual orientations as well as a relatively rare and welcome example of YA fiction with more than one main character who is explicitly on the aromantic spectrum. While there are some aphobic microaggressions and allosexual characters who are initially reluctant to recognise the asexual identity of the main character, Emma, the series ongoingly demonstrates a paradigm of care and empathy for this aroace character and for the validity of her orientations. The latest installment in the series, *Not Your Backup* (2019), is told through Emma's point of view as she navigates being the only non-superpowered member of the series' heroic team, being in a relationship with her allosexual friend, Bells, and allonormative pressures and expectations. The novel optimistically concludes with Emma and Bells agreeing to have a queerplatonic relationship, a strong feeling of mutual respect and partnership, and Emma's "fervent hope blossoming inside her [...that] they've got everything to look forward to and can develop this relationship together" (327).

The mixed success of these YA novels' sincere attempts to fully imagine queer-normative futures for asexual as well as allosexual characters speaks to the persistence of allonormativity and that there is still work to do for YA literature to enact and sustain its

potential for equitably representing asexuality and for problematising and disrupting hegemonies of sexual difference. As noted earlier, even when there is explicit naming and recognition of asexuality, the practice of conflating sexual orientation with romantic orientation is still relatively widespread. Although an increasing number of YA novels do indeed acknowledge and explicitly identify the various romantic orientations of their ace and acespec characters, various recent YA novels conflate these orientations. For example, the asexuality of the narrator of Emma Griffiths' 2015 *After I Wake* is explicitly stated and emphasised throughout the novel – Carter consciously attends her school's LGBTQA club parties because she “wants to represent the A in LGBTQA because I've always been absurdly full of asexual pride” (37) – yet her romantic orientation is never identified or stated. Moreover, sexual attraction and romantic attraction are entangled and conflated throughout the novel: for example, in Carter's statement to her best friend that she loves him “only in the most brotherly of fashions. You're gay, and I'm asexual, it could never happen. Beside, love seems a little far-fetched for me. I wouldn't be any good at it. I never have been” (131). Similarly, although the sexualities of the asexual protagonist and her pansexual best friend are explicitly named and explored in Marieke Nijkamp's 2018 *Before I Let Go*, the protagonist's (or any other character's) romantic orientation is never identified or addressed. Again, this asexual character could be coded as aromantic due to her comments such as “unlike most of my classmates, I never had crushes. I didn't understand what all the fuss was about” (57), yet the conflation of asexuality and aromanticism undermines the integrity of the novel's otherwise sensitive depiction of the questioning asexual protagonist's exploration of where she is on the asexual spectrum. There are more queer characters than straight characters in the main cast of Destiny Soria's 2018 *Beneath the Citadel* alongside an admirable diversity of sexualities, racial identities, ethnicities, and body types, yet the asexual Alys's romantic orientation is never named or specified although this character could be coded as aromantic or gray-romantic. While it is refreshing that Alys is secure in her asexuality and that her asexuality has nothing to do with the plot, it is nevertheless disappointing that Soria does not acknowledge or state Alys's romantic identity, especially as Soria identifies as gray-romantic asexual and that she consciously decided to use the actual term asexual in the book after being urged to do so by a sensitivity reader “because it's not super common to see those terms on the page in high fantasy novels and they can be really encouraging for young readers especially” (Soria n.p.).

Although there is an increasing acknowledgment of the difference between sexual orientation and romantic orientation, the practice of the conflation of asexuality and aromanticism does still persist in YA fiction and wider media. In the next section, I will examine three problematic practices which also have been traditionally involved in representing asexuality in fiction: the trope of the “allosexual saviour” (Siggy n.p.) who informs and teaches ace, acespec, and questioning characters about their asexuality; the association of asexuality and asexual people with death; and the association of asexuality

with Whiteness and White privilege. In tracing how recent YA novels have engaged with these conventions, the following section explores the extent to which YA fiction involving ace and acespec characters perpetuates, resists, or succeeds in disrupting these allonormative traditions.

