

Non-binary Narration: The Potential of Point of View in Young Adult Novels with Genderqueer Characters

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Abstract

Narratologist Susan S. Lanser argues ‘that questions of representation, and especially of queer representation, are as much questions of form as of content’ (2015, p. 24). As marginalised identities, such as those under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella, are increasingly represented in fiction for young audiences, the creative methods authors use to construct these representations warrant investigation. In this article, I examine how non-binary gender identity is depicted in a corpus of contemporary young adult (YA) novels, and how the authors of these texts use narrative voice and point of view (POV) to construct, confirm, and validate their characters’ non-binary identifications. First, I discuss the YA staple of first-person perspective and how this narration technique overlaps with Talia Bettcher’s concept of ‘first-person authority’ (2009). Second, I turn to the less-common close third-person narration, and what visible pronouns and names may offer to a narrative of gender affirmation. Third, and finally, I discuss the underexplored realm of omniscient third-person narration and its potential to affirm queer gender by using the mythic ‘voice of god’ (Fludernik 2009). These different voice techniques create different narrative effects and offer their own risks and benefits, making narration a valuable site for exploring the varied, evolving ways that queer gender identity is constructed in the storyworlds of contemporary YA.

Keywords: genderqueer, narratology, YA novels, point of view, non-binary

Non-binary identity—a queer umbrella term indicating gender outside of, beyond, or in between the binary categories of male and female—is becoming increasingly visible in fictional media for young people. Non-binary characters can be found in a variety of narratives for young demographics, from live-action high school dramas such as *Heartbreak High* (2022 – ongoing) and *Sex Education* (2019 – 2023) to animated fantasy series such as *Steven Universe* (2013 –

2020) and *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* (2018 – 2020). As my doctoral research (Henderson 2023) has catalogued, recent years have also seen a notable uptick in non-binary characters in young adult (YA) literature (Henderson 2022). The increased literary presence of this marginalised group invites celebration and scholarly attention. It is widely acknowledged that ‘representation in media is a vital site of political struggle, through which the experiences and perspectives of marginalized identities might find greater purchase’ (Harper et al. 2018, p. 7). As well as the validation, affirmation, and self-discovery marginalised readers may experience by seeing ‘their own faces reflected in the pages of a book’ (Jenkins and Cart 2018, p. 3), novels with marginalised protagonists may also serve to educate about, and encourage empathy with, identities and experiences the reader does not personally share. This ethos underlines much of the scholarship on diversity in literature, especially in the fields of children’s and young adult fiction (Epstein 2013; Jenkins and Cart 2018; Booth and Narayan 2020; Corbett 2020; Bowden 2021; Henderson 2021; Potter 2022).

Scholarship surrounding queer representation in YA literature often concerns the way these marginalised characters are constructed and represented: their adherence to or avoidance of historical clichés or harmful stereotypes, or how the construction of the character and narrative reflects contemporary issues or suggests alternate possibilities (Henderson 2022). In this article, I add to this evolving dialogue and explore this notion of queer representation—specifically, the representation of non-binary characters—through a narrative studies lens. Narratologist Susan S. Lanser argues ‘that questions of representation, and especially of queer representation, are as much questions of form as of content’ (2015, p. 24). How these stories are told is of equal interest and value to the discussion of ‘representation’ as the events that occur within them, and narrative tools like perspective and point of view (POV) impact the way non-binary identity is constructed, expressed, and validated within the text.

In the following case studies, I explore the risks and benefits of different POV styles. First, I discuss the YA literature staple of first-person perspective and how this narration

technique overlaps with Talia Bettcher’s concept of ‘first-person authority’ (2009). Second, I turn to the less-common close third-person narration and analyse what visible pronouns and names may offer to a narrative of gender affirmation. Third, and finally, I discuss the underexplored realm of omniscient third-person narration with reference to how I have experimented with this form within my own creative research and suggest that it has potential to affirm queer gender by using the mythic ‘voice of god.’

Notes on Terminology

The terminology surrounding non-binary gender identity is constantly evolving and in flux (McNabb 2018; Barker and Iantaffi 2019; Twist et al. 2020). Indeed, in several years the terms I have used here may become outdated as writers, activists, and community members continue to ‘[coin] new terms that capture the individuality of their experiences’ (Twist et al. 2020, p. 19). Rather than having a strict, singular definition, I use ‘non-binary’ here as an umbrella term (overlapping with other encompassing terminology such as genderqueer) indicating gender identity outside of, beyond, or in between the binary categories of female and male. Many more specific identity labels with which non-binary people might self-identify exist under this umbrella, including genderfluid, agender, demiboy, demigirl, neutrois, and others.¹ Much non-binary writing places great value on self-identification and articulation of one’s own felt sense of gender using whatever terminology brings comfort and self-actualisation.

