

Segundo Congreso Internacional de Ciencias Humanas "Actualidad de lo clásico y saberes en disputa de cara a la sociedad digital". Escuela de Humanidades, Universidad Nacional de San Martín, San Martín, 2022.

A Book Of One's Own: Gender Diversity and Non Binary Identities Represented in Recent Literature.

Bica, Paola Bica y Gómez, Rocío.

Cita:

Bica, Paola Bica y Gómez, Rocío (2022). *A Book Of One's Own: Gender Diversity and Non Binary Identities Represented in Recent Literature*. Segundo Congreso Internacional de Ciencias Humanas "Actualidad de lo clásico y saberes en disputa de cara a la sociedad digital". Escuela de Humanidades, Universidad Nacional de San Martín, San Martín.

Dirección estable: <https://www.aacademica.org/2.congreso.internacional.de.ciencias.humanas/262>

ARK: <https://n2t.net/ark:/13683/eoQd/edd>



Esta obra está bajo una licencia de Creative Commons.
Para ver una copia de esta licencia, visite
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.es>.

Acta Académica es un proyecto académico sin fines de lucro enmarcado en la iniciativa de acceso abierto. Acta Académica fue creado para facilitar a investigadores de todo el mundo el compartir su producción académica. Para crear un perfil gratuitamente o acceder a otros trabajos visite: <https://www.aacademica.org>.

A Book of One's Own: Gender Diversity and Non Binary Identities Represented in Recent Literature

Paola Bica
UNSAM- UNAHUR
pbica@abc.gob.ar

Rocío Gómez
TEIFEM
rociogomez@gmail.com

Resumen

Non binary representations openly discussed in literature are a rather recent phenomenon, which goes hand in hand with the social changes witnessed in these past decades.

In this essay, books such as *Gender Failure* (Coyote, Spoon, 2014), *Symptoms of Being Human* (Garvin, 2016), *None of the Above* (Gregorio, 2015), *I Wish You All the Best* (Deaver, 2019) will be analyzed in order to explore how these examples introduce the reader to different perspectives which escape gender normativity.

For this purpose, we will discuss a variety of topics, including pronouns and language representations, visibility of non binary experiences, discrimination and resisting binary norms. Authors related to gender discourse, for example, Judith Butler, Riki Wilchins and Mauro Cabral, will be consulted.

Gender; literature; non binary; language; discrimination

Ponencia (versión sintética)

Introduction

Years ago, the idea of reading about openly non binary characters was unheard of. While some enby characters could be found 'disguised' in literature, as in Shakespearean plays, they did not truly represent the non binary community or reflect their conflicts. Nowadays, we can find a wide variety of narratives that escape the binary, dealing with themes of resistance, struggles and non gender normative experiences.

Treatment through language, discrimination, and 'being outside the norm' all play an important role in discourse.

In this essay, we shall analyze four assorted works (three fictional and an autobiographical one) written by both non binary and cisgender authors, to be able to explore different perspectives and allow our investigation to be more insightful. Said books are as follows: *Symptoms of Being Human* (Garvin, 2016), *None of the Above* (Gregorio, 2015) written by cis, endosex authors; *Gender Failure* (Coyote, Spoon, 2014) and *I Wish You All the Best* (Deaver, 2019) written by non binary authors.

Our theoretical background, on the other hand, shall be based on researchers and writers such as Judith Butler, Manon Reuling and Ana Horvat.

Development

None of the above (Gregorio,2015) is a young adult piece of fiction which describes the inner fights an intersex girl, Kristin, has to face. The reaffirmation of her female identity is a topic developed throughout the story and, in her fight to be “normal”, the discrimination appears. For instance, she compares herself with an intersex athlete, Caster Semenya, “I trudged up the stairs to my bedroom, telling myself, I don’t look like Caster. I look like a woman. I am a woman.” (p.152); she is a victim of discrimination who also discriminates against others.

Her thoughts seem to be quite hetero-cis-normative until an advanced point of her story and she cannot escape from the male-female dichotomy, “I wondered what they thought of when they saw me. Did they see a girl? A boy? Could they tell something was wrong?” (p.133) Her language is hateful and rude in several occasions, showing how reluctant she is towards the idea of non being, as she says, “normal”, expressing her essentialist point of view in a cruel way, “I’d seen a couple of articles, and couldn’t really understand why some people were so militant against surgery (...) how could someone not want to be fixed?” (p.146) The use of words such as *wrong* or *fixed* can have a great impact. Even though it is important to offer a variety of LGTB+ stories in the market, Kristin rejections towards her intersex identity, in addition to the language she uses, are dangerous, taking into account that the book points to young adult readers who can look for inspirational perspectives in books related to gender diversity and minorities.