## YA FICTION'S INTERACTION WITH ALLONORMATIVE TRADITIONS

The trope of the allosexual saviour, which focuses on the epiphany of explicitly naming the possibility of asexuality as a valid sexual orientation, exists in counterpoint with the traditional trope of coming out for queer allosexual characters. As Sinwell argues, “whereas narratives of homosexuality, bisexuality, transgenderism, and transsexuality often revolve around the idea of ‘coming out’, the relationship between speech and silence, and sexual self-identification, asexual characters do not often ‘name’ themselves as such” (168). This trope of an allosexual character who frequently identifies as queer and even occasionally as asexual themselves, and who instructs the asexual or questioning character that asexuality legitimately exists, is similar to the idea of the “White Saviour narrative where the privileged and more knowledgeable allosexual is set up as ‘saving’” the asexual character from their isolation, ignorance, and feelings of brokenness (O’Connacht, “Asexual and Aromantic Tropes in Fiction” n.p.). There are indeed various YA novels which do enact this trope, such as Merrell’s *Vanilla*, Heather Kaczinski’s 2018 *Dare Mighty Things*, and Rosiee Thor’s 2019 *Tarnished are the Stars*. Promisingly, however, this trope is being increasingly challenged and rewritten. The queer and straight characters alike in Becky Albertalli and Adam Silvera’s 2018 novel, *What If It’s Us*, are presented as already familiar with the sexual orientation and spectrum of asexuality and they use the specific terms in a refreshingly matter-of-fact way. The novel’s young-adult readers are likewise expected to be familiar and respectful of these orientations with no explanation, exposition, or glossary provided. YA novels such as JL Douglas’ 2015 *Lunaside* and Danika Stone’s 2019 *Switchback* have main and secondary ace and acespec characters of various explicitly-stated asexual and romantic orientations who already know ace and acespec terminology, while Kody Keplinger’s 2018 novel, *That’s Not What Happened*, presents an asexual, point-of-view character who had independently discovered and learnt the term without any need for this trope. The increasing momentum of such novels demonstrates and affirms the agency and autonomy of young ace and acespec characters in discovering and understanding their own identities and experiences.

Another problematic practice comprises the insidious and widespread association of asexual people with death. In Trites’ still-influential premise of the intertwining of adolescence with “[b]eing-towards-death” (135), death is presented as “the ultimate and inviolable authority” (140) of YA literature. While the notorious “Bury Your Gays” trope (TV Tropes n.p.) and the presumption that the supposedly ‘natural’ conclusion of gay and queer

characters' stories is an early death relate to all LGBTQIA+ orientations and spectra, the aphobic association of asexual and acespec characters with death is particularly deep-rooted. All too often, ace and acespec characters are depicted as estranged from society and as somehow bound to/with death and being dead: for example, Voodoo's obsession for the macabre and grotesque in the YA 2018-2020 US TV series, *Sirens*; Ling's supernatural powers of communing with the dead in Libba Bray's *Diviner* series (2012-2020); Virina being named after a vampire character and her preoccupation with death and Ouija boards in Katrina Leto's 2018 *Summer of Salt*; and AM Strickland's 2019 *Beyond the Black Door*'s asexual protagonist's affinity for death and the distorted nature of her soul. In a 2017 blog piece, Claudie Arseneault charted these ties between asexuality and Western concepts of death and how "two of the most recommended books for ace fiction" – Garth Nix's 2014 novel, *Clariel*, and Seanan McGuire's 2016 *Every Heart a Doorway* – "play directly into this trope" ("Death, Stillness, and Exile" n.p.). The eponymous aroace Clariel is a necromancer who becomes Chlorr of the Mask, the primary undead antagonist in Nix's series. While Clariel is presented as a complex and not unsympathetic character, many asexual and aromantic readers have found Nix's representation offensive as her asexuality and aromanticism are deeply linked with her higher vulnerability to corruption and to the fact that she becomes the only evil undead necromancer out of all the Abhorsens. McGuire's *Every Heart A Doorway* is probably still the most well-known mainstream-published YA novel with explicitly-stated asexual representation to date. The overriding ambition of the heteroromantic asexual main character Nancy is to re-find the door to the Halls of the Dead (a parallel world associated with death) and to resume her previous life of performing a death-adjacent existence of stasis in the role of a statue. Her talent at remaining unmoving is linked with a lack of emotion and to invisibility: two traits traditionally associated with asexuality. Nancy's success in returning to the Halls of the Dead is presented as a triumphant, empowering moment, and her cameo in the later novel in the series, *Beneath the Sugar Sky* (2018), suggests that this solitude and exclusion from the living, moving world is what brings her ultimate happiness.