Self-Identification and ‘first-person authority’

The notion of self-identification and self-actualisation has always been important to queer theory and activism, particularly where gender identity is concerned. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick hypothesised that ‘there are important senses in which “queer” can signify only *when attached to the first person*. One possible corollary: that what it takes—all it takes—to make the

description “queer” a true one is the impulsion to use it in the first person’ (1993, p. 8, emphasis in original).

Sedgwick’s suggestion takes on additional layers when applied to non-binary identifications specifically. Activist Rikki Wilchins’s initial conceptualisation of the term ‘genderqueer’, coined in 1995, emphasised a deliberate queering of gender as an expression of politics and personhood (McNabb 2018; Dembroff 2020). That emphasis on self-definition, and authority and agency over the self has carried through and evolved throughout more contemporary non-binary writings and activism (Barker and Iantaffi 2019; Twist et al. 2020; Vaid-Menon 2020). Naturally, it also underpins much of the articulation of non-binary identity within fiction.

In a 2009 essay, transgender philosopher Talia Mae Bettcher applies the epistemology of ‘first-person authority’ to the self-articulation of gender identity. While, in her own words, gender is not necessarily so simple as ‘because I say I am’ (2009, p. 99), Bettcher’s interpretation of this concept places ethical weight on the ‘avowal of existential self-identity’ (p. 115). The authoritative voice on any individual’s gender is the individual themselves, and Bettcher likens a denial of this authority as a dismissal of personal agency akin to violence. This emphasis on agency crucially shifts the narrative of gender identity to ‘a result of self-evaluation’ (Jas 2020, p. 73) rather than external classification, working to contradict models in which gender is determined by outside forces (Bettcher 2014; Johnson 2016; Verman 2018; Barker and Iantaffi 2019). In medical, legal, and social contexts, gender identity (for binary trans and non-binary people) has traditionally been associated with a gatekeeper’s judgement of a set of observable criteria. Within this system, ‘there exists very little room for trans people’s faculty or power to use their own agency in making decisions about their identification with and actualization of their individual gender identities’ (Johnson 2016, p. 5). Bettcher’s call for the recognition of self-identification is philosophical, but also highly practical, calling for a

deconstruction of these systems and for recognition that a person’s articulation of their own gender is the most authentic expression of it.

While Bettcher initially suggested this model in a binary trans context, it echoes and resonates with non-binary discourse as well—and proves a useful framework for exploring the importance of language and personal affirmation emphasised by much non-binary scholarship and activism. In *Beyond the Gender Binary* (2020), activist Alok Vaid-Menon invites the reader to set aside the medicalist stigma discussed above (Johnson 2016) and consider that ‘[g]ender is not what people look like to other people; it is what we know ourselves to be’ (2020, p. 42). An emphasis on self-identification, based on a person’s own ‘unique understanding of how the multiple aspects of gender (roles, identity, expression, bodies, social gender, etc.) come together, intersect, and overlap’ (Twist et al. 2020, p. 19) echoes through much contemporary genderqueer discourse. This discourse typically centres autonomy and self-knowing at the heart of non-binary identifications, and a constantly-evolving linguistic system has been created that allows for this to be vocalised (Twist et al. 2020).

Queer Narrative Voice

In the context of literature, exploring the ways that first-person authority may influence the construction of non-binary identity in texts opens new considerations for queer representation. Fiction is understood to be ‘a vital site ... through which the experiences and perspectives of marginalized identities might find greater purchase’ (Harper et al. 2018, p. 7), but the presence of fictional characters under the non-binary umbrella is only one part of the equation when it comes to the potentiality in this space. It is prescient to ask, how has the author constructed the voice of this non-binary story, and what narrative effects does this produce?

Much of Lanser’s work concerns the idea of ‘queer narratology’ and ‘[argues] for the inclusion of sex, gender and sexuality as important, intersecting elements of narrative poetics’ (2005, p. 387). Across her career, she has explored the ways narration is constructed around

gender and gender is constructed through narration. Her scholarship on queer and feminist narratology has useful applications when considering how narration might be used to construct genderqueer characters. In a 2018 paper, she suggests that narrative voice itself may be considered queer, potentially following three different methods to achieve this textual queerness:

I take 'queer voice' to have one of three meanings corresponding to my three definitions of queer: (1) a voice belonging to a textual speaker who can be identified as a queer subject by virtue of sex, gender, or sexuality; (2) a voice that is textually ambiguous or subverts the conventions of sex, gender, or sexuality; and (3) a voice that confounds the rules for voice itself and thus baffles our categorical assumptions about narrators and narrative. (Lanser 2018, p. 926)

The examples explored in this article are largely situated within type 1: novels narrated by characters the reader comes to understand as queer, through various linguistic cues in the narration itself. Some examples, however, attempt to play with types 2 and 3, using narration to confound the expectations of gender identity *and* prose, confounding, or at least playing with, the expectations readers may hold about certain narrative conventions.