Contrasting the discovery of Kristin’s identity and her rejection towards the idea of escaping gender binarism, Ben, the main character in *I Wish You All The Best* (Deaver, 2019) -also a Young Adults piece of fiction- is a proud nonbinary teenager who struggles to express their enby identity. Language is a central topic in their story, more specifically, the proper use of personal pronouns and how important it is for a non binary person to be recognized as they are and perceive themselves. “Like, what do you do when your parents kick you out of your

house? When your entire life is upheaved, all because you wanted to come out, to be respected and seen, to be called the right pronouns?" (p.21)

There are also educational aspects as regards gender and language, for instance, non binary expressions related to members of the family, "Ben. Can I call you bro? That's not okay, right? I should find something else.' On the message boards, I found many enby people asked their brothers and sisters to call them sib, short for 'sibling.'" (p.46) In both cases, the topic of language and gender is widely covered. In the case of *None of The Above*, Kristin explains the necessity of gender neutral expressions:

(I) remembered the hours I spent memorizing the gender of certain nouns in French class. Hats and fish are masculine. Freedom and lemonade are feminine. "So what am I?" I closed my eyes to remember the word my teacher had used when she told us that Russian actually had three genders. "Neuter? (p.57)

In the case of *I Wish You All The Best*, the treatment of how misgendering can affect people is strongly remarked upon. Moreover, the main character expresses how it can affect someone physically, "Every time Nathan uses the wrong pronouns for me, it feels like a stab to the gut." (p. 270) What the writer exposes is related to the words of Judith Butler, "being called a name is also one of the conditions by which a subject is constituted in language."(p.2)

There is one instance where the protagonist is gendered in a violent interaction in *Symptoms of Being Human* (Garvin, 2016). While two classmates are discussing Riley's gender (out loud), one of them calls Riley *it*, "No,' another girl says. 'That has to be a . . .' 'Yeah, but look what it's wearing.' (p.9) Regarding this act of transphobia, Manon Reuling states in *Multiplicity and Movement* that, "Being called 'it' (...) presents the idea that when you do not have an identifiable gender, you are not a person, but an object, a space of social crisis. The person termed it is de-humanized in a world of normative genders." (p.43)

On the other hand, pronouns are a central part in Coyote and Spoon's narrative, *Gender Failure* (2014). The following paragraph explains how Coyote feels about being misgendered:

But the truth is that every time I am misgendered, a tiny little sliver of me disappears. A tiny little sliver of me is reminded that I do not fit, I am not this, I am not that, I am not seen, I can't be recognized, I have no name. (p.246)

They also talk about the importance of representation and community in the trans and non binary experience. Being acquainted with more and more people with "they/them" pronouns allowed them to recognize themselves in it and break free of binary impositions," I began to see

the benefits of using them. It dragged me out of an identity that had been previously cemented because I thought being a man was the only way to move away from my assigned sex.” (p.201)

In reading these four books, whether their authors are non binary or not makes a big difference. Books written by cis and endosex writers do not show the true nuances of the non binary and intersex experience and, furthermore, tend to stereotype the characters in a harmful way, resorting to either a highly binary point of view or a tragic story.

This trend is problematic, given the “*transness as tragedy*” approach, where, in the words of Ana Horvat, “characters have little agency in the face of the near-comical amount of abuse” (p. 80).

This concept is very clear in “Symptoms of Being Human”, showing not one, but two instances of abuse in which the attackers want to see and photograph Riley’s genitals. The first incident and an instance of great pressure and gender dysphoria throw the character into a terrible panic attack, resulting in a suicide attempt and Riley’s committal in a mental hospital (p. 192) (p.213) (p. 214). Not only does Riley go through this experience, Riley’s love interest, Bec, is revealed to have had a trans sister who committed suicide when they were younger. In said revelation, this girl’s gender identity acts as a cheap aha moment for the audience to discover.

This point can also be extrapolated to general non binary experiences. In *Gender Failure*, we can see the contrast in the experiences of the narrator in dealing with a cis person, “My roommate caught me putting it on in our bathroom and told me that she would call me ‘he’ if I wanted, but that she would never see me as a man.” (p. 103) as opposed to another trans person, “I also told him that I wanted to be treated like a guy and referred to as ‘he’ too. It felt so great when we parted and he said to me, ‘See you later, man.’” (p. 103)

Conclusion

Nowadays, non binary narratives are more readily available than ever. While their number is nowhere near that of gay, or even binary trans narratives, progress has certainly been made in literature.

The books we have analyzed all have several themes in common: the rupture with binary hegemony, the importance of language for non binary identities, discrimination, the importance of community and representation, among others.

However, not all non binary narratives are the same. Those books written by cis and endosex writers were often lacking, even stigmatizing and harmful for the community. Therefore, we must be careful about what we read and especially what we recommend to younger generations who are still developing their sense of self and their gender identity.

Bibliografía y referencia bibliográficas

Butler, J. (1988) *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*. Theatre Journal 40, no. 4

Butler, J. (1997) *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. Routledge

Cabral, M., Benzur, G. (2005) *Cuando digo intersex: un diálogo introductorio a la intersexualidad*. Núcleo de Estudos de Gênero - Pagu. Universidade Estadual de Campinas.

Garvin, J. (2016) *Symptoms of Being Human*. California: Balzer + Bray.

Horvat, A. (2021) "Trans is Hot Right Now": On Cisgender Writers and Trans Characters in Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein* and Kim Fu's *For Today I Am a Boy*. Gender Forum. An Internet Journal for Gender Studies. Issue 79. Universität zu Köln.

I. W. Gregorio (2015) *None of the Above*. California: Balzer + Bray.

Mason D. (2019) *I Wish You All the Best*. North Carolina: Push.

Reuling, M (2018). *Multiplicity and Movement: construction of genderqueer identities in Orlando, Middlesex and Symptoms of being Human*. Utrecht University. Literature Today.

Spoon, Rae, and Ivan Coyote. (2014) *Gender Failure*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press.

Wilchins, R. A. (2004) *Queer theory, gender theory: an instant primer*. Los Angeles: Alyson Books.