in my work as a literary critic and an educator of future teachers of teenaged students, I am very interested in the ways identity is constructed in and through young adult literature. My research into contemporary youth culture has led me to adopt the view that contemporary subjectivity is largely performative; that is, in order to become "ourselves," we select and enact certain scripts made available by our culture that then, through repetition and adjustments made according to the kinds of responses we get, form the basis of our public identities. Those identities, I believe, are a result of a dynamic negotiation of our particular embodiment, our body images, and the signifiers we privilege and reject, all mediated through a cultural framework that is itself always in some degree of flux or change.

Developmental psychologists inform us that we are most actively engaged in identity formation during our teen years, so the literature and media that we engage with during those years provide many of the cultural scripts that show us what is possible, desirable, and anathema in terms of identity construction. These scripts encode ideologies regarding race, class, gender, and ethnicity, as well as the subject positions that are configured through these discourses. Personal identity, then, is ultimately constructed as a nexus within these various discourses according to the degree of submission or subversion that we adopt with regard to them. For instance, the public performance of gender operates along a continuum of signifiers (including the sonic qualities of spoken language as well as visual representations), behaviors, and even body postures and gestures that are typically considered masculine and feminine, so that my friend, Marie, for instance, has always felt deficiently feminine because she can't sing soprano. She has, according to her embodiment and her acceptance of the gender identity that typically accrues to her type of body, identified herself as a female. But further, she has identified a particular vocal range as a cultural signifier of femininity, adopted a stance to it as privileged or ideal, and then judged herself as lacking with respect to it, and, in consequence, to her position as a woman. The same things happen with regard to race and ethnicity; cultural scripts map and rehearse iterative signifiers for particular racial or ethnic inheritances, and people have to decide how to position themselves with respect to both their bodies and those signifiers. The pressures and conflicts of
identity construction thus do not all come from within, as part of our psychic or physical 
structure and attributes, but are negotiated according to the dynamics of cultural 
scripts interacting with personal stances. It is therefore important to consider youth 
literature and media as something more than a mirror passively reflecting characters, 
settings, and cultural dynamics, and instead consider the representations of characters 
as part of an active feedback loop that teen readers look to as they try out the values, 
images, and beliefs that they will adopt as their own.

Considering cultural minorities in children's literature and verbal culture enables us 
to consider representations of identities that somehow differ from the hegemonic 
structures of the dominant cultures of the countries where they live. Children whose 
skin color, ethnicity, and language place them in a minority position are thought to 
be especially vulnerable to representations that either exclude them altogether or 
provide scripts that present them in an unfavorable light. Such scripts denigrate their 
very existence in their cultural landscape by consciously or unconsciously relegating 
them to minor roles, or casting them as underdeveloped, stereotyped supports for the 
dominant culture and its privileged character types. And as with all media or literary 
representations, it is not the individual instance that makes a difference in how a culture 
perceives or encodes a particular character, but the weight of repeated images linked 
with particular characteristics that creates the montage effect that turns a character 
into a type representing his or her culture, gender, race, ethnicity, etc.