First-Person Authority, First-Person Perspective

While not the only narration method used within young adult novels, 'first person is overwhelmingly the most honored and the most popular viewpoint within YA literature' (Bond 2008, p. 21). First-person perspective, 'in which a character uses [their] own voice to tell about [their] experiences and thoughts' (Thein and Sulzer 2015, p. 48), has been a staple of YA, particularly realist, novels since the mid-century texts largely credited with codifying the genre and its conventions, such as *The Outsiders* (1967) and *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). There are many reasons suggested for this preference, often centring on how first-person 'offers great immediacy' (Bond 2008, p. 21) and 'narrative intimacy' (Day 2013, p. 4). Narration in first person assists in the 'construction of the narrator's tale as disclosure, confession, or other interpersonal discourse' (p. 4), inviting a sense of conversation between the protagonist and the implied reader. This 'direct speech' method 'asks the reader to believe that the narrator gives

the floor to the character, allowing the character to speak for [themselves]' and provides an 'intimate portrait' of the protagonist's 'uncensored thoughts' (Cadden 2000, p. 148).

As Mike Cadden explores, there is some irony to the notion that first-person offers an 'authentic' storytelling experience, as most YA novels are written by adults attempting to capture their version of an adolescent 'truth'. While pertinent, especially considering concerns of voice and authenticity in fiction about marginalised groups, this quandary of 'the hidden adult' in all writing for young people (Nodelman 2008) is beyond the scope and interest of this article.² For the purposes of this article, I seek to explore first-person narration's function to '[read] as truth' (Thein and Sulzer 2015, p. 47) and how that intersects with Bettcher's concept of first-person authority.

In first-person narration, non-binary characters may be '[given] the floor' (Cadden 2000, p. 148) and invited to 'use [their] own voice' (Thein and Sulzer 2015, p. 48) to express and articulate their identity to the reader in an intimate narrative conversation that the reader is invited, in turn, to take as 'truth'. First-person narrators in YA literature may be unreliable in many ways and by their nature have limited knowledge (Cadden 2000), but for this analysis let us consider that these protagonists are, at least, written to know *themselves* and their own gender identity.

First-person narration facilitates gender identity expressed directly by the narrator, whether in dialogue, internal narration, or both. Sometimes authors will use contemporary terminology and identity labels, and sometimes the articulation will instead rest on expressions of the characters' felt sense of gender. For example, Mason Deaver's *I Wish You All the Best* (2019) is a realist coming-of-age story narrated in first person, and the protagonist, Ben, is established as 'a textual speaker who can be identified as a queer subject by virtue of sex, gender, or sexuality' (Lanser 2018, p. 926). The reader learns of Ben's gender identity and chosen identity label in Ben's own internal narrative voice: 'I said those three little words. *I am nonbinary*' (Deaver 2019, p. 14, emphasis in original). In scenes where Ben expresses their

non-binary identity in internal narration, they come ““out” to the extradiegetic narratee who stands in for the reader’ (Lanser 2018, p. 928). There is, as Lanser explains, a differentiation between this articulation and the narrator being ““out” to another character within the represented world’ (p. 928). Early in the novel, Ben does explain their identity and pronouns (which are otherwise obscured by the first-person narration—see below) to their sister (Deaver 2019, p. 20), thus coming out both inside and outside the storyworld. This technique is repeated throughout various contemporary YA novels with non-binary first-person narrators, including Kacen Callender’s *Felix Ever After* (2020) and Mia Siegert’s *Somebody Told Me* (2020).

While specific identity labels—such as ‘non-binary’ or any other terms under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella—are an important aspect of gender presentation to many people, they are not required for the expression of genderqueerness in these texts. Clare, the genderfluid narrator in Alexandra Latos’ *Under Shifting Stars* (2020), does not settle on a single identity term within the novel, even admitting that she is ‘terrified of labels’ (2020, pp. 191–2). However, the reader still comes to understand Clare’s relationship to gender through dialogue and narration, where she explains ‘[s]ometimes I feel like a girl and sometimes I feel like a boy. I don’t know what to call myself yet’ (p. 105). Thus, Clare retains first-person authority even without Latos framing her within specific identity labels.

