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with
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What Story, What Identity, Wattpad?
Teaching Youth to Restory YA Literature

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Wattpad opens the doors and enlarges the view in places where the doors are closed and the view is restricted. And somewhere out there in Wattpadland, a new generation is testing its wings.

—Margaret Atwood (2012)

I distinctly remember the first time I watched *The Pagemaster* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qgl2gnri940). The film catapulted me through time and space as it followed the misadventures of a young Macaulay Culkin battling "his way through the world's greatest adventure" (TheTrailerGal, 2016). Shifting through an array of canonical literature from Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) to Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), the film led me to view each of the many books I read as its own imaginative world—emotional spaces of fantasy in which I might love, laugh, cry, fear, and imagine. *Fair warning:* If you haven't seen the film, Ahab and the White Whale will haunt you long into adulthood.

Finding myself reflected in the translucently white, bookish Culkin, it was not until some years later that I recognized where that coming-of-age story, one filled with all the action, adventure, and fantasy seemingly requisite for young boys, failed me. While Culkin's retreat into the imaginative world of books

stemmed from an actuarial-like fear of death, my own retreat stemmed from a desire to find a queer[1] boy like me reflected in the YA books I read. I never found one.

Contrary to my own childhood, young adults today have unprecedented access to representations of queer youth in YA literature and film, and when mainstream publishing fails, they are taking matters into their own hands. Harnessing digital platforms, these youth are writing themselves into existence as they *restory* both YA literature and the world. According to Thomas and Stornaiuolo (2016), restorying is the process of "reshaping narratives to better reflect a diversity of perspectives and experiences" (p. 314). It involves filling gaps and expanding representations by publishing diverse, self-authored stories on digital platforms. Publicly accessible, these stories alter some aspect of an original text—identity, place, mode, perspective, metanarrative, or time—and in doing so, create *mirrors* and *windows* (Bishop, 1990) through which youth, particularly youth from marginalized backgrounds, "write themselves into stories that have heretofore marginalized, silenced, and excluded them" (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016, p. 317).

Queer and trans youth, in particular, are mobilizing 21st-century digital technologies to restory dominant trends in LGBTQ YA literature and, by publishing their stories on digital platforms like Wattpad, are writing themselves into intersectional existence. Overthrowing those pagemasters of yore, these young people daily demonstrate their collaborative mastery of the digital page as they spotlight the range of

genders, sexualities, abilities, and racial identities that exist within the greater queer and trans communities. Pushing the boundaries of the imagination, such re-storying practices challenge the manifold instances of cultural erasure, stereotyping, and caricaturing that have persisted throughout the history of LGBTQ literature and film for young people (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016). Furthermore, this process of refashioning stories holds great promise for advancing reading and instruction in ELA classrooms.

In this column, I consider how teachers can use Wattpad to cultivate a restorying practice with students that develops skills in reading and writing, all while infusing the world with new, more diverse stories. Using the YA text *Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda* (Albertalli, 2016), I provide strategies for restorying novels in ELA classrooms and for supporting students as they engage with fellow Wattpadians from across the globe. I conclude by explaining how teachers might introduce restorying practices into their classrooms, by beginning with *bending* characters' identities. Inviting students to reshape novels and identities to reflect their own lived experiences, teachers can support students as they harness digital platforms to restory YA literature and, ultimately, the world.

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Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda: A Quick Introduction

Between 2015 and 2017, the publication of LGBTQ YA print novels by mainstream publishers increased by 46% (Lo, 2017), and several of those novels have even been adapted for the big screen. *Love, Simon* (Berlanti, 2018), a blockbuster sensation, is one such film. Adapted from Becky Albertalli's award-winning novel *Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda, Love, Simon* became the 14th highest grossing "Teen Romance" of all time (Box Office Mojo, n.d.). A coming-of-age romance with a twist, this novel/film combo follows white, middle-class Simon Spier, a closeted high schooler, as he falls in love with a digital pen pal, Blue, and is subsequently blackmailed and outed to his school community. Simon's story conjures age-old questions about love and loss, yet contextualizes them within the contemporary realities of queer young adulthood. A national phenomenon, *Love, Simon*'s success represents a marked expansion in LGBTQ representation and gestures toward a fundamental need for queer and trans youth alike: these youth deserve to see their experiences reflected in books and on screens and to find love waiting for them at the end of the story.