In my work as a reviewer of some twelve new young adult books per month, I am fortunate 
to be able to attend not only to individual instances of identity construction, but also 
to trends that emerge in the corpus, particularly with respect to the representation of 
cultural minorities. Often, the first step is the emergence of cultural minorities from 
invisibility in the literature to any sort of representation at all. Children's literature critic 
Rudine Sims has marked and analyzed what came after both demeaning images and 
invisibility for the representation of black characters in American children's literature, 
noting that the literature since 1965 has gone through a series of stages as it progressed 
toward a very specific set of socializing goals, namely, "to promote racial harmony, to 
promote American cultural homogeneity, or to provide self-affirmation for Afro-American 
children" (Sims 1982: 103). In her book Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience 
in Contemporary Children's Fiction, Sims argues that books featuring black characters in the 
late 60s and early 70s were most often realistic fiction that focused on developing a 
social conscience. Their emphasis was on the issues that went along with desegregation, 
including "how to behave when the black folks move in" and "learning how to get along 
with whites" while "working [for change and justice] within the system" (31-32). The next 
movement in the literature that Sims notes is a shift toward the melting pot, that is, 
an ideological emphasis on the concept that "people are people are people" (33), and 
that external differences such as skin color and other physical markers of race don't 
matter. These books place an emphasis on experiences shared by children everywhere, 
including sibling relationships and growing pains, as well as the integration of black 
into mainstream culture, which basically meant accepting the values of the white 
middle class and ignoring the social and economic problems that continue to plague 
black communities as well as the distinctiveness of their cultural traditions. The final 
stage that Sims identifies is what she calls "culturally conscious" literature that seeks 
to consciously attend to the specific traditions, frustrations, and triumphs of African-
American life experience. Although she presents her survey as a historical continuum, 
my reading of contemporary literature featuring black characters shows that examples 
of each of the phases she describes are still being produced, as well as a newer trend that 
seeks to disentangle race from economic class and features culturally conscious fiction 
where the color that matters most is the "green" of material wealth.

Christine Jenkins and Michael Cart productively adopt Sims's categories in their survey 
of LGBTQ characters in young adult literature since 1969, and I would follow their lead 
in asserting that both the trends Sims identifies and the goals she articulates have 
broad applicability in charting the development of representations of any cultural 
minority in a nation's mainstream literature for children. It is certainly the case with 
the representation of religious identities other than Christian or Jewish in mainstream 
publications for young adults (although I will argue further that any sort of religious 
identity has achieved the status of a cultural minority in contemporary western 
cultures). As is the case with LGBTQ characters, a character's religious affiliation is not an 
immediately evident as his or her racial or ethnic identity, and yet it is, for many teens, 
an aspect of identity that sets them apart from mainstream culture at the same time 
as it provides an alternate group affiliation. In other words, specific religious affiliation 
often constitute cultural minorities, and are certainly treated as such in contemporary 
young adult literature, with all of the attendant difficulties of negotiating a minority 
identity in a majority culture that is resistant to its values, beliefs and priorities. As 
with LGBTQ teens, the temptation to hide their non-mainstream religious identity 
is great, since exposure may lead to ridicule and stereotyping. Finally, though the 
increasing demand for representation of cultural minorities in youth literature has 
opened the possibility for the frank exploration of the difficulties of living out their 
special demands of a particular faith tradition.

Both Christian and Jewish religious identities have a fairly robust representation 
youth literature, but it is significant to note that these representations are large 
relegated to historical fiction, mostly centering on the Holocaust. Books focusing on 
contemporary teen identities tend to relegate religious affiliation to the sidelines 
when a character's priorities, if it is mentioned at all, which is usually isn't. It appears that 
what we believe about whether there is a God, what God's attributes are, whether he 
is paying attention, and what our response should be. The events of 9/11/01 and the 
outlook that has opened another such opportunity for us to ask what we believe, wh
others believe, and how those beliefs can be so important that they are worth killing and dying for. The secularized cultures of the West have been caught rather flat-footed by the idea that a religious belief could be so important to people that they would kill themselves and others and risk violent retaliation on its behalf; we retreat to the false security that such violence can’t really be religiously motivated and thus must have a more reasonable political or material remedy that ignores religious commitments. And in fact, most civilians would not be willing to kill for their religious belief, even if they might be willing to die for it. So many questions arise in the aftermath of these sorts of events, and literature offers one of the more open-minded cultural supports that enable teens to sort through those questions without prescribing answers, and enables them to imaginatively see into the lives and minds of people who may think very differently than they do, as well as to clarify what they themselves believe.

