The Pennsylvania State University
The Graduate School

REIMAGINING HER QUEST: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE MATERIAL IN GIRLS’ FANTASY LITERATURE

A Dissertation in
Curriculum and Instruction and Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies
by
Colette Slagle

© 2021 Colette Slagle

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

December 2021
The dissertation of Colette Slagle was reviewed and approved by the following:

Jacqueline Reid-Walsh
Associate Professor of Education (Language, Culture, and Society) and Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies
Dissertation Adviser
Committee Chair

Gail Boldt
Professor of Education (Language, Culture, and Society) and Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

Kim Powell
Professor of Education (Language, Culture, and Society), Art Education, Music Education, and Asian Studies
Director of Graduate Studies, Curriculum and Instruction

Scott Smith
Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature
ABSTRACT

Feminist scholars have long remarked upon the predominance of male quests and male heroes in fantasy literature, frequently critiquing the prototypical quest structure’s suitability for stories featuring girls or women at their center. While several studies address the “female hero”—typically lumping women’s and girls’ quests together—no study has yet attended to girls’ quests specifically. Similarly, scholarship on child heroes tends not to distinguish between genders, often privileging boy heroes while girls remain an afterthought. *Reimagining Her Quest: Representations of the Material in Girls’ Fantasy Literature* seeks to fill this gap, contending that a girl’s quest must attend to her age as well as her gender (which also intersect with other axes of difference, such as race, sexuality, class, ethnicity, nationality, dis/ability, etc.) in its construction.

*Reimagining Her Quest* engages with feminist scholarship in children’s literature, fantasy studies, girlhood studies, geography, and new materialism to examine girls’ quests. I consider how representations of the material (e.g. space, place, objects, and the body) are used to imagine alternate constructions of girlhood and, in doing so, create new narratives. Instead of arguing for a universal girl’s quest structure to replace the existing masculine model, this dissertation explores how contemporary authors reimagine quest narratives that speak to girls’ situated experiences. Each chapter attends to a particular element of the prototypical quest narrative—the hero, the return home, the quest object, the storyworld(s), and the materiality of the text itself—to demonstrate how girls’ quests variously critique, rework, and subvert generic conventions. Not only do these fantasy quests better reflect girls’ experiences, they also envision alternate, affirming possibilities for girls that extend beyond their lived realities.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures.................................................................................................................. v
Acknowledgments.............................................................................................................. vii

Introduction...................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 1. There and Back Again?: Nomadic Girls and Narratives................................. 21
Chapter 2. “She will be her own doll”: Questing for Girlhood Objects............................. 82
Chapter 3. Girls in Liminal Spaces: Decolonizing Quest Narratives................................. 128
Chapter 4. Materializing the Language of Girls’ Quests....................................................... 188

Coda. Still Exploring......................................................................................................... 242
Bibliography.................................................................................................................... 259

Appendix Chronological List of Fantasy Texts by Publication Date............................... 273
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1: Joseph Campbell’s monomyth, the “Hero’s Journey”................................. 28
Figure 1.2: Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer’s home/away/home structure.................. 30
Figure 1.3: Nimona looks threatening after being pressed about her true nature.............. 68
Figure 1.4: Nimona transforms into a “cute” little girl in order to overcome the guard...... 69
Figure 1.5: Nimona leverages the “crazy old woman” stereotype in order to gain information...71
Figure 1.6: Girl-Nimona and Monster-Nimona are paralleled visually ............................ 77
Figure 1.7: Monster-Nimona and Girl-Nimona alternate speaking................................. 77
Figure 2.1: Emily’s bones are once-again embodied into her spirit-essence.................... 95
Figure 2.2: Anya and Emily mirrored on the front cover of the book............................ 97
Figure 2.3: Emily’s bones begin to fall from her hand.................................................. 99
Figure 2.4: Anya cradles her hand in an empathetic gesture........................................ 99
Figure 2.5: Emily mirrors Elizabeth and Anya in appearance...................................... 101
Figure 2.6: Anya imagines herself with her mother’s body........................................... 105
Figure 2.7: Anya looks uncomfortable in her party outfit............................................. 106
Figure 2.8: The front cover of Coraline resembles a doll.............................................. 110
Figure 2.9: An image of toy box detritus in Coraline.................................................... 113
Figure 2.10: The other mother is mirrored in Coraline’s shadow................................... 124
Figure 3.1: Max becomes king of the wild things......................................................... 128
Figure 3.2: Moth’s magic awakens............................................................................. 146
Figure 3.3: Moth’s streak in her hair.......................................................................... 148
Figure 3.4: Panel of Moth’s father and mother............................................................ 150
Figure 3.5: Moth spanning across two panels…………………………………………………. 150
Figure 3.6: Moth learns magic from her mother’s memories while in her diary……………… 160
Figure 3.7: The witches create Hecate………………………………………………………… 162
Figure 3.8: Moth, Calendula, and Sarah mirror the triple goddess……………………………. 163
Figure 3.9: Moth offers her commitment to Hecate…………………………………………... 165
Figure 3.10: Moth falling between the two worlds……………………………………………. 165
Figure 4.1: The thread appears in Priyanka’s hair…………………………………………….. 220
Figure 4.2: Priyanka’s mom admits to knowing that Priyanka found the pashmina………….. 220
Figure 4.3: Rohini makes the pashmina……………………………………………………….. 223
Figure 4.4: Rohini transforms into Shakti……………………………………………………... 225
Figure 4.5: Shakti and Priyanka are paralleled through the pashmina………………………... 226
Figure 4.6: Priyanka dresses in a sari and sees Rohini’s shadow in a mirror…………………. 228
Figure 4.7: Front cover of *Tintenherz*………………………………………………………… 232
Figure 4.8: An image of a Dustfinger’s marten, which appears at the end of chapter one in
*Tintenherz* and at the end of chapter three in *Inkheart*…………………………………… 233
Figure 4.9: An image of a stack of books, which appears at the end of chapter one in *Inkheart*
and at the end of chapter two in *Tintenherz*……………………………………………… 233
Figure 4.10: Illuminated manuscript-esque image in *Inkheart*……………………………… 233
Figure 4.11: Front cover of *Inkheart*………………………………………………………… 235
Figure 4.12: The cover of Priyanka’s graphic novel within the text…………………………….. 238
Figure 4.13: Front cover of *Pashmina* by Nidhi Chanani…………………………………… 238
Figure 4.14: Priyanka drawing a white character in a comic early in the graphic novel……… 239
Figure 4.15: Shakti in Priyanka’s drawn comic book panels…………………………………. 239
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

No quest is ever truly taken alone, and I am forever grateful to the many people who have helped me along on mine. I am fortunate to have had such an amazing committee, all of whom have shaped me as a scholar and an educator in various ways. My advisor and “academic mother,” Jacqueline Reid-Walsh has been a support to me in more ways than one, and I could not imagine taking this journey with anyone else. The amount of gratitude and admiration I have goes beyond what I can express in words here, but I am lucky to have a lifelong mentor in you. Gail Boldt has been a model of strength and compassion both inside and outside of the classroom. Kim Powell’s thoughtful and nuanced perspective has been a constant source of admiration. Scott Smith’s enthusiasm and passion for the subject matter inspires me, and I hope to bring a similar welcoming energy in my interactions with my own students. All of you provided invaluable feedback for this project.

I am also indebted to the many other educators who shared their knowledge and who helped to guide me down this path. In particular I would like to mention my middle school English teacher, Ms. Emmett, who recognized my affinity for reading and writing at a young age and helped to encourage it. And of course, my undergraduate advisor and mentor, Lori Campbell, who encouraged me to go to graduate school, and who continues to be a friend and role model.

I would also like to thank Boni Richardson in the office of Curriculum and Instruction for answering my many questions—I literally could not be where I am without your help!

I am grateful to my State College communities, who provided thoughtful conversations, delicious food, and much-needed companionship and laughter. Thank you to the Jane Austen film group (Jennifer, Jocelyn, Leslie, and Susie), whose monthly get-togethers were a welcome
reprieve. Thank you to the Children’s Literature Symposium members (Maria, Bénédicte, Clara, Julie, and Laurie) whose enlivening conversations reminded me why I pursued this path in the first place. I am also grateful to my fellow children’s literature graduate students—past and present—who have all been wonderful colleagues and friends: Paul, Laura, Margarita, Jocelyn, Arpita, and Phoebe. Thank you to Emily, who has graciously shared any document I ever asked for, and whose example has made my journey a little easier at every step. Thank you to René, Yamil, Eira, and Piper, for your constant friendship and care. Thank you to Jika and Brandon for providing warmth and laughter, even at a distance. Thank you to Sean and Harvey for being good friends and honorary godparents to my cat for many years. I am grateful to Maria and Justin, for being my crafting friend and yoga buddy, respectively. Thank you to Zach for your wry humor and for playing board games with us, even when you didn’t want to. And thank you to Adam, who has been a constant friend since the beginning of my graduate career.

Thank you to my family—both chosen and given. I am grateful to the many family friends who frequently acted as surrogate family members: Tom, Becky, Mario, Peach, Jody, Mike, Jake, and Sydney. I am also eternally grateful to the close friends who have transcended the bonds of friendship over the years. To Kim, my college roommate and confidant, whose morning chats over tea I still treasure. To Elisha, who has kept me laughing since high school. And to April, who has been the closest thing I have ever had to a sister.

I am grateful to my in-laws, who welcomed me into the family quickly and wholeheartedly. To Rita ji, who is ready to have an intellectual debate no matter what time it is. To Yashwant ji, who is always pleased to have me as a yoga partner. To Rishi, who is happy to bond over our shared love of food. To Shraddha, who is the most fun-loving and caring sister-in-law I
could have ever asked for. To my nephew, Adi, whose love for books is a joy to watch. And to my niece, Kavya, who is always happy to include me in whatever story she is telling that day.

Credit goes to my extended family, who have been a larger part of my life than their given roles required them to be. To the Kuberry family, particularly my cousin, Rachel, who was the first friend I ever had who also liked books. To Uncle Kelly and Aunt Laura, who have constantly been there for me. To Uncle Kevin, Aunt Allison, and my cousin Drake, who always keep their doors open. And to my grandparents, Phyllis and Glenn Jones, who encouraged my academic pursuits and did whatever they could to make them possible.

And of course, an enormous amount of credit goes to my first family. I am lucky to have a friend as well as a brother in Ethan, particularly one who is legitimately interested to hear about my writing and research. I am grateful to my dad, Eric, who was one of my earliest writing teachers. And to my mom, Dee, who read to me as a child, setting me on this path in the first place.

And finally, to my cat, Kisses, who began this journey with me as a girl, and who walked next to me as long as she was able. And to my partner, Akash, who read every word of this dissertation multiple times over, and who has been a constant source of love, friendship, and support throughout this process. I am forever grateful that you are the one walking this path with me, and I can’t wait to see where the road leads us next.
“A girl lost in the woods is a different sort of creature than a girl who walks purposefully through the trees even though she does not know her way. This girl is not lost. She is exploring.”

- Erin Morgenstern, The Starless Sea
**Introduction**

Alice and Julia and Quentin [from *The Magicians*] are the type of hero-and-sidekicks team that appears to be endlessly popular in pop culture, composed of at least one brilliant, hyper-competent woman who for some unclear reason is a sidekick instead of the hero, and a hapless, semi-competent guy who for some unclear reason is the hero instead of a sidekick. Think of Hermione Granger and Harry Potter, Wyldstyle and Emmet in *The Lego Movie*, Gamora and Peter Quill in *Guardians of the Galaxy*. Pop culture is filled with brilliant female characters who know everything and can do anything—except save the day. They require their less-accomplished male friends to do that.

-Constance Grady and Javier Zarracina, “Each Semi-Competent Male Hero Has a More Talented Female Sidekick. Why Isn't She a Hero?”

**Call to Adventure**

This excerpt from a 2017 *Vox* article highlights and critiques the trend in popular culture in which female characters are sidelined in favor of their male counterparts, a trend that can be seen across a range of mediums, including books, film, television shows, comics, and video games. Although this tendency to sideline female characters undoubtedly persists in popular culture, there is a lack of attention—both in the media and in the academy—towards the stories that do center girl protagonists as their hero.

Reading this article, I could not help but be reminded of my own experience reading and watching countless stories centering a male protagonist, though I did read some that centered girls as well. In general, though, the books that I read with female protagonists tended to be realistic or historical fiction (e.g. *Anne of Green Gables*, *Little Women*, *Little House on the Prairie*, etc.), whereas the fantasy books tended to feature boys or men at their center (e.g. *Harry Potter*, *The Hobbit*, etc.). I cherished all of the books dearly, but I desperately wished to be the one traveling to fantastical worlds, and so I would reimage the stories with myself at their center, taking the place of the boy hero. I would play out the new imagined stories at night as I fell asleep, and sometimes I would re-enact the stories through playing with my dolls or playing
dress-up with friends. Occasionally, if I liked the character enough, I would transpose myself onto one of the existing girl sidekick characters, rewriting the ending so that she/I became the hero of the story instead.

The talented female sidekick trope, in addition to bringing back girlhood memories, encapsulates both the theme and the exigence for this dissertation—that is, how girls’ quest stories in modern fantasy reimagine the traditional quest story in order to create alternate narrative forms. Prototypical quest stories tend to be masculine in nature, usually featuring a cisgender, heterosexual, white, adult, male, and are underpinned by Western, Christian, and Cartesian epistemologies. This model often excludes girl heroes. In recent years, however, more narratives featuring girl heroes have been published, many of which necessarily repurpose the traditional male quest narrative in order to better reflect the lived experiences of what it is like to be a girl.

*Reimagining Her Quest: Representations of the Material in Girls’ Fantasy Literature* analyzes various girls’ quest stories in modern fantasy, considering how they rework this traditional quest model by critiquing, subverting, altering, and reworking it (to different degrees). Rather than merely replacing the existing model with a “girl’s quest” model, thereby universalizing and essentializing girls and girlhood with a new narrative, I explore each book within its own specific context, allowing for a multiplicity of possible narratives. Instead of defining once-and-for-all what a girl’s quest looks like, I am interested in showing how different stories recreate the quest story in all sorts of ways, and how they both draw on and make changes to the traditional quest structure in order to make space for the girl protagonists at their center. To be clear, I do not mean to suggest that all boys or men’s quests are the same, or that they are incapable of similarly challenging the tropes inherent to the traditional quest model; rather, I am
interested in exploring how girls’ quest stories find ways to re-envision a genre that has historically excluded them. I attend to the materiality of these texts as my entry point for considering how they each work to envisage different possibilities. In this dissertation, I consider how representations of the material in these selected texts (e.g. space, place, objects, and the body) are used to imagine alternate girls’ quests, thereby crafting new narratives.

Guides

In my exploration of girls’ quests, I rely on critics and theorists from different fields to inform my thinking, who act as “guides” or “helpers” along my quest. I draw primarily on feminist scholarship from across disciplines in my analysis, including areas such as feminist theory, fantasy literature, children’s literature, girlhood studies, new materialism, geography, and book history.

At this point, it is pertinent to provide some background on quests in fantasy in general, as well as how they pertain to girls specifically. According to the Oxford English Dictionary the definition of a “quest” in literature is described thus: “In chivalric or Arthurian romance: an expedition or search undertaken by a knight or group of knights to obtain some thing or achieve some exploit. Now also: a similar search or journey in any fictional narrative.” Though quests can be found across many genres now, they remain particularly common in modern fantasy, as the genre is rooted in romance, mythology, and folklore. Several structuralist studies have outlined the typical narrative structure for a quest story in mythology and literature,¹ though it is Joseph Campbell’s monomyth that I find to be the most useful starting point for this project. Campbell’s “Hero’s Journey” was a clear blueprint for modern fantasy writers such as J. R. R.

Tolkien, and often continues to be so today. The Hero’s Journey is circular in structure, with the quest hero setting out from his home to go on his quest, and then returning home having been changed by his adventure at the end (J. Campbell, *Hero* 210).

Due to its focus on myth, Campbell’s monomyth tends to describe a mythic or epic hero—someone who is larger than life, who “has found or done something beyond the normal range of achievement and experience … someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself” (J. Campbell, *Power* 123). In his essay, “The Quest Hero,” W. H. Auden defines the unlikely hero or folkloric hero. He says, “[T]here are two types of Quest Hero. One resembles the hero of Epic; his superior *arête*\(^2\) is manifest to all … The other type, so common in fairy tales, is the hero whose *arête* is concealed” (Auden 37). While the epic hero was typically male, the unlikely hero opened up the term for those figures considered “unlikely” or less powerful by society, such as women and children (L. Campbell, *Quest* 10). As both child and gendered female, the girl hero in fantasy is typically situated as an unlikely hero, rather than an epic hero. For this reason, I also draw on Auden’s distinction between the unlikely hero and the epic hero, as it allows for more types of heroes than Campbell’s mythic version.

I have decided to use the term “girl hero” rather than heroine in this project because my focus is specifically on girls’ quests. In using the term “hero” rather than “heroine,” I draw on a tradition of literary scholars who distinguish between a female hero and a heroine, the latter term often defined as a female protagonist who functions as a counterpart, love interest, or otherwise supporting character to a male hero, rather than as one who goes on a quest herself (Pearson and Pope vii).\(^3\) Although the term “hero” is masculine in its origin and is still primarily associated

---

\(^2\) A Greek word translating to “moral virtue” or “excellence.”

\(^3\) In her 1990 book, *The Feminization of Quest-Romance*, Dana Heller argues, “Emerging from her entrapment in subservient roles, the woman who rejects the passive term ‘heroine’ and adopts the active term ‘hero’ for her own
with men, it has increasingly been applied to genders other than male in recent years. In order to emphasize her difference from traditional male quest heroes, I refer to her specifically as a girl hero, as I contend that her positionality as a girl will necessarily inform her quest.

The extent to which a girl’s (or woman’s) quest follows—or should follow—traditional, male quest models remains a contentious point among feminist scholars. As Sanna Lehtonen notes, modern feminist reimaginings of fantasy quests featuring a female hero tend to be thought of as falling into one of two camps. The first, she defines as a liberal-feminist model, in which “challenging the male hero monomyth merely meant replacing the male protagonist with a female one” (57). In this version, the female hero still follows Campbell’s quest structure. Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope’s book of literary criticism, The Female Hero in American and British Literature is an example of scholarship that largely privileges the liberal-feminist model, mapping the female quest onto the stages of Joseph Campbell’s monomyth. Pearson and Pope argue that “on the archetypal level the journey to self-discovery is the same for both the male and female hero” (vii-viii), though they do still recognize some differences between female and male quests.

The second type reflects a radical-feminist discourse in which the stories “tried to imagine new inherently feminine patterns of coming of age and heroism; often in these patterns linearity was replaced by circularity, a single helper of the hero was replaced by a community of women, conventionally marginalized characters, such as witches, were made central sympathetic characters, and so forth” (Lehtonen 57). Many feminist literary scholars have preferred the latter

---

4 See the definition of “hero” in the OED.
5 Carol Pearson’s views on the subject seem to have shifted more towards the radical feminist model in her later work, The Hero Within: Six Archetypes We Live By, as she notes that women heroes “are exploring patterns of heroism that, at first, seemed to me to be specific to women. This mode, which is different from men’s, is based upon integrity rather than on slaying dragons” (3).
to the former, arguing that traditional male quest models are unsuitable for women’s and girls’ stories. Lissa Paul, for example, states:

The problem with a “typical” archetypal quest that traces the hero’s call to adventure, his descent underground, his battle with the enemy, and his triumphant return (as outlined by typically male cartographers, Joseph Campbell, or C. G. Jung, or Northrop Frye, for example) is that it is about turning boys into men, not girls into women, or children into people. When the quest ends, the hero gets his rewards, his property, his integrity and, often, a princess thrown in among the other goods and chattels. A female quest doesn’t look quite like that, and a story that simply exchanges a female protagonist for a male one usually ends up making the heroine look like a hero in drag. (161-2)

Echoing Paul, Roberta Seelinger Trites similarly critiques liberal-feminist quest narratives, stating that “trying to gain power by acting male … is indeed irritating and retrograde” (5).6 Still other feminist scholars strike more of a middle-ground between the two arguments. Lori Campbell for example, uses Joseph Campbell’s monomyth as a starting point in order to conceptualize what she calls the “female hero,” but adds that, “the obstacles she must overcome for her journey to be recognized as heroic are different, and, like it or not, negotiating difference must be taken into account as inherent to her journey” (Quest 6-7).7

Rather than aligning myself with one group or the other, in this project I am interested in girls’ quests as they are, both in terms of how they use traditional quest models, and where they

---

6 Annis Pratt and Ursula K. Le Guin also fall into this category. See Archetypal Patterns in Women’s Fiction and “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” respectively.
7 This resonates with Brian Attebery’s stance as well in his 1992 chapter, “Women’s Coming of Age in Fantasy,” as he notes, “Copying the male initiation story with a female protagonist is one solution, but an inadequate one if the writer wishes to connect with women’s actual experience in our culture. Few women even today can find in their own lives any analog of the male hero’s freedom of movement or his expectation of power and rank at the end of his quest. An effective female initiation fantasy should be, at least at the beginning, more recognizably grounded in the biological and social reality of a woman’s life, but in the course of events it should somehow transcend that reality” (91).
diverge from them. While I do, perhaps, have a bias towards the radical-feminist model as I fully believe, like Lori Campbell, that a girl’s quest necessarily must attend to her gender, I still cannot help but see the influence of Joseph Campbell’s monomyth in many of the stories featuring girls’ quests. Furthermore, I recognize that both models are not without their problems. While the liberal-feminist model can, as Lehtonen notes, tend to erase differences while the radical-feminist model celebrates them, the radical-feminist model can tend to essentialize the experiences of women and girls, searching for one, uniform narrative of womanhood or girlhood to replace traditional masculine quest models: “The main issue with radical-feminist attempts to introduce a new model for a female hero whose experiences are based on the assumed biological and cultural realities of womanhood is that they often seem paralyzed by the idea that there should exist one particularly representative model that captures the female experience as opposed to the male experience” (Lehtonen 58). Furthermore, as Lehtonen notes, “both forms of rewriting were based on a humanist assumption of true, essentialist and unique identity” (58). In this dissertation, I aim not to privilege one model over the other, but rather to show how the texts draw on many types of narrative models in order to conceptualize new, affirmative stories for girls, without ultimately essentializing their experiences.

To this point, most scholarship on girl heroes tends to lump girls and women together, examining “female heroes” more broadly. Similarly, scholarship on child heroes tends to either make little to no distinction between boy and girl heroes, or it tends to privilege boy heroes, with the influence of gender featuring as a small aside in larger conversations about child heroes.8 In

---

8 See for example, Maria Nikolajeva’s chapter on child heroes, “From Hero to Character” in The Rhetoric of Character in Children’s Literature, which discusses girl heroes specifically only for a few pages at the end of the chapter, in a subsection titled “Female Archetypes and Children’s Fiction.”
this dissertation, I am interested in looking at girls specifically, as I contend that a girl’s gender and age will necessarily inform her quest.

It is therefore necessary to define what I mean by a “girl.” The term “girl” can be a contentious one, and exactly who is considered “a girl” is both time- and place-specific.9 Its meaning has changed significantly over time and across cultures, but for my purposes, I use “girl” broadly here to mean “a child or adolescent who is gendered female.” By this, I do not mean to suggest that they need to have been assigned female at birth, but rather that they identify as female themselves and/or are recognized as female by society. In my conception of gender, I borrow from Sanna Lehtonen’s articulate definition:

My understanding of the concept of gender has been influenced by third-wave feminist theory, in particular by Judith Butler’s notion of the performativity of gender, Rosi Braidotti’s radical (poststructuralist) critique or embodied materialism, Judith Halberstam’s queer theoretical work, and Adriana Cavarér’s notion of the “narratable self.” Gender is here understood as a fluid category that is constructed as a range of masculine and feminine identities—or femininities and masculinities—within and across individuals of the same biological sex; gender also interacts with other aspects of identity—such as ethnicity, age, class, and sexuality. Moreover, gendered subjectivity is a formation based on three main aspects: embodiment, discourse and narrativity. (11) I also draw from her definition of age, which parallels her definition of gender: “age is based on a material body but also a discursive construction” (Lehtonen 13).

---

9 See Jacqueline Reid-Walsh’s definition of girlhood (and girl) in her chapter, “Girlhood” in Keywords for Children’s Literature for a comprehensive overview of the term and its history, as well as its differences across cultures.
In my use of the words “girl” and “girlhood,” I strive not to essentialize what it means to be a girl, nor what it means to experience girlhood. Because what it means to be a girl is socially constructed and culturally specific as well as materially embodied, it is necessary locate the term within a particular place and time. In order to avoid universalizing girl or girlhood, these concepts must be considered within their own situated context (Mitchell and Rentschler 1-2). What it means to be a girl also of course necessarily intersects with other identity markers, such as race, sexuality, class, ethnicity, dis/ability, nationality, etc. Throughout this dissertation, I recognize multiple ways to be a girl and experience girlhood, rather than attempting to distill one way of being. I attend to these distinctions and specificities in my analysis for each text, emphasizing their multiplicity in order to avoid constructing a new universalizing narrative that merely replaces the existing one.

It is worth taking a moment to explain why I am interested in examining quest stories in the fantasy genre specifically. Although quest stories appear in realistic fiction as well as fantasy, they are perhaps best suited to fantasy, as they share common roots in myth and folklore (Egoff 3). Due to its inclusion of the supernatural, the fantasy genre is uniquely positioned to imagine new possibilities for girls’ narratives that may not be possible in realistic fiction. Many scholars have remarked on its unique position. Annis Pratt argues that “'[i]n the genre of science fiction women authors are sometimes able to project visions of worlds where heroes dare not to be female, transcending the gender limitations characterizing more conventional novels” (35).10 Donna Haraway’s essay “SF” similarly acknowledges the potential for speculative fiction, science fiction, and fantasy to help us create other worlds and other possibilities. She defines SF as, “that potent material-semiotic sign for the riches of speculative fabulation, speculative

---

10 See also Lucie Armitt’s 2000 book, *Contemporary Women’s Fiction and the Fantastic*, which examines how the fantastic is used in contemporary women’s fiction across various genres.
feminism, science fiction, speculative fiction, science fact, science fantasy—and, I suggest, string figures” (Haraway, “SF”). I also chose the fantasy genre due to its engagement with the material. Attending to the material is apt for the fantasy genre, due to its inclusion of magical objects, shapeshifting and otherwise non-normative bodies, supernatural creatures, and of course, otherworldly settings. Although most authors attend to the setting to some extent in any genre, fantasy must attend to setting due to its generic conventions, which require the author to engage in some degree of world-building in order to establish an alternate, fantastical world that feels true (Tolkien, “Fairy” 60).