Nonetheless, no single YA novel or film can capture the rich diversity of the queer and trans communities, and where representations fail, youth are writing themselves into existence. For instance, while *Love, Simon* demonstrates inclusion along lines of sexuality, race, ethnicity, and religion, it neglects intersectional perspectives[2] and thus reinforces historical trends in LGBTQ YA literature that foreground the experiences of white, affluent gays and lesbians to the exclusion of people of color and transgender individuals.

For example, in 2016, 81% of protagonists in LGBTQ YA literature self-defined as cisgender[3], thus relegating trans representation to a mere 15 YA novels. Racial diversity similarly merits increased representation within LGBTQ YA. For as we know from the "Diversity in Children's Books 2015" infographic (https://readingspark.wordpress.com/2016/09/14/picture-this-reflecting-diversity-in-childrens-book-publishing/), white protagonists dominate 73.3% of children's book publishing (Dahlen, 2016). While mainstream publishing is slowly increasing diverse representation, many youth remain unappeased by such gradual shifts and are instead catalyzing change by reading, writing, and publishing stories on the digital platform Wattpad.

Wattpad: Open Access Technology for Readers and Writers

An open source platform, Wattpad advertises itself as a space for reading and writing across genres that range from romance and fanfiction to science fiction and mystery. (For the adventurous, Wattpad's also offers a werewolf-themed genre). A repository of stories

written by authors from across the globe, Wattpad allows anyone to craft and publish their writing for a public audience and to cultivate online communities through engagement in *Club Discussions* (https://www.wattpad.com/clubs), *The Watty Awards* (http://wattys.wattpad.com/), and *Writing Contests* (https://www.wattpad.com/go/writing-contests/). Since its launch in 2006, Wattpad has enrolled over 65 million users and published more than 400 million user-generated stories.

Through general or in-line comments, students can cultivate dialogue and build community with readers and writers from across the globe. Boasting a pool of stories as diverse as their writers, Wattpad provides readers with literary *mirrors* reflecting their own experiences and *windows* to new experiential horizons (Bishop, 1990). As described by CEO Allen Lua, Wattpad "empower[s] diverse storytellers all over the world, helping them build a community of passionate readers" (Spangler, 2018). A platform of imagination, collaboration, and ultimately publication, Wattpad supports young writers by providing digital and in-person support to wordsmiths in training.

Teaching Readers and Writers to Restory Ethically with Wattpad

Integrated into classrooms, Wattpad becomes a powerful pedagogical tool for developing students' reading and writing skills through acts of restorying. To do so, however, educators must first consider one major ethical question: *Who has the right to tell what story?* Historically, youth from marginalized backgrounds have been the primary users of restorying, harnessing digital platforms to expand representation in mainstream publishing (Thomas, 2016). Moreover, these individuals have traditionally written their *own* stories into existence. To tell a story is to exercise power, and to misrepresent a community is to cause harm. Accordingly, students must be cautious when writing stories, particularly when those stories do not mirror their lived experiences; this is particularly true for students from dominant backgrounds whose potential to cause harm is amplified.

To mitigate such harm, teachers should direct students to learn about the history of the communities they represent by engaging in critical reading practices and by collaborating with individuals from that community. This should occur prior to publishing

> ## Wattpad Resources
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> Wattpad. (2018). *Clubs*. Retrieved from https://www.wattpad.com/clubs.
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any story. In a world of increasing diversity, misrepresentation and harm will occur; that does not mean, however, that we stop writing. Instead, we must learn to read, write, and restory in ethical ways.