Without the pressure of broad societal discussions about religious differences, however, coming-of-age seems to happen, in YA literature at least, in a spiritual vacuum. Decisions that would have moral components in the context of faith traditions, for instance, such as whether or not to have sex before marriage, are simply not set in those contexts for the most part. But events such as the Holocaust and terrorist attacks move religious identity from its status as a holiday-oriented, maybe-I’ll-think-about-that-later-once-I’ve-got-other-things-sorted-out concern to a pressing issue that requires teens to confront who they are, spiritually speaking, as well as what others believe. Classrooms may house a range of students happily ignorant of each other’s belief systems until the urgency of understanding demanded by events such as 9/11 brings unrealized prejudices and fears to the fore. Since 2001, then, there has been a small uptick in representations of teenaged characters exploring religious identities as cultural minorities in mainstream settings. Randa Abdel-Fattah’s Does My Head Look Big in This? (2005) and Ten Things I Hate about Me (2006), Medea Sharif’s Bestest. Ramadan. Ever. (2011), and Farhana Zia’s The Garden of my Inman (2013) all feature Muslim girls in mainstream Australian and American schools who have to decide whether or not to wear hijab. In each book, the issue is one of broad exposure of their religious identity; with the exception of Jamilah in Ten Things I Hate About Me, who is completely committed to hiding her Lebanese-Muslim background, the main characters each have a small group of friends who know they are Muslim, but they do not want to be recognized as such by their broader school community, especially the bullies and haters who bully them in with the extremists who commit acts of terrorism. The cultural scripts that cast all Muslims as dangerous fundamentalists are much more readily available to teens than scripts such as these books which seek to promote intercultural understanding as well as support young women in making decisions that are carefully considered rather than resulting from knee-jerk conformity to either the values of their families or their peers.

Representations of religious identity are not just limited to Muslim girls, however. Depictions of Amish, Evangelical Christian, Catholic, Buddhist, and Jewish teens have also appeared in recent years, all cast in the light that a character’s commitment to a particular faith tradition results in them being a cultural minority and potentially a social outcast. Real spiritual commitment is viewed as a curious oddity among teens, largely I would argue, because such commitment has been excluded from mainstream public identity scripts since the late 60s, when freedom of religion began to be seen as a religious freedom from religion. Of course that divorce has a much longer cultural history in the West. Indeed, since the European Enlightenment, Europe, Australia, and North America have seen a shift from the dominance of Judeo-Christian ideologies toward less monotheistic, more diverse sets of values, cultural meanings, and worldviews. A strong commitment to rationalism and empiricism in scientific inquiry as well as increased levels of physical migration and cultural exchange through new media technologies have done some of the work of displacing Christianity as the dominant civil religion of Europe, Australia, and North America, but the real displacement, as theorized by Charles Taylor and Emil Durkheim among others, is the growth of a secularism that precipitated the loss of a communal religious consciousness in favor of individual choice, practice, and understanding. Mainstream western culture, religion and spiritual belief is largely privatized as an issue of broad exposure of their religious identity; with the exception of Jamilah in Ten Things I Hate About Me, who is completely committed to hiding her Lebanese-Muslim background, the main characters each have a small group of friends who know they are Muslim, but they do not want to be recognized as such by their broader school community, especially the bullies and haters who bully them in with the extremists who commit acts of terrorism. The cultural scripts that cast all Muslims as dangerous fundamentalists are much more readily available to teens than scripts such as these books which seek to promote intercultural understanding as well as support young women in making decisions that are carefully considered rather than resulting from knee-jerk conformity to either the values of their families or their peers.