Due to my interest in the material and materiality, I engage with some scholars who could be classified as new materialist, though I do not limit myself to this framework. Generally speaking, new materialism emphasizes multiplicity, situated knowledges and put pressure on Western, Humanist, Cartesian dichotomies. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Heckman’s 2008 anthology Material Feminisms provides useful background on the field of new materialism, or what they call material feminisms.11 Broadly, new materialism involves reincorporating the material into scholarship. This includes topics such as the body, the environment, and nonhuman entities, such as animals, plants, and objects/things. This scholarship does not seek to abandon the linguistic or the discursive, but rather tries to undo that very binary—the one between the material and the linguistic. Alaimo and Heckman contend that while the linguistic turn sought to undo many gendered binaries, such as male/female, culture/nature, mind/body, subject/object, and rational/emotional, it upheld one very problematic binary: language/reality. They say:

---

11 They distinguish “material feminism” from “materialist” feminism, which emerges from Marxist feminism: “Even as many of the theorists of what we are calling ‘material feminism’ have been influenced by Marxist theory, post-Marxism, and cultural studies, their definition of ‘materiality’ is not, or is not exclusively, Marxist” (18). Though Alaimo and Heckman make a distinction between the two, the term “material feminism” seems not to have caught on, likely due to scholars’ desires to avoid potential confusion between the two.
Whereas the epistemology of modernism is grounded in objective access to a real/natural world, postmodernists argue that the real/material is entirely constituted by language; what we call the real is a product of language and has its reality only in language. In their zeal to reject the modernist grounding in the material, postmoderns have turned to the discursive pole as the exclusive source of the constitution of nature, society, and reality. Far from deconstructing the dichotomies of language/reality or culture/nature, they have rejected one side and embraced the other. Even though many social constructionist theories grant the existence of material reality, that reality is often posited as a realm entirely separate from that of language, discourse, and culture. (2-3)

This new materialist turn in scholarship seeks to complicate this binary. Such scholarship, they argue, is “crucial for every aspect of feminist thought: science studies, environmental feminisms, corporeal feminisms, queer theory, disability studies, theories of race and ethnicity, environmental justice, (post-) Marxist feminism, globalization studies, and cultural studies” (Alaimo and Heckman 9-10).

In this project, I draw on the scholarship of several different feminist scholars to inform my analyses, some of whom may be classified as new materialists (e.g. Rosi Braidotti, Karen Barad, Jane Bennett and Donna Haraway). I also engage with feminist critics and theorists in other areas, such as children’s literature (Lissa Paul, Maria Nikolajeva), fantasy studies (Ursula Le Guin, Sanna Lehtonen, Lori Campbell), geography (Doreen Massey), and book history (Johanna Drucker). While much of their scholarship often has resonances across chapters, for the sake of clarity, I focus on a few scholars in each chapter to help guide my thinking.

Due to my focus on representations of the material within the texts, I decided to include texts across two different mediums in my analysis, in order to better attend to the materiality of
the texts themselves. I thus examine both novels and graphic novels—a primarily text-based medium and a primarily visual one, respectively—emphasizing the materiality of each through their contrast. Though a larger project may have expanded to other mediums beyond these two (e.g. film, video games, board games, television shows, etc.), I focus on these two in order to limit the scope of the project, as well as due to my own relative expertise working with these two mediums and my lack of experience engaging with other media. As part of the comics medium, graphic novels frequently draw attention to their own materiality. Many comics scholars have remarked upon the affordances of the medium to do just that. Hillary Chute, for example, notes that the comics medium “offers a constant self-reflexive demystification of the project of representation” (9). In their 2015 chapter, “The Graphic Novel as a Specific Form of Storytelling,” Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey emphasize the interconnectedness of storytelling and the mediums used to tell stories:

First of all, the graphic novel helps take a stance in the classic debate between general and medium-specific narratologies. Is narrative a universal mechanism that can be studied independent of the concrete medium that actualizes it, or is it on the contrary something that takes different forms, raises different stakes and different issues according to the medium under scrutiny? To this question comics studies in general, and consideration of graphic novels in particular, give a clear answer: storytelling cannot be separated from its inherent materiality; the form is critical. (163-4)

In order to discuss the materiality of the texts and narratives themselves, it becomes imperative to examine quest stories across different mediums.
Several considerations went into my text selection for this project. The first point was the age range of the implied audience. As a children’s literature scholar, I am interested in looking at texts about girls that were created for girls (though adults are often, if not always, a second audience, as with most children’s literature); as such I omitted texts geared primarily towards women or adults, even though there are plenty of examples of such texts with a girl protagonist at its center. Since this project looks exclusively at fantasy novels and graphic novels, omitting other mediums and genres that are typically associated with younger children, such as picture books, early readers, and transitional chapter books, the books tend to be lengthier. As such, the age of the implied audience for these books tends to range from late elementary school to early high school; most of the texts could easily be classified as middle-grade texts. However, I did not strictly limit myself to middle-grade texts, especially since the fantasy genre has the unique ability to appeal to many readers across age groups. Although increasingly targeted marketing has contributed to stricter divides between children’s literature, Young Adult literature, and adult literature in recent years, with its roots in fairy tale and mythology, fantasy often transcends these boundaries. As fantasy author Tamora Pierce says, “Fantasy, even more than other genres, has a large crossover audience, with YAs raiding the adult shelves once they deplete their part of the store or library, and adults slipping into the youth sections” (3). Though some of my texts could potentially be classified as YA fantasy, or could appeal to adult readers as well, I tried to prioritize texts that could be read by multiple ages, by children, adolescents, and adults alike.

I also selected texts based on the age and gender identity of the protagonist. Although other studies point to the many heroic girls in fantasy as both protagonists and side characters, I prioritized texts that center the girl and her quest. While some secondary girl characters often can

---
12 Such texts undoubtedly warrant their own studies, though they are outside the purview of this project.
(and do) have compelling quests of their own in texts where the main character is male, for this project I was interested in looking specifically at the texts where a girl and her quest were central to the main plot. A few texts may wobble on this line, such as *Inkheart*, *Akata Witch*, and *Nimona*, for example,¹³ but even these exceptions feature a girl and her quest centrally in the narrative. The age range of the protagonists ranges from approximately eleven to eighteen (or perhaps ninety, in Sophie’s case).¹⁴ This is unsurprising given the similar traits between the quest and the bildungsroman; most of these stories act as a coming-of-age story for the girl where she is on the precipice of adolescence or womanhood. This is also expected given the implied audience for the texts, as most children’s literature features a protagonist who is the same age as, or just slightly older than, the implied reader.

Given fantasy’s history as a genre that has been predominantly written by and for white men, I have prioritized books written by women,¹⁵ and I have attempted to include stories featuring girls from various backgrounds. Though the selection here still skews white, some of this is likely due to the field itself, which is still predominantly white, though we are finally seeing more texts being published about girls of color, as well as more texts written by women of color, in the last few years. Some of this imbalance is undoubtedly due to my own biases and ignorance—I have simply read and am aware of more books about white girls than about girls of color. Though I have tried to be mindful of my text selection, I know there are many other, less canonical texts out there that I am as of yet unaware. In future projects, I would like to continue to expand my knowledge of and engagement with such texts.

¹³ *Inkheart* mostly centers Meggie, though several of the other characters feature prominently as well. Sunny is the protagonist in *Akata Witch*, though her three friends are also intrinsic to the novel and quite heroic themselves. In *Nimona*, the titular character features as Ballister Blackheart’s sidekick. Though he is the main character and the reader mostly follows his perspective, it is Nimona’s story that is of primary concern to the graphic novel.
¹⁴ In *Howl’s Moving Castle*, Sophie starts as an eighteen-year old girl before she is magically transformed into an elderly woman by the Witch of the Waste.
¹⁵ All of the books have been written by women with one exception: Neil Gaiman’s novella, *Coraline.*
I additionally decided to limit my text selection to more recent texts. The modern fantasy genre is generally considered to have been established in the nineteenth century, though of course there are many earlier texts that contain fantastical elements. All of my texts could be classified as postmodern texts as well, and many of them provide commentary on themselves or on other, classic works of children’s fantasy literature (e.g. *Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, etc.).

For the purposes of scope, I decided to limit my text selection to standalone novels (or at least novels that featured a fully completed story arc), rather than series books where the main plot is stretched out over multiple books. A few of my texts are, technically, a part of trilogies or series, however all of them feature a fully completed story arc and could be read as a standalone novel. Similarly, for the comics texts, I selected graphic novels rather than serialized comic books, for basically the same reasons. While future projects could undoubtedly include serialized comic books, series chapter books, as well as many other mediums, for the parameters of this project I decided to limit my scope to novels and graphic novels.

**Project Structure**

I envision my chapters as following a kind of Hero’s Journey themselves, starting and ending in largely the same place—though hopefully the traveler (or in this case, the reader) is changed along the way. The first chapter looks at the overall quest structure in general, focusing

---

16 See Peter Hunt’s introduction in *Alternate Worlds in Fantasy Fiction* for a comprehensive overview of the origins and influences of the genre, as well as the common (though, hopefully now outdated) critiques lobbied against the fantasy genre as “escapist” or “too childish.”

17 *Howl’s Moving Castle* has companion books, though not direct sequels. *Inkheart* is part of the *Inkworld* trilogy, though it was originally conceived of as a singular novel and became a series later. *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making* was similarly published, and features a complete episode of September’s time in Fairyland. *Akata Witch* is probably the only one that was conceived of as a trilogy from its inception; however, the first book presents a complete arc in which Sunny and her friends successfully overcome the villain, the Black Hat.
particularly on how representations of home and the journey away from it and back are changed when a girl is the quester. Chapters two and three hone in on two different, specific elements of quests, that of objects and spaces, respectively. I look at the quested-after object in Chapter Two first, as it often acts as the impetus for the quest and features early in the quest cycle. Chapter Three responds to the “Master of Two Worlds” stage of the quest, which coincides with the “Return Crossing of the Threshold” and features near the end of the Hero’s Journey monomyth. In each case, I consider how girls’ quests rework these conventions in order to construct quest narratives that speak more authentically to girls’ experiences. Chapter Four, the final full-length chapter in this dissertation, looks again at girls’ quests more broadly, though in this case it examines the mediums through which their stories are told. Considering how entangled language is with the types of stories we tell, this chapter looks at how girls’ quests attend to their own materiality—both within the narrative and without—in order to create a girl’s quest. I end with a coda titled “Still Exploring,” which succinctly summarizes my findings and begins where this dissertation began, with a brief personal reflection of my own journey, told through the comics medium.

Chapter One, “There and Back Again?: Nomadic Girls and Narratives,” takes a broader, more comprehensive look at the narrative structure of girls’ quests. Drawing on Rosi Braidotti’s concepts of the “nomadic subject” and “nomadic subjectivity,” I examine how the girls’ movement through the narrative mirrors nomadic ways of thinking, according to Braidotti’s definition. Braidotti defines nomadic subjectivity as “the kind of critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behavior” (5). I also consider the girls themselves, and how the representations of their shapeshifting and changing bodies similarly resists constructing their subjectivities as static or complete. In this chapter I look at three texts,
Howl’s Moving Castle by Diana Wynne Jones, The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making by Catherynne M. Valente, and Nimona by Noelle Stevenson, tracing how their increasingly nomadic movements in the story correspond to progressively nomadic epistemologies, thereby resulting in imagining alternate, more affirming narratives for girls. In my analysis, I explore how these texts use, critique, subvert, and rework traditional quest models in order to create something new. Due to their position as girl heroes, their quests’ trajectory follows several different models, and I draw on scholarship from various fields in order to highlight these different influences. This chapter thus attends to the Hero’s Journey as outlined by Joseph Campbell, narrative patterns common in women’s fiction according to Annis Pratt, and the home/away/home pattern pervasive in children’s literature, defined by Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer. I conclude that by reimagining these narrative structures—and as a result, the girls themselves—the authors of these texts successfully convey Braidotti’s concept of nomadic subjectivity to varying degrees, creating alternate models for how to construct an affirmatory quest story for a girl hero.

In Chapter Two, “‘She will be her own doll’: Questing for Girlhood Objects,” I look at a particular characteristic of the quest—specifically, the object that is quested after—analyzing how girls’ relationship with these objects are presented differently than in prototypical male quests. Often, girls and women were the object of the male hero’s quest themselves, a trope that still can sometimes be seen in popular culture even today. As such, girls tend to quest after their objects somewhat differently, typically seeking not to possess their object and often empathizing with the (frequently) anthropomorphized object. In this chapter, I look at two texts, Anya’s Ghost by Vera Brosgol and Coraline by Neil Gaiman, analyzing both the girl heroes’ relationships with the objects they quest after, as well as how they renegotiate their own position as objects in the
eyes of other characters. I draw on feminist scholarship, including Karen Barad’s concept of agential-realism and Jane Bennett’s concept of vital materialism to inform my analysis. I also incorporate D. W. Winnicott’s theory of transitional objects into my analysis, as his theory necessarily informs child heroes’ relationship with objects in children’s literature. In drawing from these different areas of scholarship, this chapter emphasizes the materiality of the objects along with the girls’ relationships to them. I conclude that these texts subvert and reclaim girls’ position as objects, thereby imagining alternate quest models more befitting a girl hero.

Similarly, Chapter Three, “Girls in Liminal Spaces: Decolonizing Quest Narratives,” looks at a specific characteristic of the quest, in this case the places the girls quest to and from. In this chapter, I examine two texts, The Okay Witch by Emma Steinkellner and Akata Witch by Nnedi Okorafor, analyzing how the marginalized positions of the girl heroes entangles with their movement through space, typically by conveying them in a liminal position between multiple places. I use Doreen Massey’s conceptions of space-time and place as my framework for analysis, which allows for a more fluid understanding of both the characters and the spaces as dynamic and porous, rather than bounded and static. Moreover, it allows for reading the girls as becoming-with the spaces, instead of seeing them as separate entities merely existing within a given space. Literary scholarship on liminality and portals additionally informs my analysis, and I consider how the girls’ liminal positions, between the primary and secondary worlds—as well as the contrasting portrayal of the worlds themselves—offer critiques of our own world, imagining more inclusive spaces that offer girls’ potentially more affirmatory paths. The texts furthermore subvert traditional models in which the hero becomes a “Master of Two Worlds,” returning to his original world and using the knowledge he has gained from his time in the secondary world to reestablish order, thus codifying social norms. By contrast, the authors of
these texts highlight the continued liminality of the girls between spaces, refusing to privilege one space over another. In doing so, I argue, these texts conceptualize decolonizing quest models that emphasize fluidity and possibility, rather than stagnation and hierarchy.

Finally, Chapter Four, “Materializing the Language of Girls’ Quests,” cycles back to the beginning, examining how different forms of storytelling are presented in two texts: *Inkheart* by Cornelia Funke, and *Pashmina* by Nidhi Chanani. I begin with Donna Haraway’s and Ursula Le Guin’s theorizing on the importance of stories, discussed in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* and “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” respectively, both of which assert the necessity of imagining new types of stories, attending particularly to the form these stories take. These act as my entry point into this chapter, which considers both how the materiality of storytelling is represented within the texts, as well as the mediums in which the stories are presented. I draw on scholarship from book history and material culture studies—specifically Johanna Drucker’s concept of bibliographic alterities and Jennifer Rowsell and Kate Pahl’s concept of artifactual literacies—in order to push at the boundary between text as object and object as text. I consider multiple forms of storytelling in my analysis, including oral, written, drawn, artifact, and embodied. In this chapter, I argue that by attending to the materiality of storytelling both within the texts and without, these books question, critique, and create alternate forms of storytelling to effectively recreate girls’ quests.

***

*Reimagining Her Quest* seeks to fill an important gap in existing scholarship by attending to girls’ quests in children’s fantasy specifically. In foregrounding the girl hero, this dissertation examines how her position as a child hero and as a female hero necessarily intersect, informing her quest. By emphasizing the material as a point of entry for my analyses, I locate my project
within ongoing conversations in contemporary feminist scholarship. In so doing, this project attends to an overlooked area of scholarship—girls’ fantasy quests—while also using materiality as a focal point for analysis, which still has yet to be extensively examined in girls’ literature. Ultimately, this dissertation puts together two as yet underexplored areas of study in order to highlight alternate models of quest stories for girls—ones that can effectively imagine narratives that are true to girls’ experiences, and therefore, expand the possibilities for what a girl hero (and perhaps, the girl reader herself) could be.
Chapter One
There and Back Again?: Nomadic Girls and Narratives

As all things come to an end, even this story, a day came at last when they were in sight of the country where Bilbo had been born and bred, where the shapes of the land and of the trees were as well known to him as his hands and toes.

-J. R. R. Tolkien, The Hobbit

J. R. R. Tolkien’s quintessential quest story in modern fantasy, The Hobbit, or There and Back Again highlights the defining characteristic of the genre in the above quote—and in its very title—“There and Back Again.” In this quote, Tolkien draws a direct connection between the narrative and Bilbo’s journey: all stories must end, and Bilbo must return home. Nearly all quest stories begin and end at home, with most of the plot taking place away from home. As many scholars have observed, these stories have tended to limit who gets to go on these journeys—typically, the male hero goes on the adventure while women and girls remain at home. Not only this, but many of these stories are rooted in Western imperialism as well, further limiting who gets to go on the quest, as well as which places constitute “home.” As Dudley Jones and Tony Watkins note in their 2000 book, A Necessary Fantasy?: The Heroic Figure in Children’s Popular Culture: “it is clear that the moral virtues of the hero were always articulated through the ideological frameworks of gender, imperialism and national identity” (4). In recent years, more and more texts have placed women and girls at their center. In her 1990 book, The Feminization of Quest-Romance: Radical Departures, Dana Heller says of women’s quests:

Questing, a woman dares to reinvent herself … She moves against the winds of great legends that recount the adventures of heroes, gallant men whose stories are deemed universal, timeless, and fundamental to our understanding of the historical conditions that gave rise to civilizations. In the myths and rituals of Western patriarchal culture, woman
is expected to know only what the dominant ideology occasions her to know, and she
develops in relationship to this complex illusion which fixes her within the limits of
someone else’s desire. Indeed, she may reject these limits, refuse to become self-
sacrificing, submissive, dependent. Yet this rejection alone does not fulfill her need for an
empowering self-image, nor does it grant her the mobility she requires to imagine, enact,
and represent her quest for authentic self-knowledge. (1)

Given the entangled relationship between movement, narrative structure, and ideology in quest
stories, I examine how the girl heroes’ shifting movements in their quests work to imagine
alternate stories with different ideologies—ones that do “grant her the mobility she requires to
imagine, enact, and represent her quest for authentic self-knowledge” (Heller 1).

In this chapter, I explore the connections between narrative, space, and movement, using
two novels and one graphic novel as my basis for analysis: Howl’s Moving Castle by Diana
Wynne Jones, published in 1986; The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her
Own Making by Catherynne M. Valente, published in 2011; and the graphic novel Nimona by
Noelle Stevenson, published in 2015. Drawing on Rosi Braidotti’s concept of a “nomadic
subject,”¹ I examine how the girls’ movements through the narrative speak back to quest models,
producing new possibilities. In addition to their movements through space, I am also interested in
the girls themselves, particularly how depictions of their bodies similarly produce alternate
narrative possibilities. I do not claim that this new narrative structure is a characteristic of all
girls’ quests, nor that something similar could not occur in contemporary boys’ quests. Rather, I
am interested in exploring how these texts diverge, subvert, and build upon the prototypical
white Western male quest model structure to imagine new narrative possibilities for girls’ quests.

¹ Braidotti’s definition is inspired by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s scholarship on deterritorialization and
All three texts deal with themes of belonging and displacement through their representations of the home and the body. Each text follows the Hero’s Journey structure outlined by Joseph Campbell, and/or the home/away/home structure defined by children’s literature scholars Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer. However, each also makes significant changes to the structure, critiquing the tropes in order to offer new narrative possibilities. In this chapter, I consider how these novels alter the masculine heroic tradition by drawing on archetypes found in women’s fiction, as outlined by Annis Pratt. My analysis of these texts is structured chronologically, though this is somewhat incidental. I examine these texts in terms of how well each one illustrates Braidotti’s concept of “nomadic subjectivity,” which in this case corresponds with their publication order.

First, I provide a brief overview of the scholarship and the theoretical framework that acts as a lens for the textual analyses in this chapter. I then move onto the text discussions, in which I provide an extended analysis for each text in its entirety to better elucidate the connections between them. For each text, I begin by examining the representations of the girls’ bodies and how they themselves can be considered “nomadic.” I then move to studying the girls’ movements through space, particularly in terms of home and the “Return” stage of the Hero’s Journey. Finally, I consider how each book provides metacommentary on the mythic traditions and fairy tale tropes that pervade modern fantasy, particularly through the way both the girls and the story move in unexpected ways. In doing so, this chapter shows how each text draws on and plays with traditional quest narratives in order to simultaneously critique the old narratives and reimagine new ones—ultimately creating stories that allow for “affirmative representations” for girls (Braidotti 3).
Theoretical and Critical Contexts

Before moving to analysis of the primary texts, it is first necessary to outline some key definitions and the critical conversation. The title of this chapter, “Nomadic Girls and Narratives” draws from Rosi Braidotti’s use of the term “nomadic subject” or “nomadic subjectivity.” Her use of the term does not refer to literal nomads, though her definition is inspired by them (Braidotti 5). Instead, Braidotti notes that the nomadism she is referring to is “the kind of critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behavior” (5). Because her term is more interested in alternate ways of thinking and imagining subjectivity differently, she notes that actual physical movement is not necessary to be considered a nomadic subject—though changing locations can lead to the nomadic subjectivity she discusses (Braidotti 5-8). She is particularly interested in exploring what it means to “speak as a woman” without essentializing the term, using the concept of nomadic subject/ivity as a way of reconfiguring thinking through this idea. For her, “the subject ‘woman’ is not a monolithic essence defined once and for all but rather the site of multiple, complex, and potentially contradictory sets of experiences, defined by overlapping variables such as class, race, age, lifestyle, sexual preference, and others … this is a radically anti-essentialist position” (Braidotti 4). According to Braidotti, nomadic subjectivity is a form of countermemory: “it is a form of resisting assimilation or homologation into dominant ways of representing the self” (25).

Drawing on Donna Haraway and other feminist scholars, Braidotti is interested in using new figurations to “explor[e] different forms of the subjectivity of women and of their struggle with language in order to produce affirmative representations” (3).²

² This idea has clear resonances with much of Donna Haraway’s scholarship, including her 2016 work, Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene, which I use as my framework for Chapter Four.
In this chapter, I draw on Braidotti’s concept of nomadic subject in my analysis, though my focus is on girls, rather than women. Braidotti notes that all nomadism need not be physical in her definition, and that some of the best types of journeys can occur while sitting still: “Not all nomads are world travelers; some of the greatest trips can take place without physically moving from one’s habitat. It is the subversion of set conventions that defines the nomadic state, not the literal act of traveling” (5). In the case of these texts, I am interested in both possibilities—while the girl characters physically travel through the texts, the ideas presented by the texts through this imagined travelling are the most important.

Braidotti chooses to use the figuration of the nomad rather than the migrant and exile, as she argues that it best represents the ideas she wants to evoke. She notes that the image of the exile as a metaphor is disappointing, as it largely erases differences between women and denotes privilege and whiteness: “I am not entirely happy, however, with this metaphor of the exile: being ‘a citizen of the world’ may seem attractive at first, but it can also be an evasive tactic. As if all women had in common were a sense of their homelessness, countrylessness, of not having a common anchoring point” (Braidotti 21). She finds both the exile and the migrant lacking as figurations for reimagining subjectivity due to the relative fixity of their positions, as both have ties to class structure, and the migrant “has a clear destination: s/he goes from one point in space to another for a very clear purpose” (22). By contrast, the nomad:

does not stand for homelessness, or compulsive displacement; it is rather a figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity. This figuration expresses the desire for an identity made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes, without and against an essential unity. The nomadic subject, however, is not altogether devoid of unity; his/her mode is one of definite, seasonal
patterns of movement through fixed routes. It is a cohesion engendered by repetitions, cyclical moves, rhythmical displacement. In this respect, I shall take the nomad as the prototype of the “man or woman of ideas”; as Deleuze put it, the point of being an intellectual nomad is about crossing boundaries, about the act of going, regardless of the destination. (Braidotti 22-3)

In some ways then, the quest narrative structure is the perfect form for imagining the type of nomadic subjectivity that Braidotti discusses, as it is inherently interested in crossing boundaries. Female quests, in particular, can tend to be cyclical, and many draw on the Persephone myth as a model, as her cycling between the Underworld and earth dictates the seasons (Pratt 11).³ Although quests often have a destination in mind, they clearly emphasize the importance of the journey over the ultimate endpoint. Each of the texts discussed in this chapter also imagine subjectivity with less fixity than traditional, more linear quest models, though each does so to different degrees. It is important to emphasize that in Braidotti’s conception of nomadic subjectivity, she does not believe in a complete absence of identity, just that no identity remains stagnant: “Being a nomad, living in transition, does not mean that one cannot or is unwilling to create those necessarily stable and reassuring bases for identity that allow one to function in a community. Rather, nomadic consciousness consists in not taking any kind of identity as permanent” (33). In this chapter, I use Braidotti’s concept of nomadic subject in order to examine how the journeys the girls take work to explore different forms of subjectivity and to produce new, affirmative narratives about and for girls.

By contrast, Joseph Campbell’s monomyth, the “Hero’s Journey” fundamentally functions to reestablish social norms. This structure features several different stages common to

the Hero’s Journey in myths across cultures (though many scholars have since critiqued Campbell for being primarily Western and male-centric). These include stages such as the “Departure,” the “Initiation,” and the “Return,” each of which can be further divided into more specific steps, such as “The Call to Adventure,” “The Crossing of the First Threshold,” “The Belly of the Whale” “The Crossing of the Return Threshold,” and “Master of the Two Worlds,” among others (J. Campbell, *Hero* 210) (see Figure 1.1). Generally speaking, Campbell’s monomyth shows how myths were used by the people who told them in order to help make sense of the world around them, whether this was natural phenomena, like the seasons (e.g. the myth of Persephone), or social norms and institutions, like marriage (again, the myth of Persephone). As Campbell summarizes the “Return”:

> The final work is that of the return. If the powers have blessed the hero, he now sets forth under their protection (emissary); if not, he flees and is pursued (transformation flight, obstacle flight). At the return threshold the transcendental powers must remain behind; the hero re-emerges from the kingdom of dread (return, resurrection). The boon that he brings restores the world (elixir). (211)

After the hero has successfully mastered the two worlds,⁴ he⁵ uses the knowledge he has gained in order to return home and reestablish order to society. Modern fantasy, which draws much from myth and folklore, frequently follows this structure as well (Attebery 87-88).

---

⁴ In the case of fantasy, rather than myth, we might liken these two worlds to the “Primary World” and the “Secondary World” that Tolkien describes in “On Fairy Stories.”

⁵ And it is usually a “he.” In her *A Quest of Her Own*, Lori Campbell notes that Joseph Campbell himself “accepts the idea of a female being capable of heroism, though his collections of folktales and myths generally hold to a more conservative view of heroism” (“Introduction” 6).
In addition to Joseph Campbell’s monomyth, it is also worth mentioning the home/away/home structure conceived of by children’s literature scholars Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer. Nodelman and Reimer’s home/away/home structure follows a very similar cycle as Campbell’s, dividing the protagonist’s journey into “Home (Safe but Boring)” and “Away (Exciting but Dangerous)” (201) (see Figure 1.2). In this structure, the child begins safe at home, then travels away during which time s/he learns the value of home, before ultimately returning at the story’s conclusion (198-199). The main differences are that Nodelman and Reimer’s structure refers specifically to a child protagonist, and that this model can occur in realistic fiction as well as fantastical settings. Still, the similarity between these structures—both of which
emphasize growth, coming-of-age, and an eventual return—cannot be understated. Nodelman and Reimer, citing Christopher Clausen, state that the main difference between a text for adults and a text for children is that in the latter the child character will eventually return home, learning of its value, whereas in texts for adults, home is a place from which one must escape in order to grow up (197-8). Although some children’s texts undoubtedly show “away” to be preferable to “home,” Nodelman and Reimer note that “[t]he main emphasis of children’s literature is the didactic effort to educate children into sharing an adult view of the world and, also, of what it means to be a child. As a result, many versions of the generic story try to persuade young readers that despite its boredom, home, representative of adult values, is a better place to be than the dangerous world outside” (200). While these types of representations of “home” are likely the most common in children’s literature, Nodelman and Reimer acknowledge other perspectives towards home that can be found in children’s literature texts. They divide them into three general types:

Texts that focus on adult concerns and messages take readers from the perception that home is boring to the realization that it is safe—and forget about the original boredom.