A similar technique is necessitated in speculative or historical settings where these labels do not exist. In these cases, authors may play with language to convey and express their characters’ identity while ensuring their protagonists retain ‘first-person authority’. Linsey Miller’s dark fantasy *Mask of Shadows* (2017) features a genderfluid protagonist, and though this terminology is present in some marketing copy (Corbett 2020), it is not used in the text itself. The novel is narrated in first person, but protagonist Sal expresses to other characters that Sal alternates between pronouns and gender presentation, explaining early on that ‘I dress how I like to be addressed—he, she, or they. It’s simple enough’ (Miller 2017, p. 38). While modern terminology is absent, the description of Sal’s gender as something that ‘ebbed and flowed’ (p.

50) implies a genderfluid identity to a reader familiar with the concept (and may explain it, in the abstract, to an unfamiliar reader).

Even in cases where the non-binary character is not the protagonist/narrator, authors often still imbue their characters with first-person authority. This authority is most often achieved through dialogue that conveys this information to the protagonist, who then factors it into their own first-person narration. For example, in several instances the prose of Alison Evans' *Euphoria Kids* (2020) defaults to they/them when describing a character whose pronouns are unknown to the narrator, adjusting to the appropriate pronouns when they are discovered. When protagonist Iris first meets Babs, Iris describes Babs as 'they' and 'the new person' (p. 6) until spotting the 'SHE/HER' patch on Babs' jacket, at which point Babs becomes 'she' and 'this girl' (p. 9) instead.

The avoidance of gendered language and pronouns until the narrator can 'be sure' is a technique gradually becoming more visible and common in queer YA literature, and also present in novels such as Emery Lee's *Meet Cute Diary* (2021) and A.R. Capetta's *The Heartbreak Bakery* (2021). These texts demonstrate authors playing on the unique limitations of first-person perspective, which may *only* include the scope of what is known and knowable to the narrator, 'what the point of view character directly experiences or is able to express' (Bond 2008, p. 6). It would be easy to default to what the *author* knows as the correct pronouns for described characters, but this option would create a disconnect: either slipping into omniscience, with the narration demonstrating knowledge the narrator-character cannot know, or characterising the narrator-character as a person who assumes the gender of others. In many of these cases, that disconnect is clearly not the intention. As *Euphoria Kids*' Iris is herself a genderqueer teenager, it makes sense that they are characterised with the desire to respect the first-person authority of others, and this characterisation is built into their narrative voice.

As well as its intersection with ideas of first-person authority, first-person narration is relevant to a discussion of non-binary fiction because of its structural qualities. As Lanser

explores, first-person narration opens the possibility for ‘narrative situations in which we have no way to know the sex, gender and/or sexuality of the narrating voice’ (2018, p. 930). Because ‘first-person is less sex-specific than the third’ (Lanser 2005, p. 394)—at least in English and other languages with neutral, non-gendered first-person pronouns—a character’s gender may be rendered invisible or ambiguous if they are the story’s ‘I’.³ This technique opens the possibility for a point-of-view character whose gender remains unknown, but I argue that it also opens possibilities for narrators who do not align with binary gender, and new possibilities for the kinds of flexible explorations of identity often featured in non-binary YA literature.

A character who changes pronouns throughout the story—whether due to genderfluidity, exploration of different options, or any other reason—does not have to change the way the prose is constructed if they remain as the story’s ‘I’. This is the case for Sal from *Mask of Shadows*, as described above, as well as other protagonists with alternating pronouns such as in Siegert’s *Somebody Told Me* and Steven Salvatore’s *Can’t Take That Away* (2021). The non-gendered ‘I’ can also be used to facilitate a narrator character with *no* pronouns, such as in A.R. Capetta’s *The Heartbreak Bakery*. The narrator, Syd, tentatively identifies as agender and jokes that Syd’s pronouns ‘are *No, thanks*’ (Capetta 2021, pp. 79–80, emphasis in original). Syd admits to ‘avoiding [pronouns] in my head for years’ (p. 71), and this practice is reflected in, and represented by, the narration itself, which does the exact same thing. As well as Syd’s voice being clearly queer in the sense that it is ‘a voice belonging to a textual speaker who can be identified as a queer subject by virtue of sex, gender, or sexuality’, Syd’s narration could also be considered ‘a voice that is textually ambiguous or subverts the conventions of sex, gender, or sexuality’ (Lanser 2018, p. 926). Capetta capitalises on the ambiguity afforded by the neutral first-person ‘I’ to create an unambiguously non-binary narrator, rejecting the notion that the text must be ‘stabilized’ (Lanser 2005, p. 389) by gendering Syd inside the binary and its grammatical rules. The first-person narration allows for Syd’s lack of connection to any gendered (or even gender-neutral) markers because at no point does telling the story require

third-person pronouns of Syd. Capetta deftly avoids the logistics of structuring sentence and story around a pronoun-less character and creates a metatextual space in which said character is not required to settle on a definitive set of descriptors—a gender exploration plotline enabled and enhanced by the narration style itself.