For readers, Wattpad proves particularly useful when layered into ongoing classroom literacy practices to supplement a novel study. For the study of *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, teachers might invite students to search Wattpad for publications that restory some aspect of the primary text. Once they find these publications, students might dialogue critically with authors and other readers regarding the purpose of the changes to the novel. Such dialogue provides fertile ground for students to become *critical fans* who "encourage discussion through individual contribution and empathetic conversation" (Booth, 2015). Using the in-line or general comment functions, students can inquire into fan restorying practices, asking questions such as:

- Why did you change _____?
- Why was it important for you to write the story in this way?
- Your story differed from my own experiences in _____ way. Could you explain why you wrote your story in this way?
- How do you think your story would be different if you changed _____ instead?

Becoming a critical fan on Wattpad promotes ethical reading stances that highlight the relationships be-

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tween identity, power, and stories as they shift across cultures. Furthermore, critical fan interactions promote skills in navigating online cultures, participating in transnational dialogue, and furthering critical orientations among youth. A welcome environment for readers of all comfort levels, Wattpad allows students to build skills as readers, all while preparing them to write and restory based upon their own lived experiences and identities.

Wattpad also provides a space for teachers to create authentic writing tasks tailored for diverse, international audiences. Returning to our example of *Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda*, teachers might ask students to alter the novel by restorying one of six aspects of Simon's narrative: identity, place, mode,

perspective, metanarrative, time (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016). Figure 1 provides examples of restorying activities teachers might use to develop writing skills.

Although Figure 1 is tailored to *Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda,* teachers can alter these activities to other YA texts and films. Additionally, they should be prepared for students to develop novel restorying practices based upon their personal experiences and the stories they need to tell. Stories are powerful, intimate expressions of personal life, and students will find exciting and often unexpected ways to share their experiences with the world.

Begin with Bending

For teachers seeking to introduce restorying practices into their ELA classroom, restorying identity is a great place to start. Referred to as *bending*, restorying identity allows students to draw from their personal experiences, which positions them as both knowers and authors of their own stories. Bending is adaptable in that it conforms to nearly any identity; furthermore, it has been the primary means by which marginalized youth are expanding representation on Wattpad. Some common forms of bending include *racebending, genderbending, queerbending,* and *classbending*, all of

Restory What?	Restory How?	Activity	Possible Responses
Identity	Bending	Restory a scene from *Simon* in which you *bend* some aspect of Simon's identity. Be sure to convey how the story would change.	Depict how different cultural expectations around gender might impact the coming out experience of a Latinx Simon.
Place	Alteverse	Restory the first chapter of *Simon* as if it were taking place in an alternative universe, such as the world of Marvel's *The Avengers* or *Black Panther.*	Depict how setting the novel in a world with superheroes, such as Wakanda, would change Simon's use of technology and connection to Blue.
Mode	Transmedia Storytelling	Restory a section from *Simon* in the form of a graphic novel or digital story.	Storyboard or draw several panels of a comic depicting a scene from the novel.
Perspective	Counter-storytelling	Restory a section from *Simon* from the perspective of Martin Addison or Blue.	Try and convey Martin's goofiness and insecurities to make him and the blackmailing he experiences sympathetic to the reader.
Metanarrative	Collective Storytelling	Restory dominant trends in LGBTQ YA literature that privilege white, affluent, cis-gender protagonists. With peers, compose several stories that *bend* or alter Simon's race, class, or gender.	Create a series of stories that depict Simon as a person of color, of lower and/or higher socioeconomic status, and as a woman or gender-variant individual.
Time	Alternate History	Restory *Simon* as if it took place in an alternative time period in which queer justice looked different.	Depict how Simon's story might be different were same-sex love still considered a mental illness.

Figure 1. Restorying in Classrooms

which transition easily to classroom spaces.