There are, of course, multiple reasons for this unwillingness to define oneself according to a specific institutionalized religion. Historical and current misconduct on behalf of religious institutions engenders shame for contemporary believers. Modern scientific investigation has exalted practices of empiricism and so-called rational inquiry as over and against faith, dismissing belief as nothing other than warmed-over superstition and thus positioning believers as naïve, anti-intellectual, or just plain stupid. Religious discourse can be quite divisive and in fact, Jews, Christians, and Muslims called by their religions to be set apart from those who don’t believe as they do. Each of these problems is difficult enough for adults, let alone for teens, who, more than any other time in their lives, are actively engaged in the process of identity formation seeking to overcome and avoid shame, and fit in with a peer group. While identifying with a religious tradition might seem to satisfy the need for group affiliation, teens are also in the process of questioning the values and beliefs of the culture in which they find themselves; as their prefrontal cortices develop through a pre-puberty growth spurt, they are literally in the process of forming their “moral centers,” a physiological as well as psychological process that involves forming new neural connections between the parts of the brain responsible for language, emotion, and movement. All of this takes place in a context of social situatedness, which, for modern teens, most often involves a high level of engagement in popular culture which treats religious belief...
unimportant and irrelevant at best, and caricatures it as embarrassing, intolerant, and dangerous at worst.

In the midst of these strongly mitigating factors, however, religious traditions and spirituality still play a large and often defining role in the lives of many young people. But mainstream literature for young adults follows the dominant culture by not often going beyond the problematic of religious identity as a cultural phenomenon for its young protagonists. As I have argued, religious identity is positioned as a cultural minority because the dominant culture most often sees religious belief as nonessential or nonintegrative in terms of daily life, and therefore young people who do seek to integrate faith into every aspect of their lives and view it as a core component of their subjectivity are presented as minorities. Like characters with minority racial and gender identities, those with specific religious identities are presented as "Others" who need their strange and foreign ways explained to their mainstream peers, who are what Erving Goffman would call unmarked by the social stigma of unconcealed difference from the mainstream. One might argue, of course, that Christian identity, at least in North America, is in fact the default, and indeed Goffman himself said as much in his 1963 book, _Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity_, where he argues that there is "only one completely unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant father of good complexion, weight, height, and a recent record in sports." (128). But a lot has changed, culturally speaking, since 1963, and especially since 2001, such that I would argue that his list has been fairly consistently challenged and largely upended. Indeed, while a few of the attributes he lists remain hegemonically powerful, self-identifying as Protestant, or religiously committed at all, has become, for teens, just one of a host of reasons to blush.

Interestingly, though, the problematic of religious identity is rarely explored beyond its status as a set of cultural traditions. In the books about Muslim girls, for instance, only _The Garden of my Iman_ talks about the reason behind wearing the hijab, and this is in the context of Aliya's mother trying to discourage her from wearing it:

"Okay then..." Mom say up and turned to face me. "This is what I'd say. I'd try to talk you out of it. I'd tell you to reconsider and repeat my take on it. The hijab is a symbol of modesty—a good symbol, but a figurative one. We are capable of maintaining a modest aspect in our lives in other ways."

(205-206)

The goal of the rest of the girls, as well as Aliya's mother, is to fit it, to assimilate to mainstream culture. Amal, (from _Does My Head Look Big in This?)_ on the other hand, readily adopts hijab, but spends a lot of time arranging her scarf to highlight her eyes so that she can appear attractive to a nonMuslim boy. Almira (Bestest. Ramadan. Ever.) struggles to fast during Ramadan, while openly scheming with another Muslim girl to evade her parents' and grandparents' scrutiny so that she can wear short skirts and make-up and have a nonMuslim boyfriend. Eliza Miller, an Amish girl experiencing her Rumspringa in Nancy Grossman's _A World Away_ (2012), similarly treats her religious traditions as nothing other than cultural differences that can be overcome through changing her outfits. For these girl characters, their traditions start and end with culture without an exploration of the spiritual significance behind the fashion or lifestyle choices.