First-person narration offers many possibilities for the expression and affirmation of non-binary identity in YA novels. First-person narration ties with ‘first-person authority’ (Bettcher 2009) and allows protagonists to ‘use [their] own voice’ (Thein and Sulzer 2015, p. 48) to express their felt sense of gender and establish themselves as textually non-binary in various ways the reader can recognise.

Third-Person Authority?

While first-person narration and its characteristic embrace of first-person authority are to be celebrated, I also invite consideration of other point-of-view methods and the unique capabilities they may have for the expression and affirmation of non-binary identity in YA storytelling. The majority of YA texts—particularly contemporary realist novels—use first-person narration, but many novels also use close, or limited, third-person narration: ‘In limited third person, the narrator focuses on a chosen character’ while still having a sense of being ‘outside’ that character (Bond 2008, p. 6). This idea is perhaps best conceptualised as looking over their shoulder rather than being in their head. Close third-person narration is common in novels with multiple focus characters, wherein the narration ‘alternates view points and the narrator takes on the voice and vision of the characters whose thoughts the young adult [reader] gets to hear though [sic] indirect address’ (Cadden 2000, p. 152). The ‘indirect address’ of close third-person narration may be seen to disrupt the text’s ‘narrative intimacy’ (Day 2013, p. 4) and create more psychic distance between the reader and narrator, with the personal ‘I’ replaced with visible names and descriptive pronouns. However, I argue that close third-person narrative voice—and the even-less-common *omniscient* third-person narrative voice—not only have their

place in YA literature but can facilitate uniquely affirming 'intimate portraits' (Cadden 2000, p. 148) of non-binary experience, using the very structure of the narration mode itself.

First-person narration renders the pronouns and name of the narrator character invisible in the text—a device that might serve a story about non-binary characters well, especially in cases such as *Mask of Shadows* or *The Heartbreak Bakery*. However, rendering names and pronouns visible, as they are by necessity in third-person narration, also has its advantages. Much of this potential relates to the concept of narrative authority. As Lanser explores, 'while the autodiegetic "I" remains a structurally "superior" voice mediating the voices of other characters, it does not carry the superhuman privileges that attach to authorial voice' (1992, p. 19). While there is a marked difference between *close* third-person narration and *omniscient* third-person narration that I will return to shortly, it remains true that there is an unspoken notion of authority embedded in third-person voice. First-person narration is recognised as being limited to 'what the point of view character directly experiences or is able to express' (Bond 2008, p. 6), and is thus unreliable or biased to a degree based on that character's perception of the world. Third-person narration, however, is often used to infer a degree of narrative 'truth' outside the confines of the described protagonist's experience. It is my contention that this association between third-person voice and narrative authority can offer unique affirmative qualities to stories about non-binary characters.

Hal Schriever's *Out of Salem* (2019) is narrated in close third person, and thus the protagonist's chosen name, Z, and their they/them pronouns, are consistently present on the page. As well as immediately coding Z as non-binary, the visibility of Z's neutral pronouns renders them the 'truth' of the text: the 'rules' that the narration follows. This narration creates an intriguing dissonance when, having been introduced to Z as 'Z' and as a genderqueer character, the reader then sees other characters referring to Z by she/her pronouns, as a girl, or by a different, feminine name. These characters are juxtaposed against the authorial third-person voice that is presented as objective and accurate, thus positioning these characters as

visibly incorrect. As Cadden examines, close third-person narration may be less direct than first-person narration, but its successful execution still relies on building a connection to the described character and a sense of their personal truths. The reader is still invited to accept that the characters do actually hold the thoughts attributed to them indirectly, and the portrayal of the character matches the thoughts reported from the narrator. Such indirect address has the same effect as first-person narration regarding the privileging of the YA consciousness in the text (Cadden 2000, p. 151).

Close third-person narration, then, contains the 'privileging of the YA consciousness' and the links to first-person authority from first-person perspective, while also potentially imbuing the text with a degree of omnipotent authority. Just as the reader understands that the thoughts and feelings of the characters are being reported accurately, narrative consistency leads them to understand that the building blocks of character description, such as names and pronouns, are being reported correctly by the third-person narrator. In *Out of Salem*, this strategy creates an intimate narrative even if the novel is not directly narrated by Z: the juxtaposition between the narrator's description of 'Z' and Z's perception by other characters mirrors and amplifies the fact that Z is in the closet and their genderqueer identity is unknown and misunderstood by those around them. This juxtaposition invites a sense of empathy and intimacy for the constructed, implied reader because they are invited into Z's personal sphere.