As a classroom activity, teachers might ask students to bend some aspect of a protagonist's identity and consider how that would alter the story overall. For instance, how would *Simon* need to be rewritten if the protagonist were a woman, transgender, a person of color, and/or Muslim? If Simon's identity were changed, would Blue's gender and sexuality need to change to maintain the novel's queer storyline? Might Simon's dialect need to change if he were from a region or country other than the US Deep South? How might descriptions of attire change based upon religious practices? These are just a few aspects that students might consider when they bend Simon's identity.

Bending also provides great opportunities for students to publish their own experiences on Wattpad, sharing aspects of their identities with a willing and waiting audience. Teachers should encourage students to consider their intended audience as they craft their stories and to be aware of how that audience shapes the way they represent their identities. As Wattpad is an open-source global platform, stories will likely draw readers from across the globe. As a result, understandings of race, sexuality, gender, and ability might differ, and readers may or may not be familiar with their identities.

To consider their audience, students might reflect upon the following: *For whom are you writing this story? What about your identity are you hoping to convey to your reader? Are you writing a mirror for others like you or a window for individuals different from you?* Considering audience helps students tailor their restorying efforts and represent their identities in a manner most aligned to their writing goals. Furthermore, imagining an audience has the potential to help students find the community of readers they are hoping to reach as well as choose the right Wattpad tags: #LoveSimon #Queer, #Trans, #Muslim, #POC.

Finally, when teaching students to restory identity, teachers should enact several key factors: 1) present examples of ethical bending first, 2) create space for critical discussion, and 3) remember when assessing that bending identity is personal. Take, for example, Figure 1's proposed activity for restorying identity: *Restory a scene from* Simon *in which you* bend *some aspect of Simon's identity. Be sure to con-vey how the story would change.* Teachers might first provide students with exemplar Wattpad stories in which youth have bent some aspect of Simon's identity to reflect their own. This will help mitigate the creation of new, harmful representations that perpetuate cultural erasure, stereotyping, and caricaturing in YA literature and film. Following the publication of student stories, teachers should then guide critical discussions about those stories, spotlighting the importance of restorying for both the authors and their readers (refer to critical fan questions above for guidance). Last, when assessing stories about identity, remember that though the stories are fictional, they are infused with personal experience. Students' lives serve as the templates for their stories; to share those stories with teachers, classmates, and all of Wattpad-land takes a great deal of bravery and vulnerability. Assessing, in this case, should focus more on the restorying process rather than on students' products.

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Conclusion

Youth are restorying YA literature and the world. They are writing themselves into intersectional existence and finding on Wattpad a means to fashion more diverse futures through the stories they tell. These stories reshape worn-out narratives, revitalizing them with yet-untold experiences that push against the very boundaries of the imagination. It is high time such practices, forged by youth in digital fan spaces, were introduced into ELA classrooms and utilized to develop students' skills as readers, writers, and restoryers. Through Wattpad, teachers can amplify student's stories, teaching them to harness that digital platform as a space for restorying dominant narratives of the past, for envisioning new literary worlds in the present, and for crafting diverse stories that bend towards a more just future.

Endnotes

1. "Queer" in this paper aligns with but does not exclusively imply LGBTQ identification; instead, queer refers to a way-of-being often marked as socially deviant and nonnormative. Queerness further intersects but is not necessarily synonymous with trans, racial, classed, and disabled ways of being. When talking about specific communities, I will honor that community's self-designation, and when quoting or referring to a text, my use of terminology will mirror the terminology deployed by that text.
2. Intersectionality is a theory of oppression proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) that considers how multiple identity categories intersect to generate a particular matrix of oppression for certain individuals. For more on intersectionality and its application to YA literature, see Gill's (2016) article in *The ALAN Review.*
3. While often considered the opposite of transgender, cisgender (http://www.transstudent.org/definitions/) might be thought of more simply as individuals who identify as neither transgender nor gender variant. However, per transgender studies scholar Susan Stryker (2017), cisgender might more productively be used as a way to think about privilege and how aspects of gender identity and expression afford social privileges.

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