Texts that offer child readers what some adults think they want to hear focus on the excitement of being away, disregard its danger, and see home merely as boring. The more ambivalent texts refuse to deny either the excitement of being away or the boredom of being at home” (Nodelman and Reimer 200-1).

The books I explore in this chapter largely fit into the third category—an ambivalence towards home that recognizes both attributes. More than this though, they sometimes comment directly on the predominant type frequently found in children’s literature (that of learning the value of
home in order to return to it), drawing attention to the contentious nature of “home” for girls and young women.⁶

The final narrative structure worth mentioning is outlined by Annis Pratt in her book, *Archetypal Patterns in Women’s Fiction*. In this book, Pratt identifies several archetypal patterns common to women’s fiction, noting how women’s fiction differs significantly from the narrative structures laid out by Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell, due primarily to the social roles that are afforded to girls and women within the patriarchy. Her chapter on “novels of development” is of greatest concern for me here, as it is the only type she lists that pertains specifically to girls’ quests, while the “novels of marriage” and the “novels of social protest” tend to apply to adult

---

⁶ See also Reimer’s 2013 article, “‘No place like home’: The Facts and Figures of Homelessness in Contemporary Texts for Young People,” which examines representations of homelessness in Canadian children’s fiction, “demonstrat[ing] that, while these narratives may locate themselves within the context of a social-justice pedagogy and are concerned to teach young people the facts of homelessness and to promote thoughtful reflections on the underlying social causes of which homelessness is the symptom, readers are also invited to understand the young characters in the text more abstractly, as *figures* that represent possible ways of being in the world” (1).
women. In addition to the archetypes she finds in bildungsroman, I also draw from her chapter on “novels of rebirth and transformation” as this group of archetypes has resonances with contemporary girls’ quests in fantasy. While this group only features older women heroes in Pratt’s definition, it is nonetheless relevant for the texts I examine as contemporary girls’ quests in fantasy draw inspiration from both novels of development and novels of rebirth in women’s fiction. Pratt herself even notes the relative similarity between the heroes found in novels of development to those found in novels of rebirth and transformation:

At both ends of the spectrum of novels that I have studied we find women who consciously reject their societies and declare themselves in spite of it: young women not yet enclosed, on the one hand, and older women beyond bothering with the domestic enclosure, on the other. For the woman past her “prime,” as for the young hero not yet approaching hers, visions of authenticity come more easily than to the women in the midst of social experience. (10-11)

Pratt notes that these two types of heroes are the ones that are best able to represent “desires alien to the patriarchy” and that the fantastical worlds found in science-fiction are especially able to imagine alternate, affirmative social roles for girls and women (168). Though relevant to all of the texts I discuss, Pratt’s comments on the relative freedom afforded to older women heroes in novels of rebirth and transformation are particularly pertinent for my analysis of Diana Wynne Jones’ *Howl’s Moving Castle*, which sees teenaged-girl Sophie transform into a ninety-year old woman.

Because the bildungsroman, or novel of development, draws from the quest plot structure found in mythology, Pratt notes that this is “a genre in which social realism is apt to become mixed with elements of romance” and that “[s]ince the narratives most often bring the hero from
childhood to maturity … the undertones of the mythic and fantastic are appropriate themes linking the free-ranging imaginative world of childhood to the more soberly social concerns of the adult” (13). It is unsurprising then, that girls’ fantasy quests would draw inspiration from the bildungsroman genre as well. One of the main archetypes that Pratt discusses for the novel of development that is most pertinent to this chapter is the “growing-up-grotesque archetype.” Pratt notes that because girls are growing-up within a patriarchal society in novels of development, they are “destined for disappointment” (29). She argues that, in contrast to male bildungsroman, girls are, in a sense, unable to grow up, due to the roles required of them by society as women. She notes: “In spite of the generic intent of the bildungsroman to trace a hero’s progression from childhood into adulthood, the novel of development persists in mirroring a society in which such a progression is inappropriate for women. The young woman in modern society cannot ‘grow up’: she must remain ‘one of the girls.’” (Pratt 33-4).

Due to the inevitable disappointment that girls face in these novels, Pratt notes that many of them “grow down,”—or at least recognize that growing up means growing down, leading to “an atrophy of the personality.” In some cases girl heroes suffer from illness or premature senility by growing up, and in female gothic fiction they are often depicted as “freaks” or “monsters” (30-1). She also notes that, “the female adolescent hero contemplates marriage with discomfort and terror” (31) and that, while male heroes choose their place in society and progress through their maturation deliberately, girl heroes are “radically alienated by gender-role norms from the very outset” and that this “inevitably makes the woman’s initiation less a self-determined progression towards maturity than a regression from full participation in adult life” (36, emphasis in original). She does list science fiction as an exception to this, arguing that “[i]n the genre of science fiction women authors are sometimes able to project visions of worlds
where heroes dare not to be female, transcending the gender limitations characterizing more conventional novels” (35). While I agree with Pratt’s belief in the possibility of science fiction to imagine new possibilities for gender equality and girls’ quests, I do not think this means transcending gender entirely. Lissa Paul adds that “[a] female quest doesn’t look quite like [a male quest], and a story that simply exchanges a female protagonist for a male one usually ends up making the heroine look like a hero in drag” (161-2). In this chapter, I move nomadically through the analysis, exploring how girls’ quests wrestle with these very issues, drawing on both the masculine tradition of male quest stories, as well as the female bildungsroman and children’s home/away/home structure in order to imagine an alternate narrative of what it means to be a girl’s quest.

**Sophie’s Refusal to “Grow Down” in *Howl’s Moving Castle***

Diana Wynne Jones’s 1986 novel *Howl’s Moving Castle* features eighteen-year old protagonist Sophie Hatter, who is cursed by the Witch of the Waste, transforming her into a ninety-year old woman. Once cursed, Sophie is impelled to leave behind her boring life as a hatter to embark on her own quest to break the curse, despite her belief in the commonly held knowledge that “it is quite a misfortune to be born the eldest of three” (Jones *Howl’s* 1). She journeys to the infamous wizard Howl’s imposing moving castle, both of which turn out to be quite different what she expected. Various adventures occur along the way of Sophie’s quest to break the curse, during which time she becomes closer with the inhabitants of the moving castle (Howl, his apprentice,
Michael, and Howl’s fire demon, Calcifer), establishing a new home and family for herself by the novel’s end.

Sophie’s quest follows the trajectory of both Joseph Campbell’s Hero’s Journey and Annis Pratt’s outline of the narrative of development plot commonly found in women’s fiction, as well as some elements of the novels of rebirth and transformation when Sophie transforms into an elderly woman. Through the combination of these structures, Jones effectively conveys a girl’s quest that emphasizes the girl’s growth and transformation without “shrink[ing]” her (Pratt 30). Additionally important is Nodelman and Reimer’s home/away/home structure, found in children’s fiction. Sophie’s quest is not only influenced by the mythic fantasy hero archetype or by the female heroine found in women’s fiction, but also by her position as an adolescent girl on the cusp of adulthood. Sophie’s journey away from home and back again effectively represents the melding together of these structures.

The incorporation of elements from the novels of rebirth and transformation into the bildungsroman allows Jones to turn some of the less affirming aspects of the genre on its head, while still ultimately conveying a coming-of-age tale. For example, one archetype in novels of development that Pratt discusses is the growing up grotesque archetype. In this archetype, Pratt notes that girls often realize that growing up really means “growing down” due to their expected social roles as women that deny them full maturation and participation in adult life. This realization is accompanied by frustration and disappointment, which in some novels leads to an atrophy in personality or premature senility for the girl hero (Pratt 29-31, 36). This is certainly Sophie’s case at the beginning of the novel. Ingary is governed by well-known social rules that specify the roles available to young women and the eldest child. Because it is well-known that “In the land of Ingary, where such things as seven-league boots and cloaks of invisibility really
exist, it is quite a misfortune to be born the eldest of three. Everyone knows you are the one who will fail first, and worst, if the three of you set out to seek your fortunes,” Sophie finds herself stuck toiling away in a hat shop, the family business that she is expected to take over as the eldest (Jones, Howl’s 1). Incidentally, this rule is also a fairy tale trope that Jones is clearly critiquing. In her 1989 essay, “The Heroic Ideal—A Personal Essay,” Jones reflects on some of the typical heroic conventions found in myth and folktale, noting that as a child she was initially “saddened to find that as an eldest child and a girl [she] was barred from heroism entirely” (129).

Sophie’s position at the start of the novel is not so much something she has consciously chosen, but rather something she has been propelled into by social norms and expectations (Pratt 36). Due to her feelings of entrapment and disappointment, Sophie begins to exhibit many of the physical and mental signs of “growing down” or “premature senility” that Pratt lists. Even before her magical transformation into an old woman by the Witch of the Waste, Sophie has begun to transform. Resigned to a dull life trimming hats late into the night each night, Sophie quickly becomes timid and tired. Her eyes are described as being “red-rimmed with sewing,” and she even compares her own appearance to that of an “old maid,” foreshadowing her eventual transformation (Jones, Howl’s 12). Sophie even begins to find it difficult to go across town to visit her sister: “But she did not go. Either she could not find the time, or she could not find the energy, or it seemed a great distance to Market Square … every day it seemed more difficult to go and see her sister. It was very odd. Sophie had always thought she was nearly as strong-minded as Lettie. Now she was finding that there were some things she could only do when there were no excuses left” (Jones, Howl’s 12). In a short expanse of time, Sophie has already “grown down” into a more exhausted, more timid, and less strong-minded person—her personality has
atrophied. Once Sophie is magically transformed into an old woman by the Witch of the Waste, her reaction is quite telling:

The face in the mirror was quite calm, because it was what she expected to see. It was the face of a gaunt old woman, withered and brownish, surrounded by wispy white hair. Her own eyes, yellow and watery, stared out at her, looking rather tragic. “Don’t worry, old thing,” Sophie said to the face. “You look quite healthy. Besides, this is much more like you really are.” She thought about her situation, quite calmly. Everything seemed to have gone calm and remote. She was not even particularly angry with the Witch of the Waste. (Jones, Howl’s 28, emphasis mine)

By literalizing the growing up grotesque archetype in this way, Jones not only draws on this tradition in women’s fiction, but critiques it, pointing to the ways it ultimately limits girls’ narratives. Interestingly, Sophie’s mental state is much worse as a young woman than as an old one. While she is tired and timid as an eighteen-year old girl, her transformation into an old woman frees her, and she finds herself becoming much more outspoken and strong-willed over the course of the text. Ironically, while Sophie mentally “grows down” as a young woman, she physically “grows down” as an old woman, due to the height shrinking associated with old age. In this way, Jones further inverts the “growing down” archetype Pratt discusses. Sophie’s physical bodily transformation also works to disrupt traditional quest narrative conventions in the text. As Annis Pratt notes, women’s journeys often tend to be nonlinear: “Since women are alienated from time and space, their plots take on cyclical, rather than linear, form and their houses and landscapes surreal properties” (11). Sophie’s quest makes this nonlinearity explicit by literalizing it: rather than progressing clearly from adolescent girl to young woman, Sophie is forced directly from a girl on the cusp of adulthood to an old woman. Sophie’s metamorphosis
into an old women allows Jones to combine archetypes of rebirth and transformation with the bildungsroman in order to imagine a more affirmative girl’s quest that is less limiting.

In addition to literalizing the growing up grotesque archetype, Sophie’s transformation speaks to the embodied nature of subjectivity. She is not merely a young girl in an old woman’s body—Jones makes clear that Sophie’s transformation changes her embodied experience as soon as the spell is cast:

Sophie put her hands to her face … She felt soft, leathery wrinkles. She looked at her hands. They were wrinkled too, and skinny, with large veins in the back and knuckles like knobs. She … looked down at skinny, decrepit ankles and feet which had made her shoes all knobbly. They were the legs of someone about ninety and they seemed to be real. Sophie … found she had to hobble … Her joints creaked as she moved. She had to walk bowed and slow. But she was relieved to discover that she was quite a hale old woman. She did not feel weak or ill, just stiff. (Jones, *Howl’s* 27-8)

Jones does not uphold a traditional Western Cartesian dualism of mind and body; instead, she attends to the way subjectivity is both mediated through discourse and materially situated. Calcifer even notes that the curse has already taken significant time off of Sophie’s life when he first meets her: “That spell has shortened your life by about sixty years, if I am any judge of things” (Jones, *Howl’s* 45). Drawing on Braidotti and Judith Butler in her book *Girls Transforming: Invisibility and Age-Shifting in Children’s Fantasy Fiction since the 1970s*, Sanna Lehtonen asserts that “[her] understanding of aged subjectivities is parallel to the definition of gender above: age is based on a material body but also a discursive construction” (13). This

---

8 This also echoes Karen Barad’s conception of material-discursive phenomena and how the material and the discursive intra-act with one another, an idea she explores in her 2007 chapter, “Agential Realism: How Material-Discursive Practices Matter,” which I discuss in more detail in Chapter Two.
draws directly from Braidotti’s concept of nomadic subjectivity, which sees subjectivity as multifaceted, not fixed, and socially situated (Braidotti 4, 22).

Sophie’s quest has all of the initial trappings of a bildungsroman; however, once Sophie is magically transformed into an elderly woman, Jones fittingly infuses elements of the novels of rebirth and transformation onto the bildungsroman format. By combining these two, Jones is able to craft a fantasy quest that imagines a more affirmative narrative than either of the two could offer on their own. For example, Pratt notes that in novels of development “the female adolescent hero contemplates marriage with discomfort and terror” (31). This idea is certainly hinted at for Sophie, who fears Howl before she ever meets him, believing the rumors that he “collects young girls and suck[s] their souls out of them” or that he “[eats] their hearts,” a clear allusion to the fairy tale character “Bluebeard” who kills and dismembers his wives once they inevitably find and explore a hidden chamber in his house (Jones, *Howl’s* 4). Once transformed into an old woman, however, Sophie is able to seek out Howl herself, heading directly to Howl’s moving castle on her own volition, reasoning that if he only eats young girls’ hearts, she herself is safe from harm as an elderly woman. As an old woman, Sophie feels much freer to speak her own mind, and frequently takes action without requesting the permission of others: “It was odd. As a girl, Sophie would have shriveled with embarrassment at the way she was behaving. As an old woman, she did not mind what she did or said. She found that a great relief” (Jones, *Howl’s* 64). Pratt notes that “[b]y allowing, mature, authentic voices to break through the mask of ‘old maid,’ ‘single woman,’ ‘old woman,’ and even ‘witch,’ authors of the single-woman novel subvert long-standing stereotypes” (135). Jones certainly works to do this as well in her novel. Because Sophie has grown unexpectedly from a young girl to an old woman, she is able to leverage common stereotypes about old women to her advantage. As Sanna Lehtonen argues,
Sophie is aware of the discourses around old age and older women and performs them purposefully:

After realizing that other people perceive her not only as an old woman, but as a witch, she willingly enters into two subject positions conventionally associated with old women: a cleaning lady and a witch. Sophie herself declares her new positions and her announcements function as formative utterances—what she states becomes a socially accepted condition. By making the announcements, Sophie insists an authoritative position, partly granted by her old age. (94)

Sophie is aware of others’ expectations of her due to her age, and constantly uses that to her advantage, both by superseding others’ low expectations, and by pretending to play into those expectations at times to get a desired outcome. As Lehtonen notes, her performance of aged women tropes allows Jones to challenge our conceptions of gender by having Sophie navigate different types of feminine discourses in more empowering ways (96-7). This allows for a feminist reimagining of common patriarchal narrative tropes of old women, as Sophie frequently leverages her personas of “cleaning lady” and “witch” to her own advantage (Lehtonen 95). By drawing on novels of rebirth and transformation in a bildungsroman structure, Jones crafts a novel in which her girl hero is freed by the incorporation of each. By combining the novels of

---

9 Lehtonen draws on Judith Butler’s definition of performativity in her discussion, stating, “Judith Butler emphasizes that gender is performative in the sense that it is produced through discourse and enforced through repetition; it is not a costume or role that a person can easily change at will. The same concerns an aged identity” (49). Sophie seems to have slightly more freedom in her performativity due to her magical transformation, though Jones shows that the discourses Sophie is able to perform is still bodily situated: “The change in agency—or even the decision to try to change one’s behavior—is here only made possible by a very radical bodily transformation. From a material feminist perspective, Sophie’s transformation shows that a subject’s agency is effectively restricted by corporeality” (96). This idea aligns with Karen Barad’s scholarship on how the material and discursive intra-act: “Discursive practices and material phenomena do not stand in a relationship of externality to one another; rather, the material and the discursive are mutually implicated in the dynamics of intra-activity. But neither are they reducible to one another. The relationship between the material and the discursive is one of mutual entailment. Neither is articulated/articulable in the absence of the other; matter and meaning are mutually articulated. Neither has privileged status in determining the other” (Barad, “Posthumanist” 140).
development archetype with the novels of rebirth and transformation archetype, Jones effectively
turns the former on its head, simultaneously parodying Sophie’s presumed destiny to shrink
away, while also allowing Sophie her quest by transforming her into an old woman.

In *Howl’s Moving Castle*, Diana Wynne Jones draws on archetypes from both novels of
development and novels of rebirth and transformation in women’s fiction, two types of narratives
that Pratt notes are able to represent girls’ and women’s experiences more authentically as
neither girls nor older women are in the midst of social experience (11). The primary difference
between novels of development and novels of transformation and rebirth is that the former tends
to be a social quest while the latter is a spiritual one. She says:

In women’s fiction social quests are usually found in the bildungsroman and spiritual
quests in novels whose heroes are over thirty, most often in middle or old age. If the
purpose of the novel of development is to integrate the individual into her society, its
generic function is frequently aborted by society’s unwillingness to assimilate her. The
older woman hero, in contrast, has ‘been through all that’; her goal is to integrate her self
with herself and not with a society she has found inimical to her desires. (Pratt 136)

In Sophie’s case, her quest is both spiritual and social in nature. It involves both coming to terms
with herself and her abilities, but also involves romance and establishing herself in a new family
system. The infusion of the spiritual quest with the social quest found in women’s fiction helps
to craft a coming-of-age story that follows the mythic quest tradition more closely, as the
personal and the social are more clearly aligned. For Sophie, her spiritual quest in which she
breaks her curse, learns of her magical abilities to talk life into inanimate objects and how to
master them, and comes to understand and accept her own self, enables her to be more outspoken
and strong-willed than she was at the novel’s start. Importantly, this understanding of herself is
not entirely new, but rather a reclamation of who she was as a girl, as she notes early on that she had always thought of herself as strong-minded (Jones, *Howl’s 12*). As Apolline Lucyk points out in her 2014 chapter, “Sublime Shape-Shifters and Uncanny Other-Selves: Identity and Multiplicity in Diana Wynne Jones’s Female Heroes,” “for Jones’s characters, becoming heroic is intrinsically connected with coming to terms with one’s identity, and processes of maturation” (186). This reclamation of her girl self underscores Pratt’s point that the two allow for more authentic representations. Furthermore, Sophie’s spiritual quest and her social quest are shown to be deeply entangled. Sophie’s personal quest takes place within—and because of—her social one. Many of the challenges that Sophie must face in order to obtain personal growth are the very social roles that she herself has internalized. Rather than retreating from society in order to follow a spiritual journey, Sophie’s quest involves understanding and reframing herself by imagining different social and familial structures. This marrying of the two quests is possible in part because of the novel’s fantastical elements—it is Sophie’s supernatural aging that allows Jones to merge the two narrative structures, thereby imagining alternate affirmative possibilities. As Pratt notes, novels of development in science fiction (especially those written by women) are particularly situated to imagine girl heroes who are able to “[transcend] the gender limitations characterizing more conventional novels … creat[ing] narrative patterns in which a hero completes a full-fledged romance quest” (35). By drawing on multiple types of traditions, Jones is able to successfully imagine a girl’s quest that draws upon the masculine mythic tradition without androgenizing her, and draws from narrative types in the feminine women’s fiction tradition without limiting her.10

---

10 Lucyk notes that “[Jones’s] use of multiplicity in her heroic female characters—for example, characters with uncanny other-selves, characters with mysterious disguises that have been imposed on them, and characters with a wealth of knowledge inherited from ancient witches—works to set Jones’s female heroes apart from the demure
Sophie’s journey also draws from Nodelman and Reimer’s home/away/home model in children’s literature, and the novel begins with this structure in a fairly conventional way. Sophie starts the novel feeling stuck at home with her stepmother, Fanny, destined to inherit the family business (a hat shop), for which she has a great proclivity but no love. Like many children’s literature texts, Sophie is largely neglected by her stepmother, who is a loving but mostly absent parental figure. Fanny leaves Sophie alone at the hat shop most of the time, going out courting in order to remarry and stay financially afloat. Although dreadfully bored and constantly working, Sophie is nonetheless safe in the hat shop, as even taking a short trip across town to visit her sister seems dangerous, as she runs the risk of being accosted by men as a young girl walking on her own. Sophie herself equates boredom with safety when she exclaims during her walk: “What made me think I wanted life to be interesting? … I’d be far too scared. It comes of being the eldest of three” (Jones, Howl’s 14).

Most of Sophie’s quest of course takes place away from home, though it is notable that it still takes place primarily in a house. After she’s cursed, Sophie ventures to Howl’s moving castle, where she quickly makes herself an indispensable part of the household by claiming to be the house’s cleaning lady. Although appearing as a moving castle to the residents of Market Chipping where Sophie is from, the castle is quite small on the inside, containing merely a workshop/kitchen area, a bathroom, a broom cupboard, and a small, enclosed backyard on the first floor, and just a couple of bedrooms on the second floor (Jones, Howl’s 50-2, 58). The castle exists in a mishmash of places, with its main base located in Porthaven, but with a front door that allows its inhabitants to go between four different locations when exiting the house by merely turning the door knob a different direction: Porthaven, a seaside town; the hills above Market

______________

heroines of earlier fantasy, who wait to be saved by their male counterpart. This multiplicity also sets her heroes apart from assertive female heroes who essentially play the part of a male hero in the body of a female” (185).
Chipping, the town Sophie is from; Kingsbury, the royal capital; and the non-magical Wales (located in an alternate world), where Howl is originally from. Sophie’s quest thus does not follow a strict home/away binary; although she does leave home, the majority of her quest takes place in a domestic sphere in another house. The fact that Sophie’s quest takes place mostly in this house is significant for several reasons. Sophie’s journeying to a magical, floating, foreboding castle alludes to fairy tale tropes where heroines go willingly to the castle of a wealthy yet threatening male character, such as “Bluebeard” or “Beauty and the Beast.” Howl himself is even referred to as “Bluebeard” in the townspeople’s gossip early on in the novel (Jones, Howl’s 9). Jones turns this trope on its head, however, as the castle only looks imposing from the outside, but is actually quite a normal and cozy home on the inside: “There isn’t any more of the castle … except what you’ve seen and two bedrooms upstairs … Howl and Calcifer invented the castle … and Calcifer keeps it going. The inside of it is really just Howl’s old house in Porthaven, which is the only real part” (Jones, Howl’s 58-9). This mirrors Howl’s character, who puts on airs of being a foreboding wizard who eats girls hearts, but who is actually quite kind and caring towards the other members of his household, if a bit vain. By situating Sophie’s “away” part of her quest in the house, Jones emphasizes the reality of girls’ and young women’s experiences, which have been traditionally limited to the domestic sphere. This change not only allows Jones to imagine a quest that more authentically represents girls’ experiences than the traditional mythic structure affords, but also emphasizes the danger and excitement possible within the home, effectively blurring the boundaries between the “Home (Safe but Boring)” and “Away (Exciting but Dangerous)” binary found in most children’s fiction (Nodelman and Reimer 201).
Despite the fact that Sophie’s quest takes place in the home, her arc nonetheless does feature a return home, though again Jones makes changes to the typical home/away/home pattern. In the latter half of the novel, the household is forced to physically relocate the castle’s locations and four doors due to the Witch of the Waste’s pursuit. Howl and Calcifer end up moving the main part of the house from the Porthaven location to Sophie’s old home and connected hat shop. In some ways, this return is similar to the typical home/away/home structure: she does return home after all, making the complete loop of there and back again. However, Sophie’s return home does not merely reflect a return to the safe but now preferable home. Instead, her return involves not only a transformation in Sophie, but a transformation in the space as well. Howl and Calcifer merge the space of the castle with the structure of Sophie’s old home so that neither one looks quite the same:

For a few instants, while the smoke still hung everywhere, Sophie saw to her amazement the well-known outlines of the parlor in the house where she had been born. She knew it even though its floor was bare boards and there were no pictures on the walls. The castle room seemed to wriggle itself into place inside the parlor, pushing out here, pulling in there, bringing the ceiling down to match its own beamed ceiling, until the two melted together and became the castle room again, except perhaps it was now a bit higher and squarer than it had been. (Jones, *Howl’s* 245)

The third-person omniscient narrator comments several times on how seeing her childhood home changed in this way causes her to feel “odd” and have “fearsome mixed feelings” (250). While Howl expects her to be pleased and comforted by her return home, Sophie instead has a difficult time parsing out her ambivalent feelings, as doing so involves recognizing her own changing family and home situation. This moment falls in line with Nodelman and Reimer’s third possible
home/away/home structure in which the child feels ambivalently about the home upon returning. This ambivalence is fitting for Sophie’s quest, as the hat shop had been not only a source of boredom and safety for her, but a manifestation of her entrapment—a symbol of what her life could have been limited to if she had followed the expected narrative. By having Sophie return to her childhood home in this way, Jones simultaneously shows how Sophie herself has transformed—the melding of her home and Howl’s does not seem accidental—while emphasizing the fraught, complicated relationship Sophie has with home, family, and love.

The fact that Howl’s house is located across multiple locations speaks to the displacement and ambiguity of the home. Like most children’s literature, Howl’s Moving Castle emphasizes themes of the home and the family. As Farah Mendlesohn notes, “Many of [Jones’s] novels take place indoors or are about the disputed safety of home. By the time of Howl’s Moving Castle, it is the domestic space (the house) that … has become, in fact, fantastic” (Diana 108). Rather than depicting a clear-cut didactic trajectory where the main character leaves home to ultimately return having learned to appreciate home its safety due to the presence of parental authority, Jones complicates this. By creating a house that is so difficult to pin down, Jones portrays the fluid boundaries of the home, as well as familial bonds. This idea is emphasized at the end of the novel when Sophie’s stepmother and sisters show up unexpectedly, as well as a few other characters Sophie has grown close to over the course of the novel. Sophie is surrounded by all of these people at the climax of the novel, which underscores how much Sophie’s life has transformed since the beginning of the novel. The juxtaposition of her family of origin with the inhabitants of the castle work to show how Sophie, Howl, Calcifer, and Michael have become a family as well, an idea that is driven home at the end of the novel when her stepmother, Fanny, refers to her as the lady of the house (Jones, Howl’s 328). Fanny’s assertion
that Sophie is the lady of the house makes it clear that Sophie has become a part of the moving castle’s household, while the reintroduction of Sophie’s family of origin at the novel’s climax helps to emphasize that Sophie is not merely becoming a part of her romantic partner’s family in typical patriarchal marriage plot style. In this way, Jones draws on the marriage plot common to women's fiction, but alters it slightly, offering Sophie a romance and (it is implied, an eventual) marriage that promises to be more fulfilling and interesting than those found in bildungsroman that tend to “shrink” young women (Pratt 30): “Howl said, ‘I think we ought to live happily ever after,’ and she thought he meant it. Sophie knew that living happily ever after with Howl would be a good deal more eventful than any story made it sound, though she was determined to try” (Jones, Howl’s 328). In Sophie’s story, while she does not come to appreciate parental authority from leaving home, she does come to appreciate both her new and old familial bonds. Furthermore, the home is shown to be not a place of safety, but the location of the quest itself, containing shifting boundaries that Sophie constantly has to renegotiate. In this way, Sophie becomes the nomadic subject that Braidotti discusses, by imagining a new affirmative narrative and leaving open the possibility for further growth and change.