Crucially, Schrieve's use of third-person narration creates a refreshing tone in which Z does not need to 'prove' their genderqueerness to any party before the narration—the authoritative voice reporting the story—describes them with their chosen name and pronouns. Z's first-person authority is respected by the third-person authority of the text itself. Even if contested by other characters within the fiction, the extradiegetic narrator accepts Z's identity as a fact of the storyworld and presents it as such in a way the reader cannot ignore. Given the misunderstandings and structural lack of agency non-binary people face, there is an empowering element to a narrative context where non-binary identifications are recognised,

and the chosen names and pronouns of a character are simply accepted and presented as truth. Close third-person narration provides a space to play this recognition out, affirming non-binary identity within the construction of the narrative.

However, limited third-person narration is still *limited* and, as in first-person narration, the restricted perception has certain textual effects. Maggie Tokuda-Hall's *The Mermaid, the Witch, and the Sea* (2020) is told in close third-person voice with alternating perspectives, something the author ultimately uses to explore the genderfluidity of her protagonist and the way gender may be projected and presumed in different contexts. The non-binary protagonist alternates being referred to as Flora (with she/her pronouns on the page) and Florian (he/him) depending on circumstance and upon which character's perspective the reader is following. Chapters directly reporting Flora's thoughts and actions use 'she', but a character observing the Florian persona (a masculine disguise in the tradition of 'crossdressing' female pirates) and reading the sailor as male will use 'he'. These assumptions about Flora/Florian's gender create a cast full of unreliable narrators (save for Flora herself, in which first-person authority plays out in a third-person context: following that ethos, the reader can assume that the accurate report of this character's gender comes from within that character's perspective).⁴ This shifting point of view and the shifting pronouns that go with it 'mirrors the realistic nature of perspective' (Cadden 2000, p. 152), using situations in which the protagonist is effectively misgendered to capture the complicated and flawed nature of perception and the ways in which people make assumptions about the gender of others (see Vaid-Menon 2020).

Out of Salem and *The Mermaid, the Witch, and the Sea* both use their narration to separate the internal truth of their non-binary characters from the way they are perceived by others, placing these protagonists in unfriendly worlds but nonetheless providing acceptance and affirmation of their identities on a textual level. These narration techniques create a space for non-binary possibility and sites in which non-binary identity is marked as fact and narrative truth. However, this technique can potentially go deeper still if detached (almost) entirely from

popular convention to consider the least common form of narrative voice in YA literature: omniscient third-person, or the so-called ‘epic voice’ or ‘voice of god’.

Omniscient Narration

As YA author and scholar Gwenda Bond explores in her thesis *Eye for a God's Eye: The Bold Choice of the Omniscient Point of View in Fiction for Young Adults*, omniscient third-person narration is the least common choice of narrative voice in young adult fiction, save for a ‘stray oddity’ (2008, p. 21). Omniscient third-person narrative voice is associated with, as the name implies, omniscience: the story told from a ‘God’s-eye view’ (Morreal 1994, p. 432) wherein the narrator ‘is located, godlike, above and beyond the world of the story; [and] sees and knows everything’ (Fludernik 2009, p. 92). As Bond acknowledges, ‘the very grandness of omniscience’s “godlike” associations may have put off some writers—especially writers of ever-immediate teenage fiction—from using it’ (2008, p. 5).

A narrative voice that ‘floats above’ (Fludernik 2009, p. 92) the characters and recounts their observations to the reader is yet another degree of psychic distance from the ‘intimate portrait’ (Cadden 2000, p. 148) that some scholars consider central to YA literature. This high psychic distance also raises questions about the autonomy of the characters, whose thoughts and actions are overseen and dictated by an authoritative, cosmic voice. However, while it may not lend itself to every text, Bond argues for the potential of omniscient perspective in YA literature, citing works such as Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief* (2005), Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* series (1995-2000), and Judith Clarke’s *One Whole and Perfect Day* (2006) as examples that execute it well. In particular, Bond suggests that the omniscient narrative voice lends itself well to ‘the story about story’ (2008, p. 36), a playful, metatextual framework that adolescent readers are primed to engage with. Following from Bond’s suggestions, I argue that omniscient narration also has unique applications for playful queer storytelling, and—as I have

explored in my own creative research—may have an especially crucial role in stories of non-binary possibility.