While I agree with O'Connacht that this death-adjacent convention is pervasive and that it extends allosexual claims that asexual people are abnormal and invalid members of society who will never rightly belong, thus "allowing writers to make this separation from society literal" ("Asexual and Aromantic Tropes in Fiction" n.p.), a recent YA novel has demonstrated a profound rewriting and radical transformation of this practice. The aroace eponymous protagonist of Darcie Little Badger's 2020 novel, *Elatsoe* (with illustrations by Rovina Cal), can wake the dead and raise the ghosts of dead animals: a skill passed down through nine generations to date of her Lipan Apache family. Acclaimed as a *Kirkus* Best YA Book of 2020, a *Publishers Weekly* Best Book of 2020, and one of *TIME*'s Best 100 Fantasy Books of All Time, this compelling debut blends the past, speculative fiction, Indigenous myths, and modern-day technology. In this alternate America, the presence of magic, the

supernatural, and ghosts are part of daily life. As part of her quest to find the murderer of her cousin, Elatsoe uncovers her town's violent history and ongoing practice of the medical sacrifice of unwilling Indigenous people and people of colour for the longevity and healing of Willowbee's White residents. Instead of causing conventional outcomes of isolation and death-like exclusion for the asexual character, Elatsoe's affinity with the dead, her ability to connect ancient pre-history life with the present day, and her membership of her ancestors' "superhero [...] intergenerational team" (53) are crucial for defeating this parasitic regime of White supremacy, colonisation, and exploitation. The novel concludes with Elatsoe, surrounded by family and friends and secure in her abilities, intent on going to college to become a paranormal investigator so that she might bring together Western academic knowledge with her Lipan Apache heritage in order "to prepare for the next Willowbee" (259). Elatsoe's self-possessed multiple identities as aromantic, asexual, and Lipan Apache, and the novel's unsentimental yet hope-charged repudiation of White supremacy, disrupt the final problematic practice that I will examine: the privileging of White asexual people.

Asexuality scholars have charted how "white asexual people are *very* overrepresented at all levels, especially Internet-based communities" and how "asexual people of colour are more invisible than white asexual people" (Decker 72). As Karen Coats states, "as a master signifier, Whiteness is the screen against which any 'other' culture is projected; it embodies the universal, making any other ethnicity the particular, the curious, the deviant" (125). Demonstrating the potential of YA literature to interrogate and explore hegemonies of power, there has been an increasing number of intersectional YA novels involving explicitly-identified ace and acespec characters of colour that confront and challenge White supremacy and the hypersexualization of Black and brown bodies. Recent examples include: Cassandra, the Indian-American asexual main character of *Dare Mighty Things*; Zoey, the Black biromantic asexual main character in *Sawkill Girls*; Emma, the questioning Latina main character on the asexual and aromantic spectra in CB Lee's *Not Your Sidekick* series; Kevin, the asexual main character of Maori descent in Karen Healey's *Guardian of the Dead* (2009); and Rumi, the questioning protagonist, who is hapa (the Hawaiian word for people who are half Hawaiian) and of Japanese and White Irish descent in Akemi Dawn Bowman's *Summer Bird Blue* (2018). Jennifer Latham's 2017 *Dreamland Burning* has an indigenous Black asexual main character and interweaves alternative perspectives set in the modern day with the Tulsa race riot of 1921, while the transgressive capacity of the Black aroace main character to pass as White in Justine Ireland's 2019 *Dread Nation* provides an intriguing exploration of colourism, racism, class, asexuality, and aromanticism. Non Pratt's 2017 *Truth or Dare* examines issues of the shaming of asexual people, White male sense of entitlement to the bodies of women of colour, revenge porn, and the threat of asexuals being forcibly 'corrected' to 'normal' sexual orientation through sexual assault. Amidst the Black Lives Matter movement and contemporary debates around White privilege and the systemic discriminatory discourses and practices of the policing of black and brown bodies, Mark

Oshiro's 2018 *Anger Is a Gift* addresses racist media framing, the criminalisation of young people of colour, and police brutality against both US students of colour and high-school staff who try to resist or challenge them.