September’s Cycling and Maud’s Stumbling in The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland

While Diana Wynne Jones’s Howl’s Moving Castle parodies many fairy tale tropes in order to portray a girl’s quest, Catherynne M. Valente’s The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making\(^\text{11}\) makes more explicit allusions to particular girls’ quests in order to

\(^{11}\) The title of this text originally appeared briefly in Valente’s novel for adults, Palimpsest, as a book one of the characters read as a child. The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making was originally written and published online through a crowd-funded project. Since then, she has made the book into a five-book series, though it was not originally conceived as such (Valente, Catherynne).
critique the traditional girl’s quest model. While Jones draws on elements from both mythic and women’s literature traditions in her portrayal of a girl’s quest, Valente’s September follows Joseph Campbell’s Hero’s Journey model more closely, though she resists villainizing or romanticizing the classic girl heroes. As Jill Treftz notes in her 2014 chapter, “‘All little girls are terrible’: Maud as Anti-Villain in Catherynne M. Valente’s *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making,*” Valente “allows September and especially Maud to embrace both traditionally masculine quest-heroism and the more traditionally feminine domestic heroism, imagining a children’s literature that defies those gendered binaries” (250).

While Jones’s book falls into a radical feminist model of discourse according to Lehtonen, *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making* likely falls more into a liberal feminist model due to its clear adherence to Campbell’s Hero’s Journey. However, Valente still does not take this model wholesale, frequently providing metacommentary on the genre and critiquing its conventions. She furthermore makes a point to draw from the Persephone myth, a mythic tradition that is known for being notably female, which acts like a blueprint for September’s quest. Although September is the girl hero of this novel, my analysis in this section must also attend to the antagonist and anti-villain of the story, Maud, as it is through the

---

12 Valente is quite vocal about her critiques of traditional quest models elsewhere. For example, in her 2005 article, “Follow the Yellow-Brick Road: Katabasis and the Female Hero in *Alice in Wonderland, The Wizard of Oz,* and *The Nutcracker,*” she says: “While the traditional folktale often incorporates a feminine character or two, her journey is usually quite short, that is, from birth to courtship to marriage and from thence either into childbirth and death or to vanish summarily and inexplicably from the narrative … But in the postmodern world, where the experience of women is no longer limited to hearth and childbed, where can they look for their own exempla, for heroines that perform the heroic cycle in their own right? That cycle is not now, if it ever was, the exclusive purview of men: women, too, must thread their path through the archetypes it presents” (par. 2).

13 In her study, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction,* which draws extensively from the Carl Jung’s work, Annis Pratt traces what she terms the rape-trauma archetype in women’s literature, and notes that “Jung recognizes the power of such specifically feminine archetypes as the Demeter/Kore narrative for women’s psychology” though she admits that his understanding of gender can at times “be rigid to the point of stereotyping” (7).
comparison of their two different trajectories that Valente critiques conventional quest models for girls and imagines an alternate one.\(^\text{14}\)

Published in 2011, *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making* by Catherynne M. Valente tells the story of September, a twelve-year old girl from Omaha, Nebraska, who gets spirited away to Fairyland by the Green Wind one day.\(^\text{15}\) There she finds herself a quest to undertake—setting out to retrieve the witch Goodbye’s spoon, which was stolen by the Marquess, a terrible little girl who imposes strict rules and bureaucracy onto Fairyland. Once she retrieves the spoon, however, the Marquess blackmails September into journeying to the Worsted Wood to retrieve her “mother’s sword,” which transforms into a wrench for September, as her mother is a mechanic. Upon retrieving the sword, September finds that the Marquess has kidnapped her friends, imprisoning them in the Gaol. To get there September must travel widdershins, circumnavigating the world in a ship of her own making.

Once there, she learns the truth about the Marquess and Fairyland. She learns that the Marquess was once Queen Mallow—a beautiful young woman who ruled Fairyland benevolently before her time in Fairyland ran out, forcing her back to the real world as though no time had passed. Mallow once again became Maud (her true, given name): a child, poor and abused, standing in front of the wardrobe in her attic, unable to return to Fairyland. Maud eventually clawed her way back to Fairyland, freezing herself in time in order to stay there indefinitely. She then became the Marquess, ruling over Fairyland vindictively instead.

\(^{14}\) My analysis for the character Maud draws extensively from Jill Treftz’s chapter “‘All little girls are terrible’: Maud as Anti-Villain in Catherynne M. Valente’s *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making*” in which she argues that Valente portrays Maud as an anti-villain in order to critique classic fantasy quest models featuring girls. I agree with her analysis, though I emphasize September’s quest as the focus for my analysis.

\(^{15}\) *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making* includes some chapter illustrations, drawn by Ana Juan. Though beautiful, I do not discuss these images in my analysis as they are small images that only appear with the chapter titles, and have little bearing on the text.
At the novel’s conclusion, Maud tries to trick September into disconnecting the gears from Fairyland to Earth, claiming that September’s time in Fairyland is almost up. September recognizes Maud’s trickery, and she realizes that it is actually Maud’s clock that has been unnaturally frozen with only a minute left. Though September feels sympathy for Maud and weeps for her, she uses her wrench to restart Maud’s clock. In a last-ditch effort to save herself, however, Maud falls suddenly into a deep, un-waking, fairytale-esque sleep, thus preventing herself from being physically pushed out of Fairyland. The novel ends with September returning home to her mother in Nebraska, reassured by the knowledge that, unlike Maud, she is destined to return to Fairyland in perpetuity, as she is now bound to return for a few months every year under the Persephone Clause.

Valente’s desire to construct an alternate narrative that is affirmative for girls is commented upon both within the text, and by the author herself. In the “Questions for the Author” section at the back of the book, Valente notes that as a child she was frustrated by the trend in classic children’s fantasy where all of the heroines eventually “wanted to go home, and rejected the magical world in favor of our own” and that she wrote this novel partially as a response to that (252). She says: “I wanted to create a book about saying yes to magic, about seeing a new world, a new way of living and embracing it instead of turning away” (Valente, “Questions” 252). Valente achieves her aim in her novel, and in doing so she makes fundamental changes to the quest structure in order to imagine a tale fitting for a girl’s quest.

Valente imagines an alternative narrative by emphasizing how Fairyland and its inhabitants become-with one another, collapsing the boundaries between the discursive and the material and materializing the discursive within the context of the story.16 For example, the route

---

16 In response to the question “Which landscape is more important to your writing: the physical or the emotional,” Valente responds, “I don’t think there is so much difference between them. That’s part of the joy of literature — the
September takes is largely influenced by the space itself. While the text makes clear that her choices are important, Fairyland’s influence on September’s trajectory is undeniable. There is much discussion of how the paths the characters are on determine where they end up. Early on, September comes to a crossroads in which she has to decide which path to take: “TO LOSE YOUR WAY,” “TO LOSE YOUR LIFE,” “TO LOSE YOUR MIND,” or “TO LOSE YOUR HEART” (Valente, Girl 25). She chooses the last option, which effectively determines the narrative and the character growth September experiences, as she ultimately falls in love and learns to be more compassionate towards others. In this way, Valente effectively portrays the entanglement between the space of Fairyland and September’s quest and subjectivity. The two effectively constitute one another, and Valente portrays how September and Fairyland become-with one another. Valente often emphasizes Fairyland’s vital materiality through anthropomorphism in the novel (Bennett 119-20).17 Maud, for example, holds real animosity towards Fairyland and its rules, as it is due to its laws on Stumbling that she is forced back home against her will; she says, “I am not a toy, September! Fairyland cannot just cast me aside when it’s finished playing with me!” (Valente, Girl 227). In the novel, Valente treats Fairyland as an active character itself, and the interconnectedness between Fairyland and its inhabitants is clearly felt throughout the story.

The relationship between movement, wandering, and narrative is made explicit several times throughout The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making. September, for example, frequently demonstrates knowledge of fairy tales and quest stories and

---

17 In this part of my analysis, I am drawing partly from Jane Bennett’s thinking on vital materialism, a concept I explore in more detail in Chapter Two.
how they are “supposed” to go, basing many of her decisions on this knowledge. Shortly after she arrives in Fairyland, she decides to embark on a quest, reasoning, “What did I come to Fairyland for, after all?” (Valente, *Girl* 35). She also debates how she should act, trying to determine the type of story she is in:

The trouble was, September didn’t know what sort of story she was in. Was it a merry one or a serious one? How ought she to act? If it were merry, she might dash after a Spoon, and it would all be a marvelous adventure, with funny rhymes and somersaults and a grand party with red lanterns at the end. But if it were a serious tale, she might have to do something important, something involving, with snow and arrows and enemies. Of course, we would like to tell her which. But no one may know the shape of the tale in which they move. (35-6)

The power people have over the direction their stories take is a major theme in the novel, and one that remains largely ambivalent throughout. While September’s ability to make her own choices—and to choose differently than what is expected or scripted of her—is undoubtedly important, the strong pull that circumstances, paths, and narratives have are not diminished either. At the climax of the novel, for example, the Green Wind emphasizes the importance of September’s choices, noting that it is specifically because she made these choices of her own free will *without* being fated to do so that truly makes her heroic:

No one is chosen. Not ever. Not in the real world. You chose to get a witch’s Spoon back and make friends with a Wyvern … And twice now, you have chosen not to go home when you might have, if only you abandoned your friends. You are not the chosen one, September. Fairyland did not choose you—you chose yourself. You could have had a lovely holiday in Fairyland and never met the Marquess, never worried yourself with
local politics, had a romp with a few brownies and gone home with enough memories for a lifetime’s worth of novels. But you didn’t. You chose. You chose it all. Just like you chose your path on the beach: to lose your heart is not a path for the faint and fainting.”

(Valente, *Girl* 205-6)

As Treftz suggests, however, it is largely a matter of circumstance—not choice—that differentiates September from the antagonist, Maud (263). While September effectively gets the best of both worlds by being allowed to cycle between her home in Nebraska and Fairyland every year due to the Persephone Clause, Maud, a child who has Stumbled into Fairyland, must be shunted out of it once her time is up. As Treftz notes, “Though the story depends upon the concept of heroic choice, the disturbing similarities between September and Maud suggest that the real difference between them is not a difference in kind, but in circumstance” (263). Through this ambivalent portrayal towards the extent to which narratives and paths determine the trajectory characters take, Valente effectively comments on the real influence stories have on the narratives girls believe are possible for themselves, while leaving space for alternate models to be imagined.

Valente’s novel thus makes significant changes to the typical home/away/home structure found in most children’s literature in order to construct a story about a girl “saying yes to magic” (Valente, “Questions” 252). As mentioned previously, Fairyland is portrayed as having real influence over the characters’ lives and decisions, and this applies to how the home/away/home structure is portrayed in the novel as well. Like our world, Fairyland is bound by certain laws—they may be different, but the text treats them as equally real. One of the strongest examples of this is Fairyland’s rules about the human children who travel there. There are three categories: Changelings, those who Stumble, and the Ravished (the latter two being most important to my
analysis). Changelings are human children who have been exchanged with fairy creatures—it is described a bit like a foreign exchange program—and they must wear special shoes with iron in them in order to keep themselves from floating away from Fairyland back to earth. Those who Stumble find their way to Fairyland accidentally—through a wardrobe or rabbit hole or some other dark, enclosed space—and they have clocks that count down their time in Fairyland, shunting them back to the real world once their time is up. The Ravished are those who are spirited away to Fairyland, and, under the Persephone clause, are required to return to Fairyland for a portion of each year if they eat fairy food during their stay. These laws are extremely important as they directly affect both September and Maud, largely leading to the circumstances that cause them to be the hero and the (anti-)villain, respectively.

September’s home/away/home trajectory has resonances with both Wendy (from *Peter and Wendy*) and Dorothy (from *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*), though it is the latter who Valente comments on most directly through September. The parallels between the two are plentiful: Dorothy is from Kansas while September is from Nebraska, both are spirited away from their homes one by the wind (a tornado and the Green Wind, respectively), and both narratives spend an inordinate amount of time discussing each girl’s footwear. Dorothy is also the character who explicitly longs for home the most of any fantasy heroine, making her a natural inversion to

---

18 The reason they have to wear shoes with iron is because magic is allergic to iron in Fairyland, and this reaction helps to keep them grounded. This detail is an interesting one, as iron shoes are often associated with villainesses, such as the queen in the Grimms’ version of “Snow White,” whose “slippers of iron were heated in a fire until red hot, and [she] was forced to put them on, and to dance until she dropped dead” (Opie and Opie 228).
19 Much like Alice from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* or Lucy and Susan from *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*.
20 Similar to Wendy from *Peter and Wendy*, and Dorothy from *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, who were spirited away by a supernatural being and a natural phenomenon, respectively.
21 There is undoubtedly more to be said about the significance of shoes in Valente’s novel, though it is outside the purview of this project. September spends much of the story wearing only one shoe—a potential allusion to the Greek mythical hero Jason, who is recognized as the rightful king due to his single sandal—which at the very least, denotes the quest story September is in. Furthermore, when September wears the Marquess’s shoes about halfway through the novel, they compel her to walk the path the Marquess desires. September is unable to diverge from this path until she finally returns to her own shoe near the novel’s conclusion.
September who “says yes to magic” (Valente, “Questions” 252). While Dorothy spends all of her time “away” trying to get back home, September, by contrast leaves her home freely, desiring freedom from her mundane, safe life. As the Green Wind tells her, there are many rules to reach Fairyland, one of which being that she must tell a lie in order to enter its boundaries. The lie she chooses is quite telling, a clear mirror to Dorothy’s many assertions that she needs to return to Kansas: “‘I want to go home,’ [September] lied softly” (Valente, *Girl* 10). This lie is echoed at the end of the novel, when September, trapped, cold, injured, and despairing of her ability to save her friends (who the Marquess has imprisoned) says the same line, but truthfully this time: “‘I want to go home,’ she said shakily to the dark. And she meant it, for the first time. Not as the lie that had gotten her into Fairyland, but the real and honest truth. Her lips trembled. Her teeth chattered. ‘It’s all so scary here, Mom,’ she whispered. ‘I miss you’” (201). This moment falls into Nodelman and Reimer’s schema through its depiction of the safety of the home, and the relative danger of “away.” While her sentiment may seem to echo Dorothy’s more here, September’s moment is actually a much more emotional one, as her desire to go home only happens after she has encountered much hardship and has grown more compassionate towards others as a result. Furthermore, this desire is only temporary, as only a few pages later a conversation between September and the Green Wind reveals that her want to go home is more of a moment of weakness than a true wish:

“… I just want to go home.” “Really? That’s all? I can take you home just now,” murmured the Green Wind. “If that’s all you want. Nothing but a blink, and we’re in Omaha, no harm done all well and ending well. There, there. No need of crying.”

September’s leg burned, and her arms felt so heavy. “No, but…my friends…they’re locked away and they need me…” “Well, it’s all a dream, no worries about that. I’m sure
it’ll all work itself out. Dreams have a way of doing that.” “Is it a dream?” “I don’t know, what do you think? It certainly seems like a dream. I mean, talking Leopards! My stars.” September squeezed her fists in the dark. “No,” she whispered. “It’s not. Or if it, I don’t care. They need me.” “Good girl,” chuffed the Green Wind. “When little ones say they want to go home, they almost never mean it. They mean they are tired of this particular game and would like to start another.” (Valente, Girl 205)

Although Fairyland is undoubtedly dangerous and frightening, September’s bravery and compassion towards her friends supersedes her desire to go home. Her time there is no longer merely a selfish excursion merely to relieve her boredom. Instead, she has become invested in Fairyland and its inhabitants, endeavoring to help them rather than abandon them. By the novel’s conclusion, she is quite nomadic by Braidotti’s definition. She is never fully settled in either place, but belongs to both places, and has essentially become a “polyglot,” someone who is well-versed in the cultures and customs of each place, while not endeavoring to own or possess them. Braidotti uses both the polyglot and the nomad as figurations to illustrate the kind of critical consciousness she imagines; she says:

The polyglot surveys this situation with the greatest critical distance; a person who is in transit between the languages, neither here nor there, is capable of some healthy skepticism about steady identities and mother tongues. In this respect, the polyglot is a variation on the theme of critical nomadic consciousness; being in between languages constitutes a vantage point in deconstructing identity. (Braidotti 12)

September’s nomadic relationship to home stands in stark contrast to both the antagonist Maud, and to Dorothy. Maud/Mallow follows the classic children’s fantasy model where the hero is often rewarded with a crown at the end of the novel (Alice becomes a queen at the end of the
looking glass, the Pevensie children rule Narnia benevolently for a number of years, and Dorothy, though she does not become queen herself, sees all of her companions divide up Oz and become rulers before returning to Kansas). Valente makes sure to show the negative consequences of this colonizing mindset in her novel, however, showing how even the benevolent Queen Mallow can easily become the oppressive dictator, the Marquess, and that the two are merely different sides of the same coin. September, notably, is never rewarded with a crown or ruling position in Fairyland. Instead, Valente emphasizes September’s nomadic position at the novel’s conclusion.

*The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* ends—like any good home/away/home story—where it begins: at home in Kansas. This neatly follows the typical Hero’s Journey as well: Dorothy ends her quest where she began it. This stands in sharp contrast with September. Although the novel ends with her return home in typical home/away/home fashion, she does so with the knowledge that her stay there is only temporary too. Because September has been “ravished” and has eaten fairy food during her stay in Fairyland, she must return every spring under the Persephone clause:

That is what it means to be Ravished. When the sand runs out, you must go home, just like poor Mallow. But when spring comes again, so will you, and the hourglass will turn over again. It will all begin anew. You are bound to us now, but you will never live fully here, nor fully there. Ravished means you cannot stay and you cannot go. (Valente, *Girl*

While both September and Dorothy make clear allusions to the Persephone myth, each does so quite differently. As Holly Blackwood notes in her book *The myth of Persephone in Girls’

---

22 In the original Persephone myth, frequently referred to as the Rape of Persephone, Persephone was gathering flowers one day when Hades burst from the earth and abducted her, taking her back to the Underworld. Her mother,
Fantasy Literature, the Persephone myth has held many different types of resonances for both women and men writers over the years, especially beginning in the romantic period. She says:

“This historical shift coincided with the inauguration of fantastic literature capturing the emotional realities of the young, which reveals an emergent congruence between the myth and ideas about children, especially girls, in relation to society and cycles of development. In poetry, women writers began to use the myth to explore the agony and ecstasy of female development, conveying a profound ambivalence about growing up in patriarchal cultures. Yet Persephone remained open to reflection in the work of both male and female writers. As a uniquely indeterminate and homeless girl, fated forever to cycle between worlds, she inspired paradoxical symbolism of growth and escape. Her launch into the underworld became the perfect muse for writers who would focus on the journeys of girls; imaginative literature for the young also paradoxically embraces and resists child development.” (Blackwood 1)

In Dorothy’s case, Baum predominantly resists her development; her return is accompanied by little to no transformation in her character: Dorothy has nothing to learn on her quest and, in fact, finds she has had the ability to go home the whole time (Baum 257). Baum’s version of Persephone, then, emphasizes her eternal girlhood. Although Persephone continues to cycle year

Demeter, the goddess of the harvest, searches the earth for her daughter, and during this time nothing grows. Eventually Zeus orders Hades to return Persephone, but by this time she has already eaten a few pomegranate seeds (the number varies in different retellings), meaning that she must return to the underworld for a certain number of months each year. During her time away, Demeter despairs and the crops wither, while Persephone’s return signals spring, renewal, and rebirth. Thus, Persephone’s journeying to the Underworld and back again is an origin myth used to explain the cycling of seasons.

23 Dorothy’s quest is also linked to the seasons, reminiscent of Persephone’s cycling in the myth. Baum clearly emphasizes the passing of time at the end of the novel: “For she was sitting on the broad Kansas prairie, and just before her was the new farm-house Uncle Henry built after the cyclone had carried away the old one” (259). This is significantly different from the well-known 1939 film adaptation, The Wizard of Oz, which ends with Dorothy waking up from a dream.
after year, she is one of the few goddesses who remains a “maiden,” marrying Hades but never having any children with him.\(^{24}\)

Valente, however, takes pains to emphasize the growth and change that Persephone’s cycling symbolizes through the allusions she makes throughout September’s quest. Valente keys the reader into the Persephone allusions from the very start through the Persephone clause, inviting the reader to see September’s quest through that lens. In addition to being spirited away and being required to return to Fairyland for a few months every year, September also meets death while journeying to the Worsted Wood in pursuit of her mother’s sword.\(^{25}\) In this sequence, September travels to the land of eternal autumn, “the kingdom where everything changes” (Valente, *Girl* 155). This encounter not only of course follows Joseph Campbell’s Hero’s Journey as a clear example of “The Belly of the Whale” stage (in which the hero undergoes a metaphorical death and rebirth), it also clearly mirrors Persephone’s own journey to the Underworld each year during the fall and winter months (J. Campbell, *Hero* 74). While September’s journey clearly draws on Campbell’s model in many ways, Valente is careful to make clear that her quest is not over at the novel’s conclusion, but that September will continue to journey between Fairyland and Nebraska every year, thus continuing to grow and change. In this way, Valente offers the growth that is typical to most quest and coming-of-age stories: she does take the path to “lose her heart” after all, falling in love and developing more empathy for others in the process. Still, Valente does not preclude September from future changes—she is not a fully realized or completed person by the end. In addition to the Persephone clause, Valente further emphasizes the nonlinearity of September’s growth through her relationship with a

\(^{24}\) As goddess of both spring and the Underworld, the different iterations of Persephone’s name (e.g. Kore, Proserpina) have vastly different meanings, ranging from “maiden” to “to destroy” or “to emerge.”

\(^{25}\) This sword appears in different forms for each individual based on their mother’s profession. In September’s case, she pulls a wrench, as her mother is a mechanic, whereas Maud lifts a needle, since her mother is a seamstress.
marid\textsuperscript{26} boy named Saturday. In Fairyland, Saturday explains that marids live their lives out of order: “Marids…are not like others. Our lives are deep, like the sea. We flow in all directions. Everything happens at once, all on top of each other, from the seafloor to the surface … It’s like a current: We have to go where we’re going. There are a great number of us, since we are all forever growing up together and also already grown” (Valente, \textit{Girl} 107). While September and Saturday share a young, nonsexual love during the novel’s events, Saturday and September glimpse their daughter near the end of the novel, further disrupting a linear growth trajectory for September due to her association with Saturday: “‘Did you see her?’ [Saturday] said nervously … “Our daughter. Standing on the Gear. Did you see her?” (245). As Annis Pratt notes, “Since women are alienated from time and space, their plots take on cyclical, rather than linear, form and their houses and landscapes surreal properties” (11). This is certainly the case for September, who, like Persephone, will cycle between Fairyland and Omaha, Nebraska. Still, September’s quest is not without growth, and by implementing this change into the narrative, Valente is able to imagine a coming-of-age story that ends more optimistically than many of the novels of development that Pratt examines, in which the girls are more-or-less destined to “shrink” or “grow down” as they age into women (Pratt 30).

Maud’s story, by contrast, most closely follows the Pevensie sisters’ trip to Narnia. Like Lucy and Susan, Maud stumbles upon her magical world through an abandoned wardrobe, reigning benevolently over it for a number of years as Queen Mallow, and even growing to adulthood in the process. After growing up in Fairyland, a pregnant Maud is then unexpectedly shut out of Fairyland, prevented from returning, and ends up back in her own world the same age.

\footnote{Marids are supernatural beings from Arabian folklore. In Valente’s novel, marids are sea-djinns who grant wishes when defeated in battle and who live non-linear lives. Though Saturday is male, there are stated to be female marids as well (Valente, \textit{Girl} 105-7)}
she was when she left, as if no time has passed. This is quite similar to Lucy and Susan in *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the major difference being that the two sense that it is time for them to leave Narnia and do so without any complaints. Given Valente’s own feelings towards this book as a child, it is unsurprising that Maud is devastated by this sudden turn of events. Much classic children’s literature in the Victorian and modern periods tends to romanticize innocence in children, bemoaning the loss of innocence that accompanies growing up. As Maria Nikolajeva notes in *The Rhetoric of Children’s Literature*, at the conclusion of the quest “the child character returns to the point of departure, sometimes through flight and rescue, and often crossing the return threshold to ordinary life. There is also a promise of further adventure, that is, as long as children remain children, they can cross the boundaries between the ordinary and magical world” (30). Treftz adds that this convention is frequently gendered as “children’s fantasists from Lewis Carroll to J. M. Barrie to C. S. Lewis have specifically adopted as their protagonists little girls—not little boys—who are … cast out of the realms of magic when they grow up” (249). This is unsurprising, as a loss of innocence usually implies a loss of virginity—or at least increased sexual knowledge—when applied to girls and young women. C.S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia* books are a prime example of this, as Susan Pevensie is infamously unable to return to Narnia for growing up too much (and therefore becoming sexually knowledgeable) signaled by Lewis’s dismissive line that “She's interested in nothing nowadays except nylons and lipstick and invitations” (Lewis 154). Though Lewis makes Susan’s inability to return to Narnia most explicit, the Romantic Rousseauian glorification of innocence and subsequent grieving of experience can be felt in much of Victorian and early 20th century girls’

---

27 Valente notes that it “terrified” her and she read it “as a horror novel well into [her] teenage years” (Valente, “Questions” 252).
literature: Wendy cannot stay in Neverland, Alice’s sister thinks wistfully about how Alice will share her adventures in Wonderland with her own children one day, and Dorothy must return home. In order to return and stay in Fairyland, then, Maud must stop her clock, freezing herself as a young girl forever.

Valente makes it clear that Maud’s situation is much crueler than September’s, and treats her with compassion. As Treftz argues, Valente portrays Maud as an anti-villain, doubling the two characters in order to portray Maud sympathetically, showing how her different circumstances lead her to make the choices she does (263-4). For Maud, returning home is both dangerous and traumatic. Her return to her former age erases her unborn child and any maturation she has accomplished. Valente makes clear how troubling the glorification of innocence is in its desire to prevent girls from growing up through her portrayal of Maud’s perpetual girlhood, specifically through her hyper-levels of femininity and by satirizing her girlish innocence (Treftz 251, 255). In many ways, Maud’s story follows the classic girls’ fantasy quest model much more directly than September’s quest. Valente does this intentionally, imagining some of the negative consequences of this narrative. As Treftz argues:

[B]y shaping Maud’s anger and the Marquess’s villainy so clearly around Maud’s forcible return to childhood, Valente uses Mallow’s loss as a feminist critique of that story: rather than disappearing into wife- and motherhood, Maud disappears from adulthood into childhood. Unlike Carroll’s Alice or Barrie’s Wendy, whose maturations

---

28 See Catherine Robson’s 2001 book, *Men in Wonderland: The Lost Girlhood of the Victorian Gentleman*, which “traces the ways in which a number of male authors in this period construct girlhood and analyzes the exact nature of their investment in the figure of the girl” (3). She contends that much of the male fascination with the figure of the girl in the Victorian period is a way of the adult male defining his own development: “The idealization and idolization of little girls, long acknowledged features of the Victorian era, cannot be thought of without reference to a pervasive fantasy of male development in which men become masculine only after an initial feminine stage. In this light, little girls represent not just the true essence of childhood, but an adult male’s best opportunity of reconnecting with his own lost self” (3).
are painted with regret by their authors, Valente’s Maud is most beautiful and appealing when she has reached physical, emotional, and sexual maturity, while the preservation of her childhood is wholly nightmarish (261)

For Maud, a return to her girlhood erases her pregnancy, symbolically erasing any evidence of sexual experience due to her forced return to supposed “innocence.” In order to return to Fairyland, Maud then must stop her growth, freezing her age so that she will remain a perpetual child. In this way, Valente literalizes the “growing down” archetype that Pratt identifies in girls’ novels of development: she is unable to become a full-fledged adult, and instead she must de-age to remain “one of the girls” (Pratt 34). Once September decides to take action in order to save Fairyland, effectively thwarting Maud’s plans, Maud still refuses to be cast out of Fairyland entirely by falling into a deep, ageless sleep à la Sleeping beauty or Snow White. She tells September: “I have read quite as many stories as you, September. More, no doubt. And I know a secret you do not: I am not the villain. I am no dark lord. I am the princess in this tale” (Valente, Girl 230). Indeed, as Treftz notes, Maud has every reason to believe she is the princess of the tale based on traditional fairy tales and girls’ quest models (262-3).