Omniscient third-person narration is associated with early or traditional forms of storytelling, particularly epics, fairy tales, and myths. Narratologist Monica Fludernik calls the epic 'the prototypical narrative category' and notes that, typically, '[t]he epic has a bard, a narrator who tells the story' (2009, p. 4). As myths and epics were transcribed, the bardic format that had allowed the spread and survival of the tales became codified in the narrative voice associated with the form: '[w]orks such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, or even *Beowulf*, carry with them a storyteller or proto-omniscient narrator, with the ability to know all the story's secrets' (Bond 2008, p. 4). Convention constructs a scenario in which not only does the narrator 'know all the story's secrets', but 'enjoys the narratee's trust' that their recounting of these secrets is accurate (Fludernik 2009, p. 92). Trust is thus placed in the narrator as 'historian or chronicler' (2009, p. 91) because it is not narrative convention to have an unreliable narrator at the omniscient level. The audience is not positioned to question the report of omniscient third-person narration in the same way they may accept the limitations and bias of first-person or close third-person narration. Thus, the additional layer of affirmation that omniscient narration provides stems from the very "'godlike" associations' that may deter some writers from using it (Bond 2008, p. 5). If omniscient narration is the voice of an all-seeing and incontestable authority recounting the truth of the world and its events, then there is no arguing with this voice. When the omnipotent, objective narrator narrates that a character is non-binary, that naming is the immovable, accurate truth of the universe.

Following from Bond, I argue that omniscient narrative voice as a technique holds untapped potential, particularly in queer YA literature, where identities that may be questioned, dismissed, or vilified in reality may be affirmed and uplifted using the framework of fiction. At the time of writing, my research has not uncovered a YA novel with non-binary protagonists that employs this omniscient narrative voice. To explore this gap in the field, I developed a YA

fantasy work that utilises omniscient third-person narration as the creative component of my doctoral work. My manuscript, *Children of the Dusk*, is framed as a bardic storytelling session, with an unnamed narratee listening to the Stars (literally a cosmic narrator 'floating above' the story world) as the Stars recount a saga from 'the oldest days this world has seen, of the reign of magic and monsters' (Henderson 2023, p. 1). The writing style and framing device signpost the work's mythological and folkloric influences and thus establish the implied reader's generic expectations. The reader is invited to consider the Stars' report of events accurate and true, which includes basic, yet crucial, details like character names and pronouns.

As in *Out of Salem*, in *Children of the Dusk*, the characters' pronouns are simply placed in the text, a fact of the universe and a rule of the story, including the pronouns that the characters have chosen for themselves as expression of their own felt sense of gender. What omniscient third-person narration adds is the objectivity and incontestable correctness that comes with narrator omnipotence. Perspective (shifting or otherwise) is not anchored to any singular character and is thus not at the mercy of that character's assumptions, observations, or bias. An omniscient narrator cannot tell a story like *The Mermaid, the Witch, and the Sea* in which a person is gendered based on how a given focus character sees them. Likewise, an omniscient narrator cannot tell a story like *Euphoria Kids* where the unknowns of the first-person narrator impact their gendering of characters. While an omniscient narrator is, like a close-third-person narrator, 'able to see into the characters' minds', this narration mode is not limited to the reported perspective of its characters: the placement of the story's viewpoint 'is unrestricted or unlimited in contrast to the limitations of internal and external focalization' (Fludernik 2009, p. 38). This wide-ranging view is important to relaying the story to the reader and helping establish its rules and context to 'create a system of norms intended to make it easier for the reader to interpret the text' (p. 27). In this case, the matter-of-fact use of they/them pronouns is established as part of *Children of the Dusk*'s 'system of norms' early on. Even if

other characters misgender the non-binary heroes, the omniscient narrator affirms their gender identity as the truth, the rules, and the norm of the story.

This technique also fends off gendered assumptions that may become attached to the characters. As Lanser suggests, readers may unconsciously feel the need to ‘stabilize the text’ (2005, p. 389) by projecting binary gender onto characters whose gender identity is rendered ambiguous by the text. For instance, it may be tempting for a reader to interpret my non-binary protagonist, Cillian, as a young man, due to their characterisation and behaviour or the fact that the mythic archetype they inhabit is usually associated with male characters. The narrative provokes the image of binary identity, yet the narration rejects it, repeatedly and consistently using neutral pronouns to establish them, and the attached gender connotations, as part of the internal rules of the text and the world it represents.