In terms of Sims' categories, then, it would appear that these books fit somewhere between social conscience and melting pot categories. In each story, at least one instance of bullying or hate speech makes the girls wary of exposing their religious identities, but the main goal is definitely one of assimilation with an emphasis on universal experiences. Cultural traditions appear in a show and tell format, with specific language, foods, greetings and blessings explained in a glossary or author's note. I have located a few exceptions to these general findings, such as Miranda Kinnelly's _Third I Can't Forget_ (2013) and Deborah Heiligman's _Intentions_ (2012), but my reading thus far has led me to conclude that if the protagonist is a girl, then her concerns will focus more on fashion and fitting in than on contemplating the eternal verities.

Books with boy protagonists, however, seem to have entered the culturally conscious phase of Sims's taxonomy. They are not so much concerned with how to look, dress, or even behave according to the traditions of their faith as they are with whether or not the beliefs themselves stand up to scrutiny. As with my girl books, there are no exceptions here, such as Kathe Koja's _Buddha Boy_ (2004), where the emphasis is on what Jinsen wears and how he offers himself up to bullies in a sainthood way rather than on why the Buddha would require you to do these things. However, the majority of the boy protagonists I have found really do seek the spiritual understanding that underlies the stances they take. For instance, in Brian Meehl's _You Don't Know About Me_ (2011), the main character is a fundamentalist Christian who must confront his entrenched beliefs about homosexuality when he realizes that a man he has come to idolize is gay. Fredrik Eling's _Fish in the Sky_ (2008) poses searching questions of man's relationship to God as thirteen-year-old Josh struggles with his identity. Michael Rubens's _Son of the 613_ (2012) explores questions of how contemporary cultural forms of masculinity intersect with Jewish tradition, while Antony John explicitly takes up the problem of outward appearances versus inner faith in _Thou Shalt Not Road Trip_ (2012). In these books, struggles with faith are at the core of an identity that sets them apart as cultural minorities, and it is this faith that enables them to stand against a dominant culture that casts them as minorities.

While religious identities are often connected with other markers of cultural difference, such as race or ethnicity, religious faith and belief are not bound by these things. However, because many faith traditions require their adherents to structure their identities in ways that go against mainstream culture, a committed religious identity can set a person apart as a cultural minority. Young adult literature does not provide many scripts for young people seeking to craft a religious identity, and this dear
of representation can make it seem that such an identity is an oddity in mainstream culture. Further, the representations that do exist currently seem to fall in problematic ways along gender lines, with girls more concerned with fashion while boys explore faith more deeply. If Sims’s continuum is any predictor, however, we can look forward to more complex representations in years to come.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Novels


Critical Readings


Children travelling to Japan

In my article I study how travels to Japan have been described in two books for children, the Swedish picturebook Eva möter Noriko-san (“Eva meets Noriko-san”) by Astrid Lindgren and Anna Riwkin-Brick (1956) and Stina och Anders i Japan (“Stina and Anders in Japan”) by Gunnar Nyborg (1963). I problematize travel writing as a genre and whether it should be regarded as documentary, fiction or “faction”. I consider literature as a genre with reference to child readers, and I examine the context in which the narratives arose. Furthermore, I focus on the picture of Japan that is conveyed in these two travel accounts, how they are tied to their time, and what values and patterns of thought, here called norms, are established.

Travel literature for children

Travel literature written for children and also about travelling children differs in ways from travel literature written by adult authors who have travelled in the country they describe and are writing for an adult audience. A significant and crucial difference when it comes to the children’s books is that it is an adult author writing about a fictitious child’s adventurous journey. The child cannot be expected to have necessary knowledge or overall view, and therefore these accounts are often the third person by an omniscient narrator who can provide explanations. In narratives there are often clear educational and didactic intentions, and the fact that the travel account carries the meaning. Utility is combined with pleasure, and the readers are supposed to learn something about the destination in the course of the journey, and gain greater insight into what other countries are like and how they live. Here it is interesting to study both what knowledge is considered important when the image of Japan takes shape in the two narratives and what norms—form of attitudes, values and themes—are more or less visibly inscribed in the narratives.