Maud’s return home also does not represent a return to safety as it so often does in much of children’s literature. Instead, Maud returns home to an abusive and neglectful father, which speaks to the ways “home” has historically been a contentious place for girls and women. The depiction of girls who inevitably return home to be confined to domestic roles “merely mirrors the relatively limited options available to women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (Treftz 249-50). While home has traditionally been a source of nostalgia and domestic safety or comfort for boys and men, for girls and women it has traditionally been a space of labor
and can even represent a threat of sexual danger. As Doreen Massey notes in her 1994 chapter, “A Place Called Home?”: 

It is interesting to note how frequently the characterization of place as home comes from those who have left, and it would be fascinating to explore how often this characterization is framed around those who—perforce—stayed behind; and how often the former was male, setting out to discover and change the world, and the latter female, most particularly a mother, assigned the role of personifying a place which did not change. (166-7)

In her chapter, Massey notes that identity has often been tied to place (particularly the home) and that both identity and place have been conceived of as bounded, stagnant entities. In her novel, Valente clearly critiques the traditional home/away/home narrative in girls’ fantasy literature through her portrayal of Maud and September’s own trajectories. While Valente is ultimately sympathetic to Maud’s plight, by positioning her in the role of antagonist, she aims to emphasize the problematic elements of the classical narratives that Maud’s trajectory follows, offering up September’s nomadic and changeable path (and by extension, a constantly fluctuating identity) as the clearly more desirable alternative.

**Nimona as Nomadic Monster-Girl**

The final text in this chapter, a graphic novel titled, *Nimona*, demonstrates Braidotti’s concept of nomadic subjectivity most effectively of all three texts. *Nimona*, created by Noelle Stevenson and published in 2015, follows the story of Ballister Blackheart, an evil supervillain, and his shapeshifting sidekick, Nimona, as they work together to try to take down the Institution. This

---

29 Massey’s rethinking of space and place is influential to my own thinking here (and throughout this project), and is something I attend to directly in Chapter Three.
alternate universe is set in a fantastical medieval-esque setting with knights, dragons, and heroes, which nevertheless feels distinctly modern due to its contemporary references, such as pizza deliveries, video games, computers, and horror films. In this book, Stevenson constructs a world that seamlessly melds archaic magic and mysticism with modern science and technology. In this alternate space, Stevenson is able to create a world rife with satire and symbolism that she uses in order to comment on tropes in the fantasy and science fiction genres—a fact made explicit even by the back cover’s playful advertising, reading, “NEMESES! DRAGONS! SCIENCE! SYMBOLISM!” (Stevenson). Throughout the course of the graphic novel, the story gradually shifts focus from Nimona and Blackheart’s pursuit of the Institution to the reveal of Nimona’s backstory, and the Institution’s subsequent hunting of her. While Nimona’s shapeshifting powers appear throughout the book, the true nature of her abilities—and subsequent questions about whether her “true” self is that of a girl or monster—are at the heart of the graphic novel’s climax and conclusion.

Though Blackheart is the primary protagonist of the story, Stevenson emphasizes the multiplicity of the characters’ perspectives, telling the entire graphic novel through dialogue and speech bubbles. While Blackheart undoubtedly has his own hero’s journey in the text, it does not come at the expense of Nimona’s, whose arc draws from and comments on Nodelman and Reimer’s home/away/home structure. It is for these reasons that I include Nimona as a text for analysis in this chapter, despite the fact that she is less obviously centered in the text than Sophie and September.

Stevenson uses the alternate space she has constructed in order to imagine non-normative ways of being, exploring the ways society—or in this case, “the Institution”—works to hide and control non-normative bodies. In her article, “To ‘All the Monster Girls’: Violence and Non-
Normativity in Noelle Stevenson’s *Nimona*,” Mihaela Precup argues that the text’s ambiguous attitude towards the monstrous helps complicate established ideas towards good and evil, and towards social roles such as hero and monster. In her analysis, Precup focuses primarily on disability and queerness as forms of non-normativity in the graphic novel, arguing that *Nimona* constructs a kind of “queer cuteness” in order to imagine an alternate aesthetic to the heroic body: “I also argue that the comic productively positions monstrosity at the intersection of violence, cuteness, and queerness, and thus manages to unveil not only the subversive potential of a specific kind of queer cuteness, but also a usable alternative to the aesthetics of the heroic body” (551). Precup’s analysis of Nimona’s coded queerness informs much of my own analysis, as her queer identity is inherently entangled into her identity as a girl. In this section, I explore how *Nimona* establishes the titular character’s position as a girl as “other” or “monstrous” in order to reimagine the Hero’s Journey. I focus on how the graphic novel constructs growing up as a girl as another type of non-normative body, and consider how this directly informs Nimona’s quest.

Like Sophie and September, Nimona demonstrates a pronounced awareness to the narratives that are acceptable for her as a girl, and throughout the graphic novel she is shown using these to her advantage. One of the earliest instances of this is when she first meets Blackheart and tells him a fake backstory in order to convince him to let her be his sidekick. In this story, Nimona is a six-year old girl whose village is being constantly attacked by raiders. Because she is just a young girl, however, Nimona is unable to do anything to help her village. One day, she finds a witch stuck in a hole, who promises to reward Nimona if she helps her out. The witch ends up turning Nimona into a dragon so she can fly her out of the hole and save her village from the raiders. However, Nimona is unaware how to change back and ends up being
chased away from by the villagers. Once she is finally able to figure it out and return to her village, everyone in the village has already been killed. The story Nimona tells Blackwater speaks to her knowledge about what society is willing to accept about both girls and monsters. She knows that a young girl will seem less powerful due to her assumed innocence, and that this perceived powerlessness will help to make her more sympathetic. As Precup notes, “Nimona understands the generic appeal of cuteness and uses it to her advantage in battle … By coupling (queer) cute aesthetics with Nimona’s undeniable strength and potential perpetration of violence, Stevenson thus unveils the significant subversive potential of cuteness rarely visible in more mainstream forms that tend to associate it with childishness and, thus, powerlessness” (556).

Nimona knows that she must make the monstrous (in this case, a dragon) palatable. One way she does this is by upholding a strict sense of good and evil in her story—the dragon Nimona is just misunderstood by the villagers, and she never kills anyone despite their rejection of her. This paints the monster as secretly good, and as not actually monstrous at all, effectively neutralizing any threat the monster may pose. She knows that a monster can only be sympathetic if it only seems monstrous, not if it is. Nimona also portrays herself as a girl who is clearly delineated from the creatures she transfigures into. This again helps to portray her as both wholly un-monstrous and innocent.30

When Blackwater figures out that her backstory is a lie and confronts her about it later in the story, he says to her, “You wanted me to think you were less powerful than you are, WHY?” to which Nimona responds, “Maybe I just didn’t want you to freak out! Like you’re freaking out RIGHT NOW!” (Stevenson 168). Her response indicates Nimona’s hyper-awareness that she must present herself as less powerful than she actually is, otherwise others will be threatened by

30 Notably, this works to uphold the human/nonhuman binary common to Western epistemologies, a binary that Stevenson will also put pressure on throughout the graphic novel.
her. This of course has strong resonances with how girls often make themselves seem less threatening or capable than they actually are in an effort to seem more likable and modest. This is often done by performing innocence or femininity.  

Not only that, but Blackwater’s subsequent response—fear—only serves to confirm her ideas about how she would be received if she did tell the truth. During this exchange, Nimona’s true nature and strength begins to show, and Stevenson draws her much more threateningly than she has appeared to this point (Stevenson 169) (see Figure 1.3). In a panel on the upper right-hand corner of the page, Nimona’s face appears half in shadow, hinting towards her intense anger as well as the danger she threatens. Her facial features, hair, and even her head shape are all drawn quite angularly in this scene, heightening the tension with its use of diagonals (Bang 58). As Precup notes, a queer reading is also possible with Nimona, and her haircut and fashion choices suggest a queer aesthetic (555-6). Her physical appearance as an adolescent girl coupled with her subsequent transformation further support this reading. Blackheart’s immediate reaction to grab his sword in order to silence her is particularly telling as it speaks to his fear of both her anger and her non-normative body, as well as of the power that accompanies them (Stevenson 169).

31 See for example Michele Paule’s 2016 book, *Girlhood, Schools, and Media: Popular Discourses of the Achieving Girl*, in which she argues, among other things, that high-achieving girls often manage their competing gendered and achieving identities by “characterizing their success as produced in acceptably feminized ways,” such as hard work (134).
In addition to the fake backstory she provides Blackheart, Nimona manipulates other types of narratives to her advantage through her shapeshifting abilities. Nimona frequently shapeshifts into other beings associated with women and girls throughout the text. She shapeshifts into a young girl and an old crone at different points in the text, and even the animals she changes into are often ones that have been traditionally feminized or associated with fairy tales. In her first excursion with Blackheart, her transformation into a young girl is one of the earliest things she changes into. During a skirmish with some guards, Nimona transforms into a small girl in order to disarm a guard, preventing him from killing her. She uses his moment of hesitation to grab his knife before plunging it into his back and killing him. As Precup notes, Nimona’s early violence and killing is largely portrayed humorously, and her violence and bloodthirst are largely meant to be read as Nimona’s mischievousness and naivety in these early scenes (553). The young girl is depicted as parodically cute—she has long wavy hair complete with an accompanying pink bow, rosy cheeks, large eyes, and an overlarge red sweatshirt (Stevenson 10). There is also a Little Red Riding Hood allusion in this scene. Nimona begins her fight with the guard as a wolf before turning into the small girl once she is cornered. The girl’s
long red sweatshirt is reminiscent of little red riding hood’s cloak, and her visual markers of innocence bespeak Little Red’s own naivety (see Figure 1.4). The fact that it is the young girl and not the fearsome wolf who overtakes the guard, not only flips the fairy tale on its head but foreshadows Nimona’s own lurking monster.

Figure 1.4: Nimona transforms into a “cute” little girl in order to overcome the guard
Nimona also briefly disguises herself as an older “crone” in order to gain information about the Institution and the townspeople’s attitudes towards it. She disguises herself as an old woman for similar reasons she that she disguises herself as a young girl—she knows that people will underestimate her and not perceive her as a threat. When the stall vendor does eventually notice Nimona eavesdropping, she embodies a “crazy old woman” stereotype, and in a humorous allusion to Snow White, she makes an over-the-top rant about apples before leaving, thereby dispelling any suspicion from herself: “These apples are no good! NO GOOD! This one have worm! This one lumpy! This one too hard! I break last tooth! … I DON’T PAY FOR HARD APPLE. … I’M LEAVE! Bad apples, bah!” (Stevenson 54-55). The stall vendor refers to her as a “stupid old crone” as Nimona leaves, showing that Stevenson is purposefully critiquing the crone archetype here. Nimona’s use of improper grammar here further contributes to her persona, as she adopts grammar associated with someone from a lower socio-economic class background and/or someone who speaks English as a second language. These intersecting identities all contribute to Nimona’s marginalized status, and thus to the stall vendor not taking her seriously. The page ends with a panel on the bottom right that shows Nimona changing back into her “default” self, humming happily with a sly, satisfied smile on her face, successfully having gained her information without raising suspicion (see Figure 1.5). In this example, Nimona draws on the old woman/witch archetype, similar to the way Sophie does in Howl’s Moving Castle, using stereotypical narratives to her advantage and subverting them.
Figure 1.5: Nimona leverages the “crazy old woman” stereotype in order to gain information.

When Nimona transforms, she does not merely discursively manipulate the narratives of the being she is inhabiting. Instead, Stevenson makes clear that she wholly embodies whatever form she has shapeshifted into. One of the scientists studying how Nimona’s powers work explains them this way: “Every time she changes form, every single cell in her body is destroyed and new ones are generated in their place. She’s not molding herself into new forms; it’s like every time her whole body dies and a new one grows in its place” (Stevenson 192). This means that she fully embodies whatever form she is in. She is not merely Nimona in a different body; instead, Nimona is the different body, she essentially becomes whatever form she takes. This
material embodiment is emphasized in one instance about halfway through the book where
Blackwater and Nimona encounter a cutting-edge scientific device called an Anomalous Energy
Enhancer that halts her access to the energy she needs for her shapeshifting powers. As the
scientist explains, the device uses anomalous energy, an invisible, apparently infinite source that
sorcerers use to practice their craft—and which is the same energy Nimona uses during her
transformations (Stevenson 108). The device thus causes Nimona to get temporarily stuck as a
cat, which means that she is unable to talk (Stevenson 111). This example further underscores
the idea that Nimona fully embodies whatever form she takes, thereby emphasizing materiality,
rather than a Cartesian dualism epistemology that constructs a clear boundary between the body
and the mind. Furthermore, her connection to the anomalous energy works to construct her body
(and her subjectivity) as becoming-with the world, rather than seeing them as two distinct,
separable entities. Nimona’s connection to the shared ancient communal energy and the fact that
she fully becomes whatever she shapeshifts into emphasizes ideas of embodiment and becoming-
with others.

In addition to the emphasis on materiality and embodiment, the description of Nimona’s
powers also function as commentary on the Hero’s Journey and its applicability (or lack thereof)
for a girl hero. The stages of the Hero’s Journey feature the hero’s descent into the belly of the
beast, at which point the hero figuratively dies. With his return he is “reborn”—transformed and
matured into a fully self-actualized individual prepared to reintegrate into society becoming the
master of two worlds (J. Campbell, Hero 211). Nimona’s repeated deaths and rebirths of her
body each time she transfigures alludes to this process in the Hero’s Journey. However, in
Nimona’s case, there is no beginning or end to her cycling—she does not form into a fully-
formed person, instead her body and her identity are shown to be constantly in flux. This
symbolizes girls’ changing bodies during puberty and adolescence, and it speaks to the way girls’ quests and growth are often nonlinear (Pratt 11). In addition to the powerful potential of bodies that refuse to be controlled, Stevenson points to the painful effects of continuously transforming oneself—all of Nimona’s cells have to die before she can rebuild them. This speaks to the pains girls, particularly queer girls, are pressured to take in order to make themselves socially acceptable—altering both their personalities and their bodies in order to do so. Connections between women and girls and the monstrous have long been established by scholars, “since women’s bodies were regarded as more permeable and already othered” (Precup 554). By conveying Nimona’s body in this way, Stevenson critiques a common characteristic to the male quest, and by addressing it imagines a quest that more authentically speaks to the experiences of girls.

Although Nimona fully embodies each form she changes into, she is still unquestionably Nimona each time. Stevenson visually connects Nimona in most of her forms through a pink color that is associated with her. For much of the beginning of the book, Nimona has red and pink hair, and when she transforms, the animals she changes into are usually a red or pinkish color as well. The fact that pink is associated with her is significant for its connection to girls and girlhood. Post World War II, the color pink became increasingly gendered and commodified, and began to be firmly associated with girls and girlhood (Adams 60-2). By using pink as one of Nimona’s visual markers across her transformations then, Stevenson purposefully underscores the importance of her position as a girl to understanding her character. This, coupled, with

32 Pratt specifically notes that girls’ and women’s quests tend to be cyclical, though Nimona’s quest seems to be even messier than this, resisting any one type of trajectory.
33 To be clear, I do not mean to imply that changing one’s body (in any case, but particularly for trans girls) is inherently negative. Rather, what I mean is that the societal pressure to fit into restrictive gender norms that uphold the gender binary is incredibly pervasive and can affect all girls, whether cis, trans, or nonbinary.
34 See Precup, pages 554-5 for a brief overview of the history of the term “monster” and how it relates to girls and other marginalized figures.
Stevenson’s dedication at the beginning of the book, “To all the monster girls,” invites the reader to understand Nimona’s monstrousness as directly tied to her girl-ness.

The changes to Nimona’s hair throughout the book are used to signify significant changes to her body and personality as well. Although Nimona shapeshifts constantly, there are four major versions of her “default,” seemingly true form. In her first iteration, she has reddish-pink hair that features long pieces in the front with shorter, shaved hair in the back; in her second, she has the same haircut but in purple; in the third, her hair has been cut shorter still, leaving just a small purple tuft in the front; and in her final version, she’s been returned to a small young girl with flowing long red hair. Each of Nimona’s changes to her hair in her girl form happen immediately after some major, usually traumatic event involving her shapeshifting powers. In the first instance, Nimona changes her hair to purple after encountering a scientific device that halts her ability to access the “anomalous energy” that is necessary for her to shapeshift (Stevenson 108). Blackheart comments on the change in color as soon as he sees it, asking, “I thought pink was your color” to which Nimona replies, “I like purple too” a subtle, but important nod to the way Nimona’s body and identity refuses to remain in a static state that can be pinned down more easily by others (Stevenson 124). Her later haircut also comes after a significant battle in which Blackheart witnesses Nimona beheaded while in dragon form. Blackheart, believing her body and person to be relatively stable, thinks that Nimona has died from this incident; however, her body remains and continues living while her severed head disintegrates (Stevenson 154-6). Nimona later explains that this is how her body normally works: “The strong part stays and the rest disintegrates” (Stevenson 229). Though resilient, this shapeshifting ability is not without consequences. After part of Nimona dies, Nimona seems to lose some of her memories as well, forgetting the fake background story she originally told Blackheart. Although Blackheart
believes that she has forgotten her story merely because it was a lie, it is evident that her memory loss is deeper than this, and that it is a result of the traumatic severing of part of her body in the preceding events (Stevenson 167-8). Blackheart asks her, “What was that you were just saying about not lying?” to which she replies “I’m NOT! What did I say?” (Stevenson 168). Her response here indicates a real loss of memory (though of course she did also lie about her backstory). Read allegorically, this moment can be understood to represent the repression of traumatic memories. Following a traumatic event in which Nimona is beheaded (and likely stirring up memories of her true backstory35 in which she was rejected by her family and community), Nimona is no longer able to remember the fictitious memory that she originally told Blackheart. This loss of memory after a part of her body has died speaks to her embodied subjectivity, as well as the effects of trauma on memory.

The main question throughout the graphic novel is Nimona’s true state: whether she is a girl or a monster. Precup notes that Goldenloin’s actions towards Nimona change depending whether or not he believes her true state is a monster or a girl: “Initially, Sir Ambrosius Goldenloin sees Nimona as ‘a little girl disguised as a monster’ (2015, 69). Thus while he is at first willing to disregard the Institution’s order to kill Nimona because he thinks she is just a child, later Goldenloin sees her as ‘vicious,’ ‘cruel,’ and ‘EVIL’ (2015, 180) and is prepared to help kill her” (Precup 554). In the latter half of the graphic novel, most of the characters assume that the monster is Nimona’s natural form. Goldenloin states, “We assumed she was a girl disguised as a monster, but she’s not. She’s a monster disguised as a girl” and even Blackheart questions it/her, “I took it for granted that this was your natural form, but it’s not is it? … What

35 Nimona’s true backstory is that, as a young child, she was imprisoned by her own community after she killed the raiders that attacked them. Her parents also abandoned her, believing her to be an imposter, thinking that their true child died as an infant and was replaced by the shapeshifting Nimona (the text leaves it ambiguous as to the veracity of this). Eventually, Nimona is taken away and is experimented on extensively (Stevenson 224-6).
are you trying to hide? Who are you really? WHAT are you really?” (Stevenson 162, 168). The climax of the novel, however, suggests that neither of these assumptions are quite true, but that instead, both the girl and the monster are equally Nimona. The Institution separates Nimona’s body, dividing her between her monster form and her small child form. She notes that normally one piece would disintegrate, and that the split has left her body unstable, making it risky to shapeshift (Stevenson 229). Throughout this chapter, Blackheart makes several comments on behalf of Nimona’s human-girl side, arguing that this is the “real” her. He tells the girl-Nimona, “You ARE the strong part, okay? We’re gonna get you back to your other self and put you back together” and similarly tells dragon version of her later, “Nimona, this isn’t you” (Stevenson 229, 242). Nimona, however, refuses to be reduced to only one part of herself, telling him in dragon-form: “This is me. This has ALWAYS been me” (242). In a sequence of pages in which Blackheart interacts with both girl-Nimona and monster-Nimona, Stevenson drives home the idea that the girl and the monster cannot be separated through both words and images. Monster and girl mirror one another at the bottom of page 237, in which both reject Blackheart’s help and refuse to let go of Goldenloin. Not only do both say “no,” but the angles on each version’s face are similar, though they have contrasting directions (Stevenson 237) (see Figure 1.6). A few panels later, girl-Nimona and monster-Nimona alternate speaking, further emphasizing the connection between them: “‘I’ve killed people before.’ ‘That’s an understatement.’ ‘I’ve killed LOTS of people” (Stevenson 238) (see Figure 1.7). Notably, it is Nimona’s girl-self that asserts that she has “killed people before,” which further works to blur the line between girl and monster, subverting stereotypical constructions of girlhood innocence in the process. Nimona ultimately declines Blackheart’s offers of help as she knows that doing so means rejecting a part of herself. Stevenson’s insistence on the interconnectedness of girl and monster coupled with her
refusal to assign Nimona a “natural” state thus serves not only to destabilize not only Nimona’s identity, but the very narrative of girlhood itself.

Figure 1.6: Girl-Nimona and Monster-Nimona are paralleled visually

Figure 1.7: Monster-Nimona and Girl-Nimona alternate speaking
Conclusion

To conclude this chapter, I end with an analysis of the home/away/home structure in *Nimona*. I first analyze how *Nimona* both fits and alters the structure, and how this influences the girl’s quest as a whole. I then briefly compare this depiction to the two other texts discussed in this chapter, concluding that of the three, *Nimona* most fully depicts Braidotti’s concept of nomadic subjectivity.

At the graphic novel’s conclusion, the Anomalous Energy Enhancer device explodes with both girl-Nimona and monster-Nimona still inside the building, leaving Blackheart to believe that she has most likely died. The Institution is disbanded and Blackheart is redeemed in the eyes of society as a “champion of the people” for supposedly taking down “the beast” (Stevenson 249). In a light-hearted, comedic scene it is revealed that Nimona is still alive as she masquerades as Blackheart’s doctor, referring to herself as a “monster” in order to illicit his genuine reaction: “Don’t call her that. She’s not a monster” (Stevenson 250). Once Blackheart suspects the fake doctor is Nimona when the real one shows up, he runs out of the room, catching a brief glimpse of Nimona before she disappears into a crowd. The Nimona he sees has reverted back to the appearance she had during their initial meeting—a teenage girl with short, pink hair—though there is no explanation as to how she survived the explosion, or even how much of her survived, or which version(s) of herself survived. By leaving this purposefully ambiguous, Stevenson refuses to concretely locate Nimona’s subjectivity, thereby leaving her truly fluid and “nomadic.”

This idea is further emphasized in the epilogue. In this brief two-page conclusion, Blackheart thinks about Nimona, noting that he has not seen her since that brief moment in the
hospital—at least not to his knowledge. Over a sequence of panels featuring different people and beings who potentially could be Nimona, Blackheart narrates:

I don’t know where Nimona is now. I haven’t seen her since. At least, I don’t think I have. I suppose I wouldn’t know. I don’t know if I’ll ever see her again. It’s probably for the best. Of course…I still wonder…about every stranger who gives me a knowing look. About every cat who watches me too closely. I can only hope I reached her in some way. I can only hope that if she does come back… she’ll know me for who I am. A friend.

(Stevenson 255-6)

This epilogue perfectly ties together Braidotti’s idea of nomadic subjectivity with Nodelman and Reimer’s home/away/home narrative structure. Not only is her subjectivity depicted as physically unstable and unknowable through her shapeshifting abilities, but this is tied to her nomadic lifestyle as well. She does not merely return home to live with Blackheart, her adopted parental figure, nor does she necessarily remain “away” either. Instead, Nimona’s movement is as fluid and nomadic as her body—open and constantly changing. Stevenson leaves open the possibility of Nimona’s return, though even in this case she imagines an alternate possibility that subverts the typical home/away/home model. Instead of returning to Blackheart’s home and learning to respect and appreciate parental authority, as in the case of most home/away/home models, Blackheart is now willing to meet her on equal terms, as “a friend,” rather than trying to control Nimona’s behavior and personality based on what is best for her (Stevenson 256).

In this way, Stevenson successfully imagines a narrative that effectively conveys Braidotti’s idea of nomadic subjectivity. Although both Howl’s Moving Castle and The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making reimagine alternate affirmative quest...

---

36 In his 1999 book System of Comics, Thierry Groensteen defines sequence as “a succession of images where the syntagmatic linking is determined by a narrative project” (146).
narratives for girls by subverting and commenting on traditional archetypal models, *Nimona* takes it the furthest by radically refusing to pin down Nimona, allowing her body and her movement to remain nomadic.

***

In this chapter, I explored three girl heroes’ movements through space—as well as their relationships to their own shifting bodies—examining how they connect to the overall narrative structure. I discovered that the authors reshaped the narrative structure through their portrayals of the girls’ shifting bodies and movements, reworking the genre in order to imagine a more affirming quest for girls. Using Braidotti’s concept of nomadic subjectivity, I found that these texts refuse to posit a universal narrative to replace the male mythic tradition that is so pervasive in Western culture. Instead, they emphasize fluidity and multiplicity. In the examples of these three texts, I found that they all directly comment on traditional quest narratives, critiquing them as they rework them. In particular, the girls’ relationships with home are changed, often acting as spaces filled with tension, instead of comfortable spaces to return to once the journey is over. The spaces themselves are also fluid and changeable, reflecting the bodies of the girls who become-with them. The very concept of home is shown to be progressively unstable from *Howl’s Moving Castle* to *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making* to *Nimona*, in which the titular character’s whereabouts—as well as who she is—remain ambiguous at the end, constantly shifting.

In this chapter, I looked at how these three texts reimagine girls’ quests by changing the overall quest structure, particularly through how they rework the girl hero’s return home. In the next chapter, I look at a specific element of the quest, the object to be quested after. Once again,
I examine how girls’ quests renegotiate elements of a genre that has historically excluded them, reclaiming them in order to imagine more liberating and authentic possibilities.
Chapter Two

“She will be her own doll”: Questing for Girlhood Objects

And they made a coffin of glass, so that they might still look at her, and wrote her name upon it, in golden letters, and that she was a king’s daughter.

-The Brothers Grimm, “Snow-drop”¹

The well-known fairytale, “Snow White” (or in this case, “Snow-drop”), clearly portrays the trope of “woman/girl as object” that is pervasive in many myths and folktales.² Upon her “death,” her body is clearly displayed in a glass case, with her monetary worth—the fact that she is a princess—listed on the coffin. When the prince sees her, he first offers to pay money for her: “At last a prince came … and he saw Snow-drop, and read what was written in golden letters. Then he offered the dwarfs money and earnestly prayed them to let him take her away; but they said, ‘We will not part with her for all the gold in the world’” (Opie and Opie 236). Though the dwarfs refuse his money, they do eventually decide to give Snow-drop to him in the glass coffin. Once she wakes up, he immediately asserts that she will marry him, effectively drawing a direct line from “woman/girl as object” to marriage: “Then he told her all that had happened, and said, ‘I love you better than all the world: come with me to my father’s palace, and you shall be my wife’” (236).