The cover of Claire Kann's 2018 *Let's Talk About Love* is designed in the asexual flag's colours of purple, black, and white, and the novel presents a Black biromantic asexual protagonist navigating daily aphobic violences, racism, misogyny, microaggressions, and rape culture. The novel importantly acknowledges that asexuality is a spectrum and addresses racist stereotyping of Black sexuality, the privileging of Whiteness, and the complexity of social and sexual embodiments in light of histories of marginalised people being desexualised (the denial of their sexual desires as well as enforced abstinence) and hypersexualised (the exaggeration of their sexual desires as well as forced sexual activity), and often both simultaneously (Owen 2014). Hailing this novel as a foundational text for "Conscious Black Asexuality" (165), Brittney Miles concludes that the protagonist's "queerness and positivity [...] reference the resurgence of youth as liberation, as found in the #BlackGirlMagic and #BlackBoyJoy movements", and that the novel offers a crucial counter-narrative for "what is possible for Black people's emotional health, their successes, and their happiness despite pervasive anti-Blackness in the world" (169). Ebony Elizabeth Thomas has powerfully called out the diversity crisis in children's and YA media as an "imagination gap" (5) which can only be resolved by "decolonizing our fantasises and our dreams [...and] emancipating the imagination itself" (169). Although there is still work to do in exposing allosexuality, disrupting allonormativity's complicity in racist regimes, and fully emancipating the radical potential of the YA imagination, the "unmarked whiteness" in much of the thinking and presumptions around asexuality and the tradition of asexual spaces as "white-dominated spaces" (Przybylo and Gupta, x) have increasingly been recognised and interrogated in these and other recent YA novels which explore intersectionalities of asexuality and race, and promote anti-racist affirmations of ace and acespec people of colour.

## CONCLUSION

In "Reconsidering Asexuality and Its Radical Potential", CJ DeLuzio Chasin posed a provocative premise for a re-imagined and asexual-inclusive world: "where being sexual is no longer mandated as a prerequisite of normalcy or intimacy and where nonsexual relationships are recognized and valued, [...] where no level of sexual desire is pathological and where the social emphasis is on sexuality being self-affirming in whatever unique form it takes" (416). While contemporary YA literature has made welcome strides in recognising the existence and validity of asexuality and the asexual spectrum, it still does have a significant way to go in enacting its full potential and in confronting and disrupting

allonormativity, compulsory sexuality, and the association of adolescence with sexual attraction and sex. As YA authors, readers, publishers, audiences, and scholars continue to engage with issues of ace and acespec representation, it is vital that this representation and the complexity and diversity of the spectrum is rendered authentically and inclusively. The validation and affirmation of asexuality as an orientation and the equitable recognition of the full spectrum of asexuality are particularly significant for questioning, ace, and acespec young readers seeking representation and who might not have encountered inclusive and respectful stories about their experiences and identities. While “LGBTQ youth are isolated by metaphorical understandings that define adolescence as a transitional stage that is neither adulthood nor childhood, and then isolated again by heteronormative assumptions and homophobic discourse” (Lewis and Durand 44), ace and acespec youth are particularly vulnerable due to pervasive allonormative and allosexual beliefs, histories, and power systems.

Nearly fifteen years ago in her book, *Radical Children’s Literature, Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction*, Kimberley Reynolds suggested that “writing about sex, sexuality and relationships between the sexes [is] one of the most radically changed areas in contemporary children’s literature” (114-115). For Reynolds, “the area of greatest change is not about how much sex is taking place but the importance attached to it and the strategies for writing about it” (122). The recognition of asexuality and engagement with its radical challenges to allonormativity in the literary imagination as well as wider media and society are crucial for this project to be meaningful, equitable, and inclusive. In his 2021 study of contemporary YA entertainment media and literature, *Queer Anxieties of Young Adult Literature and Culture*, Derritt Mason makes the intriguing argument that “anxiety is fundamental to understanding the past, present, and future of queer YA [... and] that anxiety is both generated by and generative of queer YA” (6). Asexuality and its resistances to easy definition and the regime of allonormativity enact and generate these queer anxieties, thus posing the possibility for transformative disruptions for discourses and traditions of compulsory sexuality and normative regimes. While problematic tropes and hegemonic practices still do persist around the treatment and representation of asexuality in YA literature and the field’s ways of conceptualising adolescent sexuality and YA sexual orientations, contemporary YA literature affords important and radical potential for equitably honouring and responsibly affirming this traditionally “invisible orientation” (Decker 1).

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