However, I concluded from my experiment that omniscient narration alone is not enough as a narrative device for gender affirmation in adolescent narrative. Character autonomy is central to YA literature, and first-person authority is central to non-binary discourse and representation. Thus, I deployed a combination of ‘voice’ techniques. As well as being described by the Stars, the characters articulate their own felt sense of gender, using, as in the above examples from *Under Shifting Stars* and *Mask of Shadows*, expressive language in the absence of contemporary identity labels. Cillian does not say ‘I am non-binary’, but they express their non-binary identity multiple times to multiple characters, in dialogue such as ‘I am neither man nor maiden, and this is a truth as true as the silver of my eyes and the starlight in my blood’ (Henderson 2023, p. 171). I attempt to provide multiple levels of gender affirmation throughout the narrative: the characters articulate their felt sense of gender through dialogue, which comes to be understood as their truth via ‘first-person authority’, and this identity is recognised and cemented as truth by the omniscient narration—providing a vision of a fantasy world where queer affirmation is offered not just at the personal, but at the cosmic, level.

Conclusion

As Lanser explores across her body of work, narration itself can be considered queer, and should be considered as a lens through which to view queer representation in fictional texts. Narration and point of view should not be taken for granted as an element of non-binary storytelling, as different forms and styles can offer different benefits and risks to narratives exploring and expressing non-binary identity. First-person perspective facilitates Bettcher's concept of 'first-person authority', using the expectations and conventions of this narrative form to allow non-binary characters to 'use [their] own voice' (Thein and Sulzer 2015, p. 48) to cement their identity as textual truth. First-person narration also allows authors to play with the gender-neutral parameters of the singular 'I'. Close third-person narration, while often perceived as risking a loss of 'narrative intimacy' (Day 2013, p. 4), offers its own benefits by making neutral pronouns and chosen names visible, these aspects of gender presentation built into the text and marked as truthful via the authorial voice.

Finally, omniscient third-person narration holds underexplored potential. Associated with epics, sagas, and fairy tales (Bond 2008; Fludernik 2009), the 'voice of god' narrative voice is uncommon in YA literature, due to the decreased psychic distance between the characters and the implied reader. However, following from Bond, I argue that not only does the omniscient voice have its place in YA literature, but that it has useful applications in a narrative about genderqueer empowerment: it may use the 'voice of god' to affirm the existence and validity of genderqueer identity, the narration coded as incontestable and accurate, a storyworld in which queer identity is treated as a simple fact of the universe.

Each method, as I have shown, offers its own set of benefits and risks. I argue not that there is one best method with which to advance non-binary representation in YA literature, but that these methods be given due scholarly attention in discussions surrounding queer representation in YA literature. The ways in which authors give these representations a voice

are a crucial part of their impact on young readers and carry layered meanings that are valuable to explore. As the niche of non-binary YA literature continues to expand, as I expect it will in coming years (Henderson 2022), I invite my fellow scholars to keep one all-seeing eye on this area and the representational possibilities it presents.

Notes

1. Resources such as the Nonbinary Wiki attempt to document the evolving language of gender identity. See https://nonbinary.wiki/wiki/List_of_nonbinary_identities.
2. Though deeper discussion is out of scope, any exploration of queer fiction—particularly YA—deserves a mention of the #ownvoices movement. Coined by YA author Corinne Duyvis in 2015, #ownvoices was intended as a shorthand phrase connoting that a novel’s author shared the marginalised identity of the novel’s protagonist. Initially pitched as a book recommendation tool that would help marginalised readers and reviewers seek more ‘authentic’ representation, the discussion surrounding #ownvoices has bloomed far beyond its original context. I have chosen not to place emphasis on the #ownvoices status of the texts in this study, nor the gender identities of the authors, as for the purposes of this paper I find it more important to examine the content and construction of the novels rather than attempting to measure the ‘authenticity’ of their narrative voice. As Cadden explores, authenticity is difficult to measure in YA literature in the first place, and I acknowledge the limitations of such a metric and how it might distract from the analysis.
3. Lanser’s work examines how readers may project their own assumptions based on what they perceive to be quirks of voice or descriptions that they read as masculine or feminine. As she explores, ‘[a]lthough the narrator’s *sex* is never identified in [Jeanette Winterson’s 1992 novel] *Written on the Body*, for example, that absence surely does not stop readers from looking for *gender* markers through which to constitute the narrator’s sex and with it his/her sexuality—and hence to stabilize the text’ (Lanser 2005, p. 389, emphasis in original). She codifies this

tendency of readers to attempt to gender narration in order to 'stabilize' it as 'Lanser's rule'; however, she returns to complicate the theory throughout her later work (see Lanser 2018).

4. For instance, I am presuming she/her are the correct pronouns for this character, as those are the ones used in Flora/Florian's own narration, even after she concludes she is 'a girl, and also a boy ... herself, or himself. Both were equally true to her. Neither told the whole story' (Tokuda-Hall 2020, p. 256) towards the end of the novel.

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