This trope of the girl or woman as an object (and also a reward) remains ubiquitous in quest stories across various mediums in the fantasy genre, in both male-centered and female-centered stories. Some popular examples include the Super Mario Bros. video game franchise,

---

¹ This passage is copied from the tale, “Snow-drop,” in Iona and Peter Opie’s book, The Classic Fairy Tales. They note that the text “appeared in German Popular Stories, Translated from the Kinder- und Haus-Märchen, collected by M. M. Grimm, from Oral Tradition, 1823” (228).
² It is worth remembering that Snow White is stated to be only seven years old in most versions of the tale (Opie and Opie 227, 230).
the animated Disney Princess films, fantasy film adaptations such as *Stardust*, and many female characters in superhero comics. Though “Snow White” is unquestionably a female-centered tale, its heroine is still cast in the “girl as object” role, both by the hero (the prince), and by the queen, who repeatedly gazes at Snow-drop’s beauty through her magic mirror.

While this dissertation is interested in exploring the different aspects of a girl’s quest as opposed to the prototypical male quest in general, this chapter focuses specifically on the quest object. Given that women and girls have so often been the objects of quests themselves, how do their quested objects feature differently than in the archetypal quest story? And, how do their intersecting identities as girls further influence their relationship to the quested-after objects in their stories?

In exploring these questions, I engage with feminist critiques of the archetypal quest story and of children’s literature, as well as with feminist scholarship in new materialism to better attend to the materiality of the quest objects. In addition to these guides, I draw on D. W. Winnicott’s theory of transitional objects, exploring the girl hero’s relationship to her quest object. By exploring how objects are repurposed and reimagined in a couple of selected girls’ texts, I analyze how these changes subvert existing narratives to create new ones. I consider how two girls’ quests in modern fantasy—the 2011 graphic novel, *Anya’s Ghost* by Vera Brosgol, and the 2002 novella, *Coraline* by Neil Gaiman—speak back to and overturn the trope of girl-as-object through the way the girl heroes relate to their quest objects, as well as their own bodies. I

---

3 In the *Super Mario Bros.* series Mario, the hero, repeatedly rescues Princess Peach from the villainous Bowser, who acts both as an impetus for the quest and as the reward at the end. Though more recent Disney films such as *Moana* or *Frozen* have made efforts to subvert this trope, the majority of the Disney Princess films (based predominantly on fairy tales) still tend to fall into it, to various degrees (e.g. *Sleeping Beauty, Aladdin, Cinderella, etc.*). *Stardust* (both the film and the novel) pays homage to and reworks various fairy tale tropes, including this one. In *Stardust*, Tristan quests to get a star for the town beauty, Victoria, but the star turns out to be a young woman named Yvain, who Tristan eventually falls in love with instead. Though many superhero comics have made efforts to write more authentic female characters, especially in recent years, many female leads have frequently played the “damsel in distress” in order to further the male hero’s storyline (e.g. Lois Lane in *Superman* and Gwen Stacy in *Spider-man*).
consider not only how they subvert the objectification they experience from others, but how they overcome the objectification they themselves have internalized. In this chapter, I argue that these girl heroes must face their own objectification as part of their quest, either by confronting it or by leveraging it to their own advantage. Furthermore, I contend that—due to their own objectification—the girls experience empathy and connection with their quested objects, which are shown to have their own vitality.

**Rethinking (Girls’) Quest Objects**

In his essay, “The Quest Hero,” the first element W. H. Auden lists as essential to a quest story is, “A precious Object and/or Person to be found and possessed or married” (35). Though his wording of “Person” is gender-neutral, girl or woman is implied here, and most frequently she is a princess that the hero is rewarded with at the end of his quest through marriage. As Auden notes, “In many versions of the Quest, both ancient and modern, the winning or recovery of the Precious Object is for the common good of the society to which the hero belongs. Even when the goal of his quest is marriage, it is not any girl he is after but a Princess. Their personal happiness is incidental to the happiness of the City; now the Kingdom will be well governed, and there will soon be an heir” (37). Joseph Campbell similarly notes the role of women in his famous work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. He lists “Woman as Temptress” and “Meeting with the Goddess” as steps within the “Initiation” stage of the Hero’s Journey. He says, “Woman, in the picture language of mythology, represents the totality of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know” (J. Campbell, *Hero* 97). Though Campbell himself believed that both men and women could be capable of heroic acts, his outlined structure with its stages depends upon women and girls playing ancillary roles to the male hero’s quest.
As mentioned previously, feminist scholars have critiqued this narrative structure as ill-suited for a girl’s quest model. As children’s literature scholar Lissa Paul notes, “The problem with a ‘typical’ archetypal quest … is that it is about turning boys into men, not girls into women, or children into people. When the quest ends, the hero gets his reward, his property, his integrity, and, often, a princess thrown in among the other goods and chattels” (161). When the quest features a girl as its hero, it is important to consider not only her gender, but also her age, as her position as a child will necessarily inform her quest. Like Paul, children’s literature scholar Maria Nikolajeva similarly emphasizes the difference between the typical mythic or romantic hero to that of the child hero. She observes several similarities between the mythic hero’s journey and notes that “The romantic hero … is one of the most common character types in children’s fiction”; however, she argues that the primary difference between a mythic hero and a child hero is that the child loses all of the power s/he has gained upon her/his return (30).

Nikolajeva says:

I have already shown how mythic patterns are displaced on the romantic level. The most important difference, which allows reiteration, is the return to the initial order, the disempowerment of the hero, the reestablishment of adult authority. The mythic hero kills his father and usurps his place, which would be highly improper in a children’s book. From magical journeys to alternative worlds or histories, the child hero is brought back to the ordinary, sometimes being explicitly stripped of the attributes of previous power … The magical object is irretreievably lost or loses its magical power …, the magical helper is removed, and the character once again stands alone without assistance, no longer a hero. (31)
Nikolajeva interprets this loss as part of the reestablishment of the normal social order, in which the child loses his/her acquired power and returns to their former status at the beginning of the quest. Though this is undoubtedly true in many cases, the lost object—or the object emptied of its power—has undeniable resonances with Winnicott’s theory of transitional objects as well.

Using Winnicott’s theory of transitional objects to read and understand children’s coming-of-age stories is not uncommon to scholars of children’s literature. Most coming-of-age stories in children’s literature follow a structure similar to the quest narrative, both in the realistic fiction and fantasy genres. Instead of merely possessing the objects however, child heroes—both boys and girls—frequently destroy or abandon the objects in their quest. This pattern in children’s literature reflects Winnicott’s contention that transitional objects are important to the child’s understanding of reality and their relation to the object is integral to their own conception of the self. In this theory, children use objects in their identity formation, helping them to make sense of their world by distinguishing between me and not-me. Eventually, the object loses meaning for the child once they obtain a more fully developed sense of self. As Winnicott notes:

This intermediate area of experience, unchallenged in respect of its belonging to inner or external (shared) reality, constitutes the greater part of the infant’s experience, and throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work. An infant’s transitional object ordinarily becomes gradually decathected, especially as cultural interests develop.

(19)
In the case of children’s literature, the child protagonists frequently leave behind or destroy the object at the story’s conclusion—a destruction that typically coincides with their own maturation.4

While Winnicott’s theory of transitional objects is useful for thinking about children’s quests in general, his theory values the experience that transitional objects allow for, more than the objects themselves. Although Winnicott does acknowledge that the nature of the object can be important, and references many different items that can act as transitional objects (a blanket, a stuffed animal, a toy, the infant’s thumb, and even the mother herself), his own research does not directly consider the materiality of the object much (2-6). One thing he does say of the object specifically is that “it must seem to the infant to give warmth, or to move, or to have texture, or to do something that seems to show it has vitality or reality of its own” (7). By contrast, new materialism is explicitly interested in attending to the material. Since this chapter is interested in the materiality of objects specifically, I draw from feminist scholars Karen Barad and Jane Bennett, who each attend to the materiality and the vitality of objects. In this chapter, I use new materialism alongside Winnicott’s theory of transitional objects to inspire my thinking, considering not only the experience the object allows for, but also valuing the object itself.

Jane Bennett’s 2010 book, Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things, focuses on drawing attention to the agency of nonhuman entities—specifically that of objects or things. Most Western conceptions of objects think of them as static, as only to be acted upon, not as acting themselves. Even “Thing Theory” (posited by theorists such as Martin Heidegger and Bill

---

4 In her 2012 book, The Myth of Persephone in Girls’ Fantasy Literature, Holly Blackwood notes, “Toys are animate objects; as mirrors of the protagonists, they inevitably blow up and distort whatever is projected upon them. Once developmental issues are mapped onto a toy, the object takes on life and is given the tolls of its creator—of the girl—whereby it becomes a danger to her … Toys in girls’ literature absorb fears about what it means to grow up and replace mothers” (7).
Brown) only focuses on the way that humans become aware of an object’s thingness when it stops functioning as it ought to. In these moments, the object becomes more than object, and we are forced to confront its thingness. Bennett takes the conception of objects/things a step further, arguing that things are already always acting on the world in ways we are not always aware of, that they are infused with what she calls a “vital materialism.” She notes, “What I am calling impersonal affect or material vibrancy is not a spiritual supplement or ‘life force’ added to the matter said to house it. Mine is not a vitalism in the traditional sense; I equate affect with materiality, rather than posit a separate force that can enter and animate a physical body” (xiii).

Bennett maintains the necessity of taking up this perception towards objects, as doing so would have real material effects on our environment and how we (humans) interact with it.

It is important to note that in her discussion of the agency of things, Bennett does not mean to suggest that things are infused with an individual will or a soul. She takes a very secular approach to vital materialism, arguing against infusing objects with the notion of a soul. In terms of agency, she subscribes to Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of assemblages, which focuses on the relationality between things to affect change, rather than an individual’s will to act upon something else. She notes that, “the locus of agency is always a human-nonhuman working group” (xvii). While Bennett takes a secular approach to materialism, she does not discount anthropomorphism, finding it necessary for imagining vital materialism:

In composing and recomposing the sentences of this book—especially in trying to choose the appropriate verbs, I have come to see how radical a project it is to think vital materiality. It seems necessary and impossible to rewrite the default grammar of agency, a grammar that assigns activity to people and passivity to things … If a green materialism requires of us a more refined sensitivity to the outside-that-is-inside-too, then maybe a bit
of anthropomorphizing will prove valuable. Maybe it is worth running the risks associated with anthropomorphizing … because it, oddly enough, works against anthropocentrism: a chord is struck between person and thing, and I am no longer above or outside a nonhuman “environment.” Too often the philosophical rejection of anthropomorphism is bound up with a hubristic demand that only humans and God can bear any traces of creative agency. (119-20)

Although she does not deny the tensions that are present between anthropomorphism and new materialism, Bennett ultimately notes the way that anthropomorphism can be one useful way of countering anthropocentrism.

Karen Barad, a feminist scholar in physics, similarly contributes to new materialist scholarship, arguing against representationalism, which she defines as “the belief that representations serve a mediating function between knower and known” (“Agential” 133). She argues that representationalism “displays a deep distrust of matter, holding it off at a distance, figuring it as passive, immutable, and mute” (133) and instead argues in favor of material-discursive practices or phenomena as ontological units (141). In her 2006 chapter, “Agential Realism: How Material-Discursive Practices Matter,” Barad discusses this at length. In it, she argues against common notions of objectivity and of fixed boundaries of things. She notes that “bodies are not objects with inherent boundaries and properties; they are material-discursive phenomena,” and argues against thinking of bodies or objects as being like drawings, with clear, closed and contained boundaries (153, 156). She contends that even in scientific studies, the apparatus matters, the atoms that make up different entities intra-act and entangle with one another (141-3). Barad distinguishes intra-action from the more commonly used interaction, arguing in favor of the former. She says:
The notion of *intra-action* (in contrast to the usual “interaction,” which presumes the prior existence of independent entities or relata) represents a profound conceptual shift. It is through specific agential intra-actions that the boundaries and properties of the components of phenomena become determinate and that particular concepts (that is, particular material articulations of the world) become meaningful. Intra-actions include the larger material arrangement (i.e., set of material practices) that effects an *agential cut* between “subject” and “object” (in contrast to the more familiar Cartesian cut which takes this distinction for granted. That is, the agential cut enacts a resolution *within* the phenomenon of the inherent ontological (and semantic) indeterminacy. In other words, relata do not preexist relations; rather, relata-within-phenomena emerge through specific intra-actions. (Barad “Agential” 139-40, emphasis in original)

Ultimately, Barad argues against a strict language/reality dichotomy, particularly one that sees language as merely a mediator that neutrally describes reality (138). Instead, Barad makes the case that discursive practices produce, not merely describe, the subjects and objects of knowledge practices (“Agential” 147).

In this chapter, I think with the aforementioned scholars in order to engage with two girls’ texts, *Anya’s Ghost* and *Coraline*, in a new way. By thinking with feminist scholarship from fantasy, children’s literature, and new materialism alongside Winnicott’s theory of transitional objects, I demonstrate how girls’ texts co-constitutively rethink subject and object relationality to reimagine the role of girls in quests.

**Resisting the Male Gaze in *Anya’s Ghost***
Rather than looking at the texts chronologically, I begin with the 2011 graphic novel, *Anya’s Ghost*, by Vera Brosgol, and end with the 2002 novella, *Coraline*, by Neil Gaiman. I examine them in this order due to their relationships with their respective objects. While both *Anya’s Ghost* and *Coraline* emphasize empathy for the objects by conveying their vitality, they respond to the trope of “girl as object” in slightly different ways. *Anya’s Ghost* speaks back to the trope of girls’ and women’s objectification by making it a central part of Anya’s quest that she has to consciously reject in herself and others. *Coraline* takes this one step further: she not only learns to reject this objectification, but she also subverts it, leveraging the other mother’s objectification of her to her own advantage.

The parallels between these two texts are not surprising—and perhaps not even totally coincidental—given the connections between their two authors. A quote from Gaiman appears on the front cover of *Anya’s Ghost*, endorsing Brosgol’s work: “A masterpiece!” A heavyweight in the fantasy literature community, Gaiman’s influence reaches across children’s and adult’s literature, as well as across mediums. Though not an artist himself, Gaiman is famous for authoring the comic book series *The Sandman* (featuring various artists). *Coraline* was also adapted into an animated stop-motion film, which was released in 2009 and was generally positively received by audiences and reviewers alike. Notably, Brosgol was a storyboard artist at Laika Inc. for ten years, and worked on the film version of *Coraline* during her time there (Danziger-Russell 208).

*Anya’s Ghost* follows the story of Anya Borzakovsky, a teenage girl whose family emigrated from Russia to the U.S. when she was a young girl. Throughout the story, Anya

---

5 Although *Coraline* has a graphic novel adaptation, drawn by P. Craig Russell, adaptations are beyond the purview of this project, and as such I focus on the original novella. Doing so also helps to illustrate the material differences of the texts themselves.
struggles with fitting in and accepting herself. One day while taking a shortcut home from school, Anya, distracted by her thoughts, falls down a well and gets trapped there for a few days. While in the well she sees a skeleton, and meets a ghost, Emily, who is a teenaged girl who lived and died about ninety years ago and whose presence is tied to the bones of her skeleton. Eventually, Anya is rescued from the well and returns to her normal life at home and school. Soon thereafter, she realizes that Emily has followed her out of the well via Emily’s pinky finger bone. For some time Anya and Emily bond once Anya realizes the benefits of having a ghost friend in high school; however, this changes when Anya learns the truth of the circumstances around Emily’s death. While Emily originally claimed to have been murdered herself, the truth is that she is actually the murderer, as she burned the house of her ex-boyfriend and his partner while trapping the pair inside. Emily then fled into the woods where she fell into the well and got stuck there, eventually dying. Upon discovering this truth, Anya seeks to rid Emily from her own life by returning the pinky bone to the well in order to protect herself, her family, and her community. This leads to a showdown between the two in which Emily seeks to hide the bone from Anya while Anya tries to find it. In the end, Anya returns Emily’s bone to the well and is able to convince Emily to move on. The graphic novel concludes with Anya engaging her community in a public safety project in order to fill up the hole, ensuring that nobody else will get stuck in the well again.

Though Emily (and the bone from her little finger) are the primary object of Anya’s quest, she does not set out on her quest in pursuit of them. In fact, it is not until the final third of the graphic novel that Anya begins searching for the bone, once the aim of her quest becomes to protect her family from Emily’s ghost, who is becoming more corporeal the longer she stays with Anya. Though Emily’s pinky bone facilitates Anya’s journey throughout the graphic novel, the
object Anya starts out questing for is her crush, Sean. Her pursuit of Sean and his affections symbolizes her larger desire for acceptance from her peers and to fit in socially at school, and she clearly believes that obtaining his affections would fulfill these desires. She uses Emily—who shares Anya’s desires—in order to spy on Sean’s schedule so that she can accidentally-on purpose run into him (Brosgol 80). Once Anya goes to a party with Sean and his girlfriend, Elizabeth (via Emily’s assistance), however, the object of her quest quickly changes. At the party she sees Sean’s true character when she discovers Elizabeth standing guard outside a bedroom as Sean hooks up with another girl inside. All at once Anya stops desiring Sean and—perhaps more importantly—stops desiring to be like Elizabeth. Emily, however, continues to be single-minded in her attempts to win over Sean through Anya. After Anya learns the truth about the circumstances of Emily’s death, the goal of her quest quickly becomes about ridding herself of Emily in order to save her family and her community, symbolically rejecting the vain, selfish part of herself that only longed to fit in with her peers. Anya’s initial pursuit to obtain Sean as a romantic partner notably flips the script of traditional quest narratives in which male heroes typically quest for female romantic partners as their objective. Though the narrative flirts with merely flipping the gender roles, it ultimately goes beyond this, as simply reversing the roles would construct a liberal feminist narrative in which female characters are transposed onto prototypical male narratives without fundamentally altering the overall narrative structure (Lehtonen 57). By re-centering the object of the quest as Emily rather than Sean, Brosgol effectively critiques prototypical masculine quest narratives in which the romantic, heterosexual partner is the object of the quest. Anya instead learns to stop objectifying herself and others, and ultimately begins treating both with more compassion.
The significance of Emily being the object of Anya’s quest is evident through the shifting boundaries between objects and subject. By making Anya’s primary object of her quest Emily’s pinky bone, Brosgol collapses the boundaries between “object” and “girl”. Going back to Auden’s criteria for a quest, Anya’s objective is both “object” (pinky bone) and “person” (Emily). Importantly, the entangled link between Emily and her material body—even in the afterlife—serves to emphasize her subjectivity rather than to objectify her. By making Emily/Emily’s pinky bone the object of the quest, Brosgol plays with traditional quest narratives without reproducing them. One way she is able to do this is by emphasizing the vitality of the object through anthropomorphism. Emily and her pinky bone are shown to be necessarily tied to one another—thus Anya’s quest for the pinky bone directly affects Emily. Ironically, though her “soul” is no longer residing in her body, this portrayal of the relationship between her bones and her spirit largely pushes against Cartesian dualistic thinking of a distinct mind/body, emphasizing instead that who Emily is cannot be extricated from what remains of her material body. This idea is underscored by a scene at the end of the graphic novel when Emily embodies all of her bones into her spirit-essence once again (Brosgol 206) (see Figure 2.1). This portrayal of Emily’s body, even in the afterlife, speaks to Bennett’s conception of vital materialism. Although Bennett takes a secular approach to vital materialism stating that she does not want to infuse objects with a will or soul, this does not preclude the use of anthropomorphism. Though Emily’s ghost is likely meant to be seen as a soul or imprint of some kind, the portrayal of the relationship between her finger bone and her ghost does not necessarily fall strictly into this line of thinking. In fact, at the end of the story when Emily finally “passes on” it is not merely her ghost that leaves—instead, it appears that both her physical bones and her ghost disappear together, leaving nothing behind (Brosgol 213-4). By emphasizing the interconnectedness
between the two and collapsing the boundaries between the typical objects of a quest, Bros gol portrays the objects with a vital materialism. In the end, Anya ultimately feels empathy for the girl-object, emphasizing a position of compassion and respect for her/it.

Figure 2.1: Emily’s bones are once-again embodied into her spirit-essence

Not only does Bros gol emphasize the vitality of quest objects through her portrayal of pinky-Emily as the object of the quest, but throughout the story Anya becomes the object of the quest herself through mirroring and doubling. Though there are too many instances of mirroring and doubling between Anya and Emily throughout the graphic novel to name them all here, in the next few paragraphs, I analyze a few such instances in the text.

The connection between Anya and Emily is emphasized throughout the graphic novel, beginning with its title and the front cover. The title, “Anya’s Ghost” emphasizes the connection between the two girls before the reader even opens the book. This situating invites the reader to interpret Emily as a part of Anya herself, and to look for connections between them throughout
the narrative. The front cover image further implies this connection, showing Anya facing one way with Emily’s outline facing the opposite direction, created from the lines in Anya’s hair (see Figure 2.2). This image mirrors the two before the book is even opened, emphasizing their connection. In doing so it conveys Barad’s ideas about the (lack of) boundaries for bodies and objects. She says, “All Bodies, not merely “human” bodies come to matter through the world’s iterative intra-activity—its performativity. This is true not only of the surface or contours of the body but also of the body in the fullness of its physicality, including the very ‘atoms’ of its being” (Barad 152-3, italics in original). Barad goes on to explain that bodies do not necessarily end in a clearly defined line, even though we (humans) tend to perceive them as such. She draws on research by physicist Richard Feynman, who says: “In order to draw an object, we have only to draw its outline … What is the outline? The outline is only the edge difference between light and dark or one color and another. It is not something definite. It is not, believe it or not, that every object has a line around it! There is no such line. It is only in our psychological makeup that there is a line.” (qtd. in Barad 156). Barad further adds that “there’s no stopping there: physics tells us that the edges or boundaries are not determinate either ontologically or visually” (156). Though drawings, particularly cartoons, tend to use clearly drawn outlines to represent the characters, in this case, Brosgol uses the visual medium of comics to show the connections between Anya and Emily. Here, Anya and Emily blend seamlessly into one another, emphasizing how the pair’s relationship will inform one another throughout the text, the lines frequently blurring between them.
Another example of how the two are connected is through Anya’s injured hand. Anya injures her right hand when falling down the well at the beginning of the book, and she spends the rest of the book with her hand in a bandage. Coincidentally, this is also when Anya obtains Emily’s pinky bone, and begins carrying it around with her wherever she goes. The connection between their hands is braided⁶ visually throughout the book, but there is an especially

---

⁶ Braiding or tressage is Thierry Groensteen’s term, which refers to a series of panels (which may not appear sequentially) in comics that are linked to one another across the text. As Barbara Postema explains, “Groensteen calls the coherence that connects various panels in a work as a series, tressage or braiding, since these panels create a network within a comics text through a paradigmatic or “associative logic”—as opposed to the “syntagmatic logic” at work in the sequence.” She notes that “[a] series within the context of comics can be less self-evident than
noticeable series\(^7\) of panels near the end of the book. After Anya throws Emily’s pinky bone back into the well, Emily manages to pull herself up out of the well by embodying her full skeleton, forcibly climbing out of the well. As she tries to follow Anya, her reconstructed skeleton begins to fall apart. There is an image of Emily’s ghost hand specifically with bones falling out of it, including one of her pinky bones. When Anya witnesses this, she immediately stops running away from Emily, turning to face her and talk to her with Emily. She admits that, despite denying it before, she is like Emily, and that she understands how she feels. In a close-up image, Anya is shown cradling her last two fingers on her bandaged hand in an empathetic gesture as she relates to Emily, underscoring the connection between the two of them (Brosgol 207, 209)\(^8\). By emphasizing compassion for the object-turned-antagonist of her quest, Brosgol effectively subverts traditional quest models where girls are merely objectified or villainized.

---

\(^7\) Groensteen defines series as “a succession of continuous or discontinuous images linked by a system of iconic, plastic, or semantic correspondences” (146).

\(^8\) Interestingly, the hand that is shown losing its bones appears to be Emily’s left hand, while Anya cradles her injured right hand. So though they are connected visually, they are also mirrored as well—similar, but not exactly the same. Though the two images are connected visually, it is worth mentioning that it is not necessarily clear that the original pinky bone Anya carries throughout the text is from Emily’s left hand. It is not ever made explicitly clear which hand her pinky bone comes from. It is also worth noting that Anya and Emily are connected through their hands throughout the text. Both are likely left-handed. Anya is directly stated to be left-handed in the text by her mother (Brosgol 39) and it appears that Emily is as well, as her dominant hand is usually her left one, she is shown picking things up and holding objects such as a cigarette in her left hand (Brosgol 159, 162).
Figure 2.3: Emily’s bones begin to fall from her hand

Figure 2.4: Anya cradles her hand in an empathetic gesture
The last example of mirroring between Anya and Emily I want to discuss here is a bit more complex. The morning after Anya’s disastrous party excursion, she awakes to find Emily, who has physically transformed her ghost appearance. Her hair is much longer and flowing—a more typically “pretty” look than the scraggily short hair she had been sporting previously. She now has a headband, and, a few pages later, she is smoking a ghost cigarette. This version of Emily is particularly interesting as she seems to be mirroring both Anya and Elizabeth simultaneously. While her longer hair is reminiscent of Anya’s flowing locks on the front cover of the book (mentioned previously), visually she is much more similar to Elizabeth (Danziger-Russell 213) as her hair is now longer than Anya’s and is styled similarly to Elizabeth’s (Brosgol 136) (see Figure 2.5). The inclusion of the headband mirrors both Anya and Elizabeth, while the cigarette is decidedly Anya as there is no indication in the text that Elizabeth smokes. Although Emily visually looks more like Elizabeth, here she is mirroring both Anya’s behaviors and desires. Throughout the graphic novel, Anya tries to fit in with her peers and constantly wants things that Elizabeth has; she even states this explicitly at one point, claiming to “hate” Elizabeth because she is too nice: “How I hate thee, Elizabeth Standard … Nice grades, nice legs, nice nice nice. I wish she’d get a zit or something to prove that she’s full of pus like all the rest of us” (Brosgol 105).9 Emily, learning from Anya about what is considered the “acceptable” way for teenage girls to act and look, thus transforms herself into what Anya has conveyed to her is a desirable way to look and act—skinny, long-haired, with a selfish, harsh, callous sort of attitude. Elizabeth notably symbolizes a sort of “all-American girl” quality that Anya clearly yearns for throughout the text. She consistently hides her Russian-immigrant status as much as possible, rejecting anything connoting these origins from her surname to her mother’s cooking, and

9 The fact that her last name is “Standard” too is a tongue-in-cheek indication that Elizabeth symbolizes both the “norm” that Anya aspires to fit into and that she is a sort of “gold standard” that Anya wants to achieve.
distancing herself from the other Russian immigrant in her class who Anya deems as seeming too “fresh off the boat” (Brosgol 57). Emily and Elizabeth’s hair colors (both light in color) also work to emphasize this difference in contrast to Anya’s dark hair. These examples emphasize the material-discursive relationships between subject and object, and how the two are entangled and inform one another, unable to be separated (Barad “Agential” 153, 156).

Figure 2.5: Emily mirrors Elizabeth and Anya in appearance

The objectification of both Emily and Anya is emphasized throughout the text through the characters’ own fixations with beauty and their frequent commentary on their own and other girls’ physical appearance. In addition to being the objects of male quests, girls and women have a long history of being objectified and sexualized in the media and in literature. Girls’ bodies are often portrayed as uncontrollable and even monstrous. As Krystal Howard notes in her chapter, “Gothic Excess and the Body in Vera Brosgol’s Anya’s Ghost”: 
The use of the Gothic in this scene—and throughout the graphic novel—complicates the depiction of gender in general, and adolescent femininity in particular, because, like the Gothic body, the teenage body is often posited as a symbol of excess, deviance, and otherness … Similarly, the emergence of the ghost that is intimately linked to Anya in Brosbol’s narrative, as well as the focus on Anya’s body as both sexual and unwieldy, underscores the connection between girlhood and monstrosity. When girlhood intersects with the Gothic, the body of the girl (what it produces, how it moves, and what it might do) is what becomes potentially terrifying. (255)

Brosbol effectively centers the theme of the objectification of girls’ bodies by incorporating it as part of Anya’s quest, in which she has to confront her own self-objectification.

Emily’s case is particularly compelling as her position as “object of quest” through her pinky bone and her position of “objectified girl” collapse and overlap in interesting ways. Her finger bone, for example, is quickly turned into jewelry. After realizing the benefits of having a ghostly confidant, Anya ties some thread around the bone so that she can carry Emily’s bone (and therefore, Emily) around with her inconspicuously, as a necklace. In this case, Emily is not only literally objectified (that is, made into an object), but significantly, the object she is made into is one that denotes both beauty and femininity. Howard adds that this action also once again connects Emily’s ghost body to Anya’s own physical body (255). In this example, the material and the discursive once again intra-act; the discourses around jewelry as an object of femininity and beauty inform Anya’s decision to turn Emily’s pinky into a necklace as much as the materiality of the object (the size and shape of the object for example), showing how the two do not preexist one another (Barad, “Agential” 140, 147).
In addition to being turned into an object literally, Emily is shown to self-objectify her physical appearance throughout the graphic novel. While Emily is less explicitly sexualized than Anya (perhaps due to the fact that she appears to be slightly younger in age than Anya) her fixation on beauty and her objectification are prevalent throughout the text. As shown through her aforementioned physical transformation, Emily is preoccupied with physical beauty, finding it desirable and as a necessary step towards achieving her goals (primarily romantic partnership). Bros gol even shows her sadly attempting (and failing) to physically transform her appearance early on in the text (113). The depth of her fixation is revealed when she uses physical beauty as a justification for her committing of double murders: “He said I was ugly! He broke my heart!” (Bros gol 164). This moment shows an extreme case in order to emphasize the extensive damage such an ideology can cause: both Emily and her ex-boyfriend define her value based on physical appearance—him using it as justification to break up with her, and her using the perceived slight as justification for murder. This causes Emily to seek to change physically—even in the afterlife—so that she can obtain what she has been taught is necessary (beauty) to have as a girl in order to be deserving of love and affection.

Emily also projects these feelings onto Anya, objectifying her in the process. Struggling to change herself physically for some time and limited in her interactions with others due to her ghostly status, Emily attempts to achieve her desires vicariously through Anya, putting all of her energy into trying to help Anya win over Sean by helping her secure an invitation to a party and dressing her in attractive clothing, emulating the fashions she’s seen in magazines (Bros gol 112-115). Emily’s role in this scene is like that of the fairy godmother in Cinderella, or of the best friend in a modern teen rom-com movie, transforming the protagonist into something beautiful in order to catch the attention of (and ultimately marry or date) the prince or popular guy,
respectively. Again, Brosgol pokes fun at this trope, pointing to the sexist undertones inherent in it. For example, Anya feels uncomfortable in the outfit, but is encouraged to wear it anyway because, as Emily asserts, “This is exactly the kind of thing men like nowadays,” as if that is the only thing that matters (Brosgol 112). Through her allusion to this fairy tale trope, Brosgol effectively critiques the objectification of girls and women that is reinforced by girls and women.

Like, Emily, Anya is shown as being constantly preoccupied with her own looks, especially as she compares herself to other girls, reflecting her own self-objectification and an internalized male gaze. She of course comments jealously on Elizabeth’s appearance (mentioned previously), and she refers to Emily as looking like a dandelion (Brosgol 130). Having a curvier frame than the thin and slender Elizabeth, Anya is shown constantly worrying about her weight. In one panel, she imagines herself gaining weight and having a figure similar to that of her mother’s, and when Emily is dressing her up for the party she comments that she “need[s] some industrial tape to hold her stomach in” (Brosgol 48, 113) (see Figure 2.6). The former example also intersects with her anxiety over her Russian-American identity. Wishing to distance herself from her Russian heritage in order to seem “more American,” Anya imagines her body to be like her mother’s, who symbolizes Anya’s Russian roots and who is constantly trying to get Anya to reconnect with her culture. This has clear resonances with the transitional object, in which the infant distinguishes between “me” and “not-me,” recognizing the mother as “other” than itself (Winnicott 144-5). In Anya’s case, however, she begins by distinguishing herself from her mother, and her quest is largely about reconnecting with her family and her culture.
Her sexualization throughout the book is also frequently connected to her curvy figure. She worries that the revealing party outfit makes her look “too loose-womany” (Brosgol 114). Elizabeth compliments her outfit when picking her up for the party—a fairly innocuous moment, but one that works to further convey a culture of girls’ self-objectification and policing of other girls’ appearances in general. The sexualization of her appearance becomes insidious (and just plain gross) when it comes from a few of the boys at the party. There are two distinct occurrences. The first is from a friend of Sean’s named Preston who drunkenly, unexpectedly tells her: “Anya, I have to tell you something very important. Your boobs…look spectacular in that shirt” (Brosgol 118). She receives a similar comment only a few pages later from Sean, who tells her he “really like[s] her shirt” (Brosgol 121, emphasis in original)—all while his girlfriend Elizabeth looks on and as another girl, Amber, waits for him through the bedroom door behind them.

Brosgol shows how negotiating self-objectification and objectification from others is an intrinsic part of a girl’s experience growing up. It is shown to be inherently sexist, unhealthy, and
even dangerous, and as such she makes them part of the trials and tribulations that Anya must overcome as a girl hero. In spite of this negative, patriarchal history, she does not choose to merely expunge it entirely; instead, she shows the reality that many girls must face, and how Anya learns to negotiate this objectification in more positive ways. Throughout the graphic novel Brosgol does not shame the girls for their appearance or their behaviors, emphasizing instead the culture that leads to this behavior. Nor does she portray them in negatively objectifying ways through her own drawings, potentially reinscribing a voyeuristic male gaze upon them through the eyes of the reader. Instead, her drawings work to emphasize the girls’ interiority—visualizing Anya’s thoughts, for example, and emphasizing Anya’s awkwardness and uncomfortableness through her body language rather than dwelling visually on her “sexy” outfit (Brosgol 113) (see Figure 2.7). In doing so, Brosgol effectively includes the objectification and sexualization that girls face as part of their quest, but does not encourage an uncritical male gaze in her visual portrayal of the characters, thereby subverting the tradition in prototypical male quest narratives.

Figure 2.7: Anya looks uncomfortable in her party outfit
Subverting the Adult Gaze in *Coraline*

While *Any’s Ghost* speaks to the history of girls as sexualized objects and the internalized male gaze, particularly amongst Any’s peers, *Coraline* underscores adult desires to objectify and possess ideas of children and childhood. As such, sexualization does not feature explicitly in the novella, though some psychoanalytic readings do touch on representations of Coraline’s sexuality and her sexual maturation over the course of the book.\(^{10}\) Considering these two texts side-by-side, we can see the dual types of objectification girls have experienced as both female and child in traditional, heteronormative, masculine narratives.

Along with textual analysis of the novella, I incorporate some visual analysis of a few of the images that feature in the book. Although the words and the images in the novella do not work together as directly as they do in comics—nor are the pictures as prominent as they would be in a picture book—the visuals nonetheless inform the reader’s experience of engaging with the text. Dave McKean’s artwork is stylized and his images help to convey a creepy mood that seamlessly complements the imagery present in Gaiman’s text. When Gaiman originally wrote *Coraline*, he envisioned Edward Gorey as the artist for the accompanying images; however, it took Gaiman about ten years to finish writing the book and he notes that Gorey died the day he finished writing it (S. Jones 14). Dave McKean’s style, though undeniably his own, has clear resonances with Gorey’s in their shared macabre imagery and their use of dark, heavy lines.\(^{11}\)

---


\(^{11}\) Dave McKean and Neil Gaiman have also worked together on various other projects, both before and after *Coraline*. They originally worked together on comics, with Gaiman writing and McKean illustrating. Although for *Coraline* McKean’s artwork feature pen-and-ink drawings, he is more commonly known for his mixed medium approach seen in his graphic novels or in *Wolves in the Walls*, a picture book by Gaiman that McKean illustrated (S. Jones 14-5).
Coraline follows the story of a preteen girl growing up in the U.K., who discovers a mysterious door in her family’s flat shortly after moving into it. Though locked at first, Coraline eventually finds a way through the door, and discovers a mirror version of her world—one that looks mostly the same on the surface, but is quite different underneath. There Coraline meets her other parents who dote on her and provide her with much more attention than her real parents, but who have ominous black buttons in place of eyes. Coraline is unsettled by the other world and the creatures in it, particularly once the other mother tries to persuade Coraline to trade her real eyes for button ones. As the story progresses, Coraline begins to unravel the other world, coming into direct conflict with the other mother as she attempts to rescue her real parents and the souls of the dead children that were the other mother’s previous victims.

Coraline plays with the tradition of girls’ (and children’s) objectification by adults through the other mother’s malicious plot to steal Coraline’s soul. The other mother collects the children, literally objectifying them by sewing buttons into their eyes, effectively turning them into dolls: “‘If you want to stay,’ said her other father, ‘there’s only one little thing we’ll have to do, so you can stay here for ever and always.’ They went into the kitchen. On a china plate on the kitchen table was a spool of black cotton, and a large silver needle, and, beside them, two large black buttons. ‘I don’t think so,’ said Coraline” (Gaiman 45). In this example, it is clear that the other mother wishes to possess Coraline and keep her as a child forever. Her desire to turn Coraline into a doll by sewing buttons into her eyes establishes a connection between children and childhood objects. For the other mother, the two are essentially synonymous, an idea that is further emphasized when the other mother claims that she loves her: “It was true: the other mother loved her. But she loved Coraline as a miser loves money, or a dragon loves its gold. In the other mother’s button eyes, Coraline knew that she was a possession, nothing more”
This connection between girls and dolls is also emphasized through McKean’s drawings throughout the text. Interestingly, though the novella places so much importance on eyes and the loss of eyes, the drawings of all of the people do not feature detailed attention to the eyes at all. By contrast, the button eyes of the inhabitants in the other world are all drawn in great detail. The humans, including Coraline, are instead only given a small dot for their eyes—so small and tiny that it is reminiscent of a stitch in a doll with which a button eye might be sewn.

In addition to the small pinprick eyes throughout the images in the novella, the image on the front cover especially underscores the connection between girl and doll (see Figure 2.8). The front cover\textsuperscript{12} of \textit{Coraline} features a young girl (presumably the titular character) with tiny eyes set into a much larger eye socket and a papier-mâché quality, perhaps using the mixed medium approach that McKean is more commonly known for. This quality emphasizes the \textit{creation} of this figure; she is not depicted with realism, rather the artificiality of the drawing cannot be missed when gazing upon the image. The girl even looks slightly like a voodoo doll—appropriate, given the way the other mother seeks to control her by sewing buttons into her eyes.

Together, the illustrations and the text work to underscore the entangled relationship between girl and girlhood object.

\textsuperscript{12} The front cover I am referring to is the first HarperTrophy edition, published in paperback in the U.S. in 2003, the first edition of \textit{Coraline} to be published in the U.S. This cover tends to be the most commonly associated with the novella, and was the one that was originally conceived for the book, though it was not the first one printed in the U.K. The cover art is by Dave McKean and its copyright date is 2002 (S. Jones 16-8).
The fact that the other mother wants to change Coraline into a *doll* also speaks to Coraline’s objectification as a girl specifically. As Jacqueline Reid-Walsh notes of one possible etymology for the word “girl” in her entry on girlhood in *Keywords for Children’s Literature*:

The first theory, linking “girl” and “apparel” or fashion, may be startling to the modern reader, but it underscores the problematic association between two terms that have been linked in Western culture ever since Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Émile* (1762) connected girls to fashion-doll play and argued that this play predicated a girl’s life course: “The doll is the special plaything of the sex. Here the girl’s liking is plainly directed towards her lifework. For her the art of pleasing finds its physical expression in dress….Look at
the little girl, busy with her doll all day long….She is absorbed in the doll and her
coccoetry is expressed through it. But the time will come when she will be her own doll.”

(93)

Though Rousseau believed that the girl would “become her own doll,” in Coraline, the other
mother attempts to make Coraline into a doll. In addition to flipping the script, this reworks
Winnicott’s theory of transitional objects. Rather than the child creating the transitional object in
order to differentiate itself from the mother, understanding her as “not me,” in this case the other
mother defines herself in relation to her children, who become her objects. As Annette Kuhn
says in her chapter, “A Credit to Her Mother”:

The mother’s fantasy of identification (in which she cares for her little daughter as she
would be cared for herself, and produces the baby in herself as a beautiful little girl
worthy and deserving of love) rests upon a degree of projection, the baby its object, its
screen. In the process of projection and identification, the baby is fantasized as part of the
mother—who can then simultaneously have, and be, the baby girl. In both senses, the
baby becomes her mother’s possession, and the pay with femininity involved in dressing
her up part of the mother’s own involvement with femininity and its paradoxes, its
ambiguities and its masquerades. (290)

By having the antagonist’s goal be to turn Coraline into a doll, the novella thus brings to mind a
long tradition of Western constructions of girls and girlhood; by making it the central conflict,
the novella turns this attempted adult objectification into a part of her quest, rather than merely
reproducing it.

The connection between childhood objects and children is further established through the
other mother’s previous victims. After sewing buttons into their eyes and collecting the children,
there is nothing remaining of her victims except for their marble-like souls. When Coraline finds the first soul in the bottom of a toy box amidst other toys, she initially overlooks it, thinking it is only a simple marble: “Most of the toys that had been in the toy box had now crawled away to hide under the bed, and the few toys that were left (a green plastic soldier, the glass marble, a vivid pink yo-yo, and such) were the kind of things you find in the bottoms of toy boxes in the real world: forgotten objects, abandoned and unloved” (Gaiman 96, emphasis mine). The fact that the collected children’s souls are represented as marbles emphasizes the objectifying quality of the other mother’s collecting practices. Marbles are a common child’s game, and they are one of the most commonly collected types of toys among children. A comment from one of the ghosts of the dead children further belies the connection between childhood objects and children: “She stole our hearts, and she stole our souls, and she took our lives away, and she left us here, and she forgot about us in the dark” (Gaiman 84). This comment is followed shortly thereafter by an image of childhood objects that serves to highlight the connection between the children and the objects, and foreshadows the souls’ resemblance to marbles (Gaiman 88) (see Figure 2.9). The image of the toys emphasizes their forgotten-ness, and looks like the debris found at the bottom of a toy box: an assortment of different toys, along a few other random objects and rubbish (including a spider and various pens). The drawing also has a sketchy quality, with some images appearing more faintly than others or even appearing incompletely, as if the drawing were not quite finished. This gives the drawings themselves a childlike quality—almost as if children drew them—13—in addition to portraying child objects. This visual portrayal further highlights the connection between the children and the childhood objects, and how the other mother is unable to distinguish between them. The other mother has completely objectified her

---

13 Or at least, an adult’s interpretation of what a child’s drawing might look like.
child victims, desiring at first to possess them and then casting them aside as no more than toy box detritus when she is finished with them. Her objectification of Coraline and the other children—in that she literally sees them as (and turns them into) objects—speaks to her perception of children, and towards her perception of childhood. In *Coraline*, the other mother seeks to divest both child and object of their materiality, turning them instead into empty signifiers for the adult other mother to fill with her own ideologies of children and childhood. Ironically, Coraline ultimately leverages this objectification against the other mother by reasserting her materiality, emphasizing her connection to childhood objects in order to trick the other mother (more on this later).

Figure 2.9: An image of toy box detritus in *Coraline*
The other mother’s desire to consume conceptions of childhood by divesting the children of their materiality (and therefore their identity) is emphasized through the ghost children. The ghost are the other mother’s previous child victims, and each of them represent different periods in time (and consequently different constructions of childhood) through their dress and speech. There are two girls and a boy. One of the girls “[wears] a brown, rather shapeless dress, and [has] a brown bonnet on her head which tie[s] beneath her chin” (Gaiman 142), likely locating her around the 18th century. The other girl, a fairy, seems to be the oldest based on her speech patterns, and is described thus: “She was a very pale child, dressed in what seemed to be spider’s webs, with a circle of glittering silver set in her blonde hair … the girl had two wings—like dusty silver butterfly wings, not bird wings—coming out of her back” (Gaiman 142). She is likely meant to represent the oral tradition of fairy tales, linking her potentially as far back as the Middle Ages. Notably, the other mother disproportionately targets girls three to one (including Coraline). Furthermore, the gender of the boy is originally called into question in the text, and is the only one of the ghost children that is discussed at length. When Coraline first meets the ghost children, she asks him: “Are you a girl? … Or a boy?” to which the ghost child replies, “When I was small I wore skirts and my hair was long and curled … But now that you ask, it does seem to me that one day they took my skirts and gave me britches and cut my hair” (Gaiman 84), referring to the practice of “breeching” for boys, which continued through the 19th century (Buck 149-153). His memory of having a governess and a later description of him dressed in “red velvet knee britches and a frilly white shirt” (Gaiman 142) further suggest he is from the 19th
The initial uncertainty of the boy’s gender speaks to the uncertain history and definition of the term “girl” in general, as well as the long history of the feminization of childhood. As Reid-Walsh states, “These definitions undermine the idea of ‘girl’ being associated with a set chronological age or even sex or gender; in the 1300s the term (usually in the plural) referred to a child or young person of either sex. From the late 1300s on, ‘girl’ also began to be associated with the female sex, in ways both matter-of-fact and derogatory” (93). Though the boy himself postdates the time period in which the term “girl” might have been used for a child of either sex, the uncertainty of his gender being linked directly to the practice of breeching—a rite of passage for boys that would signify him as having reached the age of reason, and as being on the path to manhood—serves to emphasize the feminization of childhood in general (Buck 149). Thus, though the other mother seeks to consume children and childhood in general, the portrayal of the boy’s experience of childhood coupled with the disproportionate number of girls serves to center girls and girls’ experiences as emblematic of childhood within the context of the novella. Furthermore, the stripping away of the ghost children’s genders, alongside their loss of eyes, names, memories, and body, serves to emphasize gender as a materially embodied experience as well. Gaiman’s portrayal of the ghost children undoes strict boundaries between the soul and the body, and instead understands subject and object relationships as a material-discursive phenomenon (Barad, “Agential” 153, 156).

For the other mother, possession and consumption are deeply intertwined. The other mother aims to objectify and possess the children so that she may ultimately consume them.

---

14 The style of the frilly white shirt and the knee britches both suggest male 19th century dress, and red in particular was considered to be a masculine color and was worn by boys and men (whereas blue was considered to be softer and more feminine) up until World War I when the gender designations for the colors swapped (Adams 60-2).
15 Blackwood argues that “the ghost’s memory of one day suddenly having his hair cut—his gender imposed—seems a mirror for Coraline’s feeling that suddenly a passageway opened … For the boy ghost, it matters less his inherent sex and more the sudden imposition of gender, which ends androgynous childhood. Similarly, menarche is a sudden, visible moment in which gender and social role demand contemplation” (216).
Though never made explicit in the novella, it can be inferred that the other mother consumes the lives of her child victims in order to extend her own life force. The other mother is hinted as being a very old creature,\textsuperscript{16} and the various time periods of her child victims reflects this. The conflation of possession and consumption is made explicit several times throughout the text, such as in one example when the cat states, “She wants something to love, I think … Something that isn’t her. She might want something to eat as well. It’s hard to tell with creatures like that” (Gaiman 65). As Kara Keeling and Scott Pollard argue, “All this Britishness is an unconscious manifestation of the struggle for autonomy and identity; it embodies the oral struggle at the core of the novel. The food feud is a repressed struggle for dominance, acted out through the means of food as persuasion, as argument and counterargument, while hiding the real conflict: the real feeding, the real desire to consume, the real consumption of the Other” (17).\textsuperscript{17} For the other mother, her desires to control, consume, and possess the children are all intertwined. Gaiman conflates multiple definitions of what it means to consume something (or someone), including “the action or fact of eating or drinking something, or of using something up in an activity” and “the purchase and use of goods, services, materials, or energy” (“consumption”). This conflation further emphasizes the other mother’s objectification of Coraline and the children, seeing them as passive objects for her own enjoyment to possess and destroy. Through this depiction, Gaiman effectively critiques the discursive objectifying adult perception of childhood that constructs children and childhood as passive objects for adult consumption, rather than as dynamic entities of their own. By literalizing this discursive consumption through the other mother’s material consumption of bodies, Gaiman effectively portrays children and childhood as material-

\textsuperscript{16} The cat notes, for example, that she has had the other world for “a very long time” (Gaiman 75).

\textsuperscript{17} See Keeling and Pollard’s article for an in-depth analysis of how orality and food function in the novella.
discursive phenomena that entangle with one another, critiquing the other mother’s complete disregard for the vitality of objects in the process.

Ultimately, Coraline makes use of her connection to objects and her appreciation of their materiality in order to defeat the other mother. While the other mother treats the ghost children as forgotten toys once she is finished with them, their marble souls lost and hidden away in forgotten places, Coraline appreciates them and treats them with care. Because of this, she is able to successfully find the marbles, and, using a magical stone with a hole in it,18 she is able to perceive their full beauty and worth, which the other mother overlooks:

[S]omething glinted on the floor, something the color of an ember in a nursery fireplace, the color of a scarlet-and-orange tulip nodding in the May sun … Her fingers closed about something smooth and cool. She snatched it up, and then lowered the stone with a hole in it from her eye and looked down. The gray glass marble from the bottom of the toy box sat, dully, in the pink palm of her hand. (Gaiman 97)

This reflects not only Coraline’s appreciation and respect for the objects, but her child perspective that sees the connection between the children’s embodied selves and their marble souls, whereas the other mother’s adult perspective works to divest each of their materiality.

The most compelling example in which Coraline repurposes her position as object in the other mother’s quest to possess and consume her is when she essentially turns herself into a doll in order to trick the other mother’s severed right hand and banish her completely. Coraline sets up a pretend picnic with her dolls in order to lure the other mother’s hand, tricking her and trapping her in the old well. Notably, the doll picnic she sets up clearly mirrors the dream picnic

---

18 Likely a hag stone or witch stone (also known as an adder stone), which is a stone with a naturally occurring hole in it and is considered to have protective magical properties in folklore. This stone also stands in sharp contrast with the button eyes of the other mother. While the stone allows Coraline to see and perceive more clearly, the button eyes work to obscure and to mask.
she has with ghost children she has rescued. In her dream, the three children and Coraline each sit on a side of the picnic blanket, mirroring Coraline’s set up with herself and her three dolls—Jemima, Pinky, and Primrose—around the tablecloth she’s placed over top of the well (Gaiman 158). This is an appropriate trap for the other mother as she sought to turn Coraline and the other children into dolls by sewing buttons into their eyes, treating the two as basically indistinguishable. This trick furthermore speaks to the other mother’s perceptions of childhood as something fixed and static, and her inability to see children as dynamic, living beings. She can only see them as innocent (and therefore empty) objects, solely existing for her to possess and consume. This idea is shown through the contrasting reaction of Coraline’s real mother, who immediately recognizes her daughter’s sudden desire to host a doll tea party as out of character, saying “I didn’t think you played with your dolls anymore” to which Coraline replies, “I don’t … they’re protective coloration” (Gaiman 153). She then performs girlhood in order to trick the other mother. As Robin Bernstein states in *Racial Innocence*, “Most children … are virtuoso performers of childhood, because most children understand with precision the behaviors that children’s things script … Literary and visual culture … combine with material culture (dolls) to script performances, and children expertly perceive these scripts which they then respond to in many ways, including resistance” (28). Once the doll picnic is set up, the third person limited narrator says, “Now was the hardest part” (Gaiman 157) right before Coraline begins play-acting

---

19 It also mirrors the other mother’s own actions, as she feeds, dresses, and cares for Coraline as if Coraline is a doll she brought to her tea party. It is also worth mentioning that girls’ play, particularly with baby dolls, participates in social scripts of motherhood, preparing the girl for her own assumed eventual motherhood through play (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 182). Children may resist or perform these scripts to different degrees through their play, but nonetheless they must negotiate the material-discursive phenomena that the doll presents. See Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh’s 2002 book, *Researching Popular Culture: The Children’s Spaces of Childhood*, particularly the chapter, “Historical Spaces: Barbie Looks Back” for research on dolls’ scripts and how children (particularly girls) engage with and resist them. See also Robin Bernstein’s 2011 book *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*, which argues that toys can convey multiple, even contradictory scripts through their materiality, and looks at how children negotiate the scripts produced by black dolls specifically.
her doll tea party, conveying that pretending to conform to the other mother’s script of what
girlhood should look like is what Coraline finds most difficult. She is successful though, as she
keeps an eye on the hand’s movements around her while pretending to play with her dolls until
the other mother finally attempts to grab the key on the tablecloth, falling directly into Coraline’s
trap:

“Jemima!” said Coraline. “What a bad girl you are! You’ve dropped your cake! Now I’ll
have to go over and get you a whole new slice!” And she walked around the tea party
until she was on the other side of it to the hand. She pretended to clean up spilled cake,
and to get Jemima another piece. And then, in a skittering, chittering rush, it came. The
hand, running high on its fingertips, scrabbled through the tall grass … and then it made
on triumphant, nail-clacking leap onto the center of the paper tablecloth … And then the
weight and the momentum of the hand sent the plastic dolls’ cups flying, and the paper
tablecloth, the key, and the other mother’s right hand went tumbling down into the
darkness of the well. (Gaiman 158-9)

By re-appropriating her position as girl-object, Coraline is able to subvert traditional adult
narratives of girlhood in order to succeed in her quest to save her parents, the ghost children, and
herself from the other mother.

Conclusion

As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, archetypal male quests seek to possess the object (or
person) in order to become the master of two worlds; by contrast, children’s quests typically
feature the loss of the object. This loss coincides with the child’s return to their initial, less
powerful status, but it can also represent their growth and maturation, particularly when read using Winnicott’s theory of transitional objects as a lens.

I have already shown how the two girls’ quests in this chapter speak back to the prototypical male quest by emphasizing the materiality of the objects and by subverting girls’ usual objectified status in these quests. In this concluding section, I focus on how the girls leave behind their quested objects at the end of their quest, resulting in growth and maturation. Though I use Winnicott’s theory of transitional objects in order to help elucidate how the objects work in the girls’ quests, I still endeavor to keep the materiality of the objects in mind, as they are not merely empty objects that only function as tools for the girls’ growth, to be tossed aside once the girls no longer have use of them.

In *Anya’s Ghost*, Anya spends the last third of the graphic novel trying to find and get rid of Emily’s pinky bone (and therefore Emily) by throwing it down the well with the rest of her remains—quite similar to Coraline’s method for getting rid of the other mother’s right hand. Just before she tosses the bone into the well, she and Emily have a conversation where Emily claims that Anya would have made the same decisions she did under similar circumstances, whereas Anya vehemently rejects her claims, shouting, “I’m not!!! I would never hurt anyone!” (Brosgol 197-8). This moment has clear resonances with Winnicott’s theory of transitional objects as Anya clearly rejects Emily as a “not-me” object in this moment. While previously the two had been frequently mirrored, Anya distinguishes herself from Emily, and Emily once again returns to her original appearance after going through Anya, denoting the distinction between the two visually. The fact that this change happens after Emily goes through Anya while attempting to push her into the well further emphasizes that Anya has internalized the “not-me” object,

---

20 The emphasis on *hands* specifically is also important as a symbol for female creativity and power.
meaning she no longer has need of an external one (i.e. Emily). This idea is driven home when Anya finally succeeds in tossing Emily’s bone into the well, seemingly solidifying their distinction from one another and demarcating her own maturation.

Notably, the pair’s encounter does not end there. Emily shortly rises out of the grave on her own using all of her bones. As mentioned previously, Anya immediately feels empathy for Emily. She stops running away from her as Emily begins to fall apart, and instead talks to her with compassion; she says:

W-wait. Stop. I’m not running. I know—I know I said before I wasn’t like you…it’s not true. I’m enough like you to know how you feel. Wanting how others look, what they have, who they have! Everyone else’s life seems so much easier…but that’s all you know! What you want! You don’t know what’s going on inside anyone else’s head … No one has the right to decide who gets to live or die. Not even you. Look at you. You’re barely standing. Why don’t you go? What you want…What you want doesn’t even exist.

(Brosgol 209-214)

In this example, while Anya does initially attempt to abandon the object, in the end she speaks to Emily instead with compassion and understanding. In these words, it is clear that Anya has become less selfish and narcissistic, and has learned to see others not just as “not-me” objects, but as complex individuals themselves.

Anya’s speech to Emily reflects the lesson she has learned through her quest via Emily, but importantly, in these last moments, Emily learns the lesson too. As much as Emily provides a means for Anya to grow by functioning as her transitional object, Anya also is this for Emily. Anya helps Emily to understand that her actions were misguided and helps her to move on. Significantly, though Anya helps guide Emily, it is ultimately Emily’s choice to move on
(Brosgol 212-3). In a wordless sequence of images, Emily has an emotional realization and she is shown crying before sighing and finally letting go, fully disappearing. This speaks once again to the vitality of the object, and in doing so emphasizes empathy for girls who get caught up in unhealthy and problematic ways of thinking without villainizing them.

Though many literary analyses of *Coraline* take a psychoanalytic approach, few of them consider Winnicott at length, tending to privilege instead Freud and Lacan in their readings. However, Winnicott’s theory of transitional objects is present throughout the text. Indeed, Chloé Germaine Buckley argues that “*Coraline* situates itself in dialogue with Freud and psychoanalytic theory” (62), and while she primarily focuses on the novella’s engagement with Freud, something very similar could be said of the novella’s engagement with Winnicott. Winnicott’s ideas on finding and creating seem to be commented on explicitly by the text; responding to Coraline’s question of whether the other mother made the other world, the cat says, “Made it, found it—what’s the difference?” (Gaiman 75). 21 Though this question of making and finding is riddled throughout the text in various aspects, in this concluding section, I focus specifically on finding as it relates to Coraline’s quest and the objects within the text. 22

The other mother and Coraline are constantly mirrored in the text, and both are shown participating in acts of creating and of finding throughout. The mirroring of the other mother and Coraline can even suggest that the other mother is an extension of Coraline, an idea emphasized in the image appearing on the facing page of the first page of text in the novella, and one that

21 Of this line in the novel, Blackwood notes that “Whether one finds or makes transitional space is a question that cannot be asked. Similarly, myths like the myth of Persephone and Demeter are both found and made anew by each listener and teller. Pervasive myths of womanhood are simultaneously made and found; it is impossible to determine whether they create or merely express dominant feeling about development” (220).

22 Though there are certainly more connections to be made between Winnicott’s theory of transitional objects and *Coraline*—such as Coraline’s relationship to the other mother and the other mother’s creation of the world, for example—I largely limit my analysis to the portrayal of the objects in Coraline’s quest in order to keep the focus on questing and objects in this chapter.
many psychoanalysis interpretations of the text support (Gaiman 2) (see Figure 2.10). This image clearly illustrates a line that appears later in the novella. Before Coraline even meets the other mother, the shadow she casts is reminiscent of the other mother’s appearance later: “The only light came from the hall, and Coraline, who was standing in the doorway, cast a huge and distorted shadow onto the drawing room carpet—she looked like a thin giant woman” (11). This line directly connects to the first image in the novella, which features Coraline standing in a doorway, her shadow appearing in the shape of a rat with the negative space around the shadow taking the silhouette of a woman. Though the image does not reflect the line in the novella exactly since it shows Coraline’s shadow as a rat with the other mother appearing in the negative space (rather than as the shadow directly), it still clearly mirrors the other mother and Coraline. Regardless, the question of who created and/or found the other world and its accompanying objects and inhabitants is central to the novella.

23 Rudd, for example, argues that “rather than seeing Coraline as threatened by this other mother, it is also plausible to read her as the other mother. Coraline’s fantasy is then about realizing that she is the one being overly demanding of her parents and neighbours, everyone being sucked into her orbit in her desire to be the centre of attention” (167).
For Coraline, finding things is clearly a way she learns about the world and herself in the book. Coraline loves the act of collecting, and takes pride in her identity as an “explorer” or a finder of things. Her exploration is an integral part of her quest, one that comes to a head through the “finding-things game” that Coraline ultimately challenges the other mother to in order to save herself, her parents, and the souls of the other child victims: “And what is it you think you should be finding in this hide-and-go-seek game, Coraline Jones?” Coraline hesitated. Then, ‘My parents,’ said Coraline. ‘And the souls of the children behind the mirror.’ The other mother smiled at this, triumphantly, and Coraline wondered if she had made the right choice” (Gaiman 92). If Coraline is able to successfully find all of the souls and her parents within the other world,
then they can all go free. If not, the other mother will get to keep Coraline forever. Coraline
proceeds to search various locations in the other world, finding the three marble-like souls of the
children in different rooms of the house, and her parents trapped in a snow globe on the fireplace
mantle. For Coraline, finding these people-objects is an integral part of her quest, and one that
allows her to better understand herself and the world around her. As she searches for the
children’s souls she encounters several obstacles, traps the other mother sets to try to prevent
Coraline’s success. In order to succeed, Coraline must learn to “be wise,” “be brave” and “be
tricky,” (Gaiman 142) three nascent skills she already possesses but that she must learn to
develop during the course of her quest.24

Ultimately, it is the experience of finding the objects that is more important than keeping
the objects herself. This follows Winnicott’s theory of transitional objects, in that both characters
grow and develop enough that they no longer need the transitional objects. Winnicott postulates
that although the object itself is no longer needed the *experience* of the transitional object is
essentially retained through the experiences elicited from creative and imaginative works, such
as art (Winnicott 19). Importantly, though, in *Coraline* the vital materialism of the objects are not
forgotten. Although Coraline does not keep the objects herself, it is less of an abandoning and
more of a freeing. Unlike the other mother, who kept, possessed, and “forgot about [them] in the
dark” (Gaiman 84), Coraline sets the ghost children free so they are able to move on in the
afterlife:

> The fragments of the glass marbles that she saw looked like the remains of eggshells one
> finds beneath trees in springtime: like empty, broken robin’s eggs, or even more
delicate—wren’s eggs, perhaps … She gathered up the eggshell-thin fragments with care

---

*Coraline*,” for an in-depth analysis of Coraline’s heroism in the novella.
and placed them in a small blue box which had once held a bracelet that her grandmother had given her when she was a little girl. The bracelet was long lost, but the box remained. (Gaiman 149-50)

Coraline no longer needs the objects themselves as the experience they elicited are enough; however, she still demonstrates care and respect for the objects, even after she no longer has need of them.

***

In this chapter, I examined how two girls’ quests speak back to the trope of “girl as object,” which is commonly seen in the fantasy genre, even today. Using feminist scholarship to inform my analysis, I explored how Anya and Coraline demonstrate compassion for their quested objects, seeking to free them rather than possess them. I concluded with an analysis Winnicott’s theory of transitional objects as it presents in both books, examining how these girl quests fit within the larger tradition of children’s quests, in which the object loses its magical power and the child hero returns home to his/her former status of limited power, having matured slightly in the process. I found that the girls’ own objectification frequently features as an intrinsic part of her quest that she must overcome, whether the objectification is from a heterosexual male, from an adult parent (particularly the mother), or from her own internalized male gaze—or some combination of these. By renegotiating their relationship with their quested objects and subverting their own position as the objects of others, these texts successfully reimagine girls’ quests into more authentic and affirming narratives for girls, and undo the strict dichotomy between subject and object in doing so.

In this chapter, I focused on specific element of the quest, the quested object, and examined how girls’ quests rethink and reclaim this trope. In the next chapter, I consider a
different aspect of the quest narrative—the crossing of the threshold—and how the girls’ own liminal positions intersect with the liminal spaces they traverse.
Chapter Three

Girls in Liminal Spaces: Decolonizing Quest Narratives

The above image from the classic picture book, *Where the Wild Things Are*, touches on a trope that is common to most quest stories in which the hero is rewarded, not only with marriage and/or riches (as discussed in the previous chapter), but also with land and power (see Figure 3.1). Max travels to the “place where the wild things are,” the pictures taking up more and more space on the page as he travels (becoming more “wild” themselves), mirroring Max’s journey and his growing freedom and power over the space. This reward of land and power typically coincides with increased self-knowledge and growth for the hero, whereupon the hero becomes a
“Master of Two Worlds” (J. Campbell, *Hero* 196, 211). As I discussed in the previous chapter, the hero’s knowledge is represented by his marriage to a woman: “the mystical marriage with the queen goddess of the world represents the hero’s total mastery of life; for the woman is life, the hero its knower and master”\(^1\) (101). In this way, woman (or girl) is not merely associated with “object” as I discussed in the last chapter, but with space, as a direct connection is made between her and the physical, knowable world.\(^2\) Campbell further underscores this connection between woman and earth in *The Power of Myth*, when he says, “The human woman gives birth just as the earth gives birth to the plants. She gives nourishment, as the plants do. So woman magic and earth magic are the same. They are related. And the personification of the energy that gives birth to forms and nourishes forms is properly female … And when you have a Goddess as the creator, it’s her own body that is the universe. She is identical with the universe” (167). Once a hero has become “Master of Two Worlds” he is able to move between the two worlds without encountering the resistance he faced previously as he has gained the knowledge necessary to do so (J. Campbell, *Hero* 196). This stage also represents a return to stability and a reinstatement of social norms, in which the hero is able to take the knowledge gained while away and use it to benefit those back home (211).

While Campbell’s monomyth emphasizes the growth and transformation of the hero, the imperialist ideologies underpinning this archetype, are, I think, obvious. The hero explores a place “other” to his own, and at the journey’s conclusion he is rewarded with land and

---

\(^1\) Though Campbell describes her as “goddess” here, he also states that the goddess “is incarnate in every woman,” so she need not be a literal goddess in every quest (*Hero* 99).

\(^2\) As Diane Purkiss notes in her 1992 chapter, “Women’s Rewriting of Myth,” “woman therefore occupies the position of symbol rather than subject, bearer rather than creator of meaning … This discourse of mythography defined the Great Mother as a figure in male writing by insisting that such female figures were the dark, repressed underside of civilization. While this was the basis of their claim to ahistorical and universal validity, civilization was thus repeatedly constructed as a business for men. Men had lost their connection with the ‘dark continent’ of myth, so that dark continent was ‘naturally’ gendered female; since women were excluded from civilization they could become the bearers of this unknown knowledge” (443-4).
leadership. As M. Daphne Kutzer notes in *Empire’s Children: Empire and Imperialism in Classic British Children’s Books*, “The story of empire is often presented as a kind of fairy tale, in which the valiant but unrecognized hero travels to strange realms, overcomes obstacles and villains, all in order to reach the pot of gold (or ivory, or spices, or oil, or rubber, or diamonds) at the end” (1). Furthermore, this archetype upholds dualistic ways of thinking by associating women with the earth—a space/person to be possessed, conquered, and used for the hero’s benefit. As Val Plumwood notes in her 1993 book, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*:

> The concept of reason provides the unifying and defining contrast for the concept of nature, much as the concept of husband does for that of wife, as master for slave. Reason in the western tradition has been constructed as the privileged domain of the master, who has conceived nature as a wife or subordinate other encompassing and representing the sphere of materiality, subsistence, and the feminine which the master has split off and constructed as beneath him. The continual and cumulative overcoming of the domain of nature by reason engenders the western concept of progress and development. But as in other patriarchal reproductive contexts, it is the father who takes credit for and possession of this misbegotten child, and who guides its subsequent development in ways which continue to deny and devalue the maternal role. (3)

This fact is made all the more clear when looking at classic children’s texts in the Western canon (particularly British children’s literature), which are rife with quest and adventure stories conveying imperialist ideologies, particularly during the nineteenth and twentieth
centuries (Kutzer xiii-xiv). The number of characters who are rewarded with a crown by the novel’s end are numerous, and the feminization of space is often implicit in that.

In the case of the *Where the Wild Things Are* example, these tropes can be clearly seen. Max journeys to “the place where the wild things are” and immediately becomes king, ruling over the wild things and their land. Even the language used is suggestive of colonialist ideologies; terms such as “wild” coupled with the visual depiction of the jungle where the wild things live work together to convey these ideas. The term “wild” is multilayered as well, as it has racist and adultist implications, and historically has been used to describe non-white people and children, establishing both as “other.” Spaces such as the jungle or the wilderness are frequently feminized, likened to female bodies that refuse to be controlled or tamed and situated as “other” to the rational male culture (Plumwood 161-2). As Perry Nodelman notes in his 1992 article,

---

3 See also Michelle Smith’s 2011 book, *Empire in British Girls’ Literature and Culture: Imperial Girls, 1880-1915*, which “examines how girls were shaped by, and were imagined as shaping, the British Empire in a range of print culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It also situates these girls’ texts in the context of discourses of the period about femininity, education, race, and reading as located in contemporary magazine and newspaper articles and books” (1).

4 The Pevensie children, for example, all become kings and queens of Narnia at the end of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Alice is given a throne between the two chess queens (the White Queen and the Red Queen) at the end of *Alice through the Looking Glass*. All of Dorothy’s companions are given different parts of Oz to rule over before she returns home to Kansas in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

5 See John Clement Ball’s 1997 article, “Max’s Colonial Fantasy: Rereading Sendak’s ‘Where the Wild Things Are,’” for an in-depth analysis of the “imperial-colonial model through which Max imagines and achieves this state of empowerment” (Ball 168).

6 “Adultist” or “adultism” is broadly defined as “a prejudice in favor of adults” and is often used to describe the discrimination children and adolescents experience as a result (Young-Bruehl 8). Elisabeth Young-Bruehl offers up the term “childism” to mean “prejudice against children” in her 2012 book, *Childism: Confronting Prejudice against Children*; however, Peter Hunt also uses the term “childist” positively and advocates for it as a new type of critical approach, likening it to feminist criticism in his 1991 book *Criticism, Theory, and Children’s Literature* (16). In order to avoid this confusion, I use the terms “adultism” and “adultist” to describe the discrimination against children in this chapter.

7 See also Marianna Torgovnick’s 1990 book, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intelligents, Modern Lives*, which traces the history of the term “primitive” in the West, which she links evolutionary or developmental narratives of how cultures form and develop. She says, “Primitives are like children, the tropes say. Primitives are our untamed selves, our id forces—libidinous, irrational, violent, dangerous. Primitives are mystics, in tune with nature, part of its harmonies. Primitives are free. Primitives exist at the ‘lowest cultural levels’ we occupy the ‘highest’ … The ensemble of these tropes—however miscellaneous and contradictory—forms the basic grammar and vocabulary of what I call primitivist discourse, a discourse fundamental to the Western sense of self and Other” (8).

8 See also Beth Tobin’s 2005 book, *Colonizing Nature: The Tropics in British Art and Letters, 1760-1820* which examines how British imperialism conceptualized the tropics specifically as a way of defining themselves: “This
“The Other: Orientalism, Colonialism, and Children’s Literature,” Western assumptions about children and childhood frequently parallel Edward Said’s description of Orientalism: they are seen as inherently inferior, are associated with femaleness, are perceived as an inherently stable and uniform group, and are used primarily to define its opposite (i.e. adults and adulthood), among other characteristics (29-32). This idea is somewhat explicitly drawn attention to by Sendak, as Max travels to the land of the wild things as a way to express his own feelings of aggression about being punished by his mother at the beginning of the novel, which he does by exerting control over the wild things (Ball 167-8).

In this chapter, I consider how two texts, Emma Steinkellner’s 2019 graphic novel The Okay Witch and Nnedi Okorafor’s 2011 novel Akata Witch, speak back to this colonizing history implicit in white, Western, adult, male quest narratives. I consider how the girls negotiate the spaces in their stories differently, relating to and becoming-with them instead of treating them as empty containers to be conquered. I explore how the girls and the spaces work together to push against dualistic ways of thinking and how they even, at times, reclaim associations of nature and the feminine—not subscribing to inherently sexist and patriarchal ways of thinking, but instead reimagining anti-sexist and anti-racist narratives that are more affirmatory for girls.

Real and Imagined Girlhood Spaces and Places

Before delving into the textual analyses, it is first necessary to discuss space and place as they relate to girls and girlhood, as well as “real” and “imaginary” worlds in fantasy literature. While book … extends these arguments by examining particular artistic, literary, and scientific genres and tropes to suggest that aesthetics as well as science played an important role in both Britain’s discursive mastery and Britain’s political and economic colonizing of the tropical and subtropical regions of the world” (26).

9 See also Jacqueline Rose’s 1984 book, The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children’s Fiction, which similarly argues that children’s literature is a form of colonization perpetuated by adults.
space has been traditionally thought of as an empty container in which events happen, and place has been defined as a static, isolated location within space (usually also associated with human, social processes), I follow how feminist geographer, Doreen Massey, conceives of the terms. Massey understands space as much more dynamic and open than in previous modes of thinking, and she uses the term “space-time” to emphasize the interconnectedness of the two concepts, rather than seeing the two as independent of one another. She defines space as “a product of interrelations,” as “the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity,” and as “always in a process of becoming” (Power-geometries 28). She perceives place as open as well, typically using place to describe specific locations within space, while remembering that the boundaries are fluid, open to change, and never static. In her definition of place, she emphasizes the interconnectedness between the cultural and the physical. She says, “‘places’ may be imagined as particular articulations of these social relations, including local relations ‘within’ the place and those many connections which stretch way beyond it. And all of these embedded in complex, layered, histories. This is place as open, porous, hybrid” (Massey, Power-Geometries 22). Correspondingly, this model is anti-essentialist and anti-universalist, allowing for more fluid understandings of gender and situated understandings of places and cultures (Massey, Space 12-13). This perspective importantly refuses to see space as merely an empty container in which events happen, and recognizes the co-constitutive nature of physical places and the social beings that inhabit them—seeing them not merely as two distinct entities but as entangled with one another.

Massey’s definition of space and place has been integral for much scholarship in girlhood studies and childhood studies, which are also of relevance here. As Claudia Mitchell and Carrie Rentschler note in their introduction of Girlhood and the Politics of Place, there is no universal
experience of being a girl, and what it means to be a girl is largely contingent on place. They say:

Place is a stage and practice of power; it is also the site of great pleasures and possibilities for girls. As Timothy Cresswell argues, we do not just experience something, we experience things “in place” (2014: 38) … As geographers Doreen Massey and Nigel Thrift argue, “place has become one of the key means by which the social sciences and humanities are attempting to lever open old ways of proceeding and telling new stories about the world” (2009: 276-277), a world that is deeply marked and territorialized around lived experiences of gender, race, sexuality, class, age, citizenship, and other social differences, privileges, and oppressions. (Mitchell and Rentschler 1)

Because what it means to be a girl is socially constructed and culturally specific as well as materially embodied,10 it is necessary to locate girlhood within a particular place and time. In order to avoid universalizing girl or girlhood, these concepts must be considered within their own situated context (Mitchell and Rentschler 1-2). As feminist geographers such as Sarah Holloway and Gill Valentine argue in their 2000 article, “Spatiality and the New Social Studies of Childhood,” “children’s identities are constituted in and through particular spaces,” (765) which are further modified by gender, as girlhood studies scholars contend (Mitchell and Rentschler 2). Holloway and Valentine draw extensively from Massey’s work, arguing for “progressive understandings of place” to “overcom[e] the split between global and local approaches to childhood” (765). They contend that most geography studies of childhood focus either on the global or the local, thus re-inscribing a false dichotomy that the two are unconnected. In this chapter, I examine how the specific places the girl heroes inhabit inform

---

10 See Jacqueline Reid-Walsh’s “Girlhood” in Keywords for Children’s Literature.
their own position as a girl in specific, contextualized ways. Rather than representing a universal notion of girlhood, these texts emphasize the importance of context—that is, of time, place, and space. I explore how the girls’ positions are inextricably entangled with the places they are a part of.

Some discussion of “real” and “imaginary” worlds in fantasy is necessary here, as fantasy’s portrayal of imagined worlds uniquely situates it to envision alternate possibilities for girls’ narratives. Fantasy is a particularly apt genre to look at when discussing space and place, as it must attend to setting due to its generic conventions, which require the author to engage in some degree of world-building in order to establish an alternate, fantastical world. To differentiate between the “real” and “imaginary” worlds present in the texts, I draw from J. R. R. Tolkien’s definitions of “primary” and “secondary” worlds. As Tolkien states in “On Fairy Stories,” fantasy involves the creation of a “secondary world” by the author, which the reader’s imagination enters. In Tolkien’s definition, the author becomes a “sub-creator” in that s/he creates a world that is “true” and that “accords with the laws of that world” (60). He suggests that entering such a world does not involve a suspension of disbelief, but rather a “literary belief” while the reader is inside the world—in other words, because the author has created a world that feels true, “you therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside” (Tolkien, “Fairy” 60). These terms (primary world and secondary world) are still used by scholars to distinguish between the mundane and the sub-created worlds. While Tolkien uses “Primary” world to refer to the reader’s real world, since then fantasy scholars have sometimes used it

\[11\] Lucie Armitt notes that, “[b]oundaries, borders and thresholds are always key concepts for any reading of the fantastic, linking together concepts of nation and the otherworldly, bodies and the grotesque, housing and hauntings” (1).

\[12\] This essay was originally written as an Andrew Lang Lecture in 1938. The version I reference is from Tolkien’s piece “Tree and Leaf,” published in 1964 and reprinted in The Tolkien Reader in 1966.
to refer to the fictional world in the text that is meant to mirror our world—the mundane or unmagical space that the character(s) exist in before they travel to the new, fantastical world: “These terms remain in use today to distinguish the mundane—as approximated in realist fiction—from a world ‘sub-created’” (L. Campbell, *Portals* 9). As Lori Campbell notes in her 2010 book, *Portals of Power: Magical Agency and Transformation in Literary Fantasy*, the secondary world, “rather than being an Other-world alien from the Primary … Faerie exists as a parallel place in which the ‘impossible’ is ‘codified’ and from which the author can ‘send messages about the boundary between the fictional and the real’ (Attebery 55)” (9). She argues that the construction of these secondary worlds invites the reader to reflect on the world outside of the text, potentially motivating the reader to make changes to their own world.

This pattern in which the main character moves from the mundane primary world to the secondary world is a defining feature of “low” or “portal” fantasy in particular. In her 2008 book, *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, Farah Mendlesohn provides an extensive definition of portal fantasy and how it works:

A portal fantasy is simply a fantastic world entered through a portal … Crucially, the fantastic is *on the other side* and does not “leak.” Although individuals may cross both ways, the magic does not … They are almost always quest novels and they almost always proceed in a linear fashion with a goal that must be met … they often contain elaborate descriptive elements … the portal fantasy must be navigated. Frequently, portal fantasies

---


14 “Faerie” is a term used by Tolkien to refer to the magical world.

15 Generally, “high fantasy” or “epic fantasy” is defined in contrast to “low fantasy,” as a subgenre of fantasy that takes place entirely in the secondary, fantastical world, rather than featuring a portal in which the characters move between the primary and secondary world (L. Campbell, *Portals* 18, 163). Lori Campbell pushes against this distinction in her analysis of *Lord of the Rings*, as she argues that Frodo’s movement from the Shire to the rest of Middle-Earth functions similarly to that of a portal in low fantasy.
become more mysterious, rather than less … Most significant, the portal fantasy allows
and relies upon both protagonist and reader gaining experience. Where the stock
technique of intrusion is to keep surprising the reader, portal fantasies lead us gradually to
the point where the protagonist knows his or her world enough to change it and to enter
into that world’s destiny. One way to envision this technique is that we ride alongside the
protagonist, hearing only what she hears, seeing only what she sees; thus our protagonist
(even if she is not the narrator) provides us with a guided tour of the landscapes. (xix)

Mendlesohn slightly expands the definition of portal fantasy beyond how it is commonly used,
arguing that portals are about “entry, transition, and negotiation” (xix). For this reason,
she suggests that most quest fantasy fits better with portal fantasy (she terms the genre “portal-
quest fantasy”) as it typically conveys a protagonist that “goes from a mundane life … into direct
contact with fantastic” though they need not necessarily start off in a primary world that
represents our own.16

In general, portal fantasy tends to be particularly common in fantasy for children due to
its attention to a transformation in the protagonist—typically involving some sort of
maturation. The portal symbolizes this transformation, leading the protagonist to a liminal
space—the secondary world—where this change can happen, and then leading the protagonist
back to the primary world once the transformation is completed. As Lori Campbell explains, “It
is commonplace to accept an alternate realm in literary fantasy as a state of consciousness seen
as a physical place that is palpable for the protagonist and for those with whom he or she
interact. As a magical agent of transformation, the portal creates a way out, or a removal from the
mundane, but it main function is as a way in, or inward” (Portals 10, emphasis in original). She

16 She thus classifies texts like The Lord of the Rings under portal-quest fantasy, even though there is technically no
movement between different worlds, and it has been traditionally been classified as a high, mythopoeic text (xx).
defines portal, saying, “A portal is conventionally understood in literary fantasy as a door or gateway between worlds. However, in a larger sense that has consistently escaped critical attention, a portal signifies a nexus point and instance of magical agency, the place where one world not only physically borders but also engages another” (6, emphasis in original). She expands the definition of portal to include not only literal portals, but also people, animals, objects, and spaces that function in the same way as portals; she says, “Specifically, this study proposes a more expansive definition of the portal to include not only the concrete doorway like Alice’s mirror, but all those living beings, places, and magical objects that act as agents for a hero(ine) to travel between worlds and/or to access higher planes of consciousness” (6, emphasis in original). Campbell defines portals as not only the boundary or connecting space between two worlds, but also notes their transformative function for both the primary, mundane world within the text, and potentially for the “real” world beyond the printed page as well (19).

Both of the texts I consider in this chapter could be classified as portal fantasy or portal-quest fantasy. It is worth noting that the division between the mundane, primary world and the magical, secondary world are not always strict and magic does sometimes “leak” between them in these texts, though the spaces do remain distinct. 18 I look at portal-quest fantasy specifically in this chapter as the portrayal of the portal allows for transformation and critique of our world—apt for reimagining girls’ quest narratives. The presence of the portal—an in-between entity that

---

17 Campbell refers to them as “porters” when they are “in living form” (Portals 7). In this chapter, I use the word portal for all forms, living and nonliving, to emphasize the material connections between them.

18 Though there are (mostly) clear primary and secondary worlds in these two texts, it is worth noting that these distinctions are not always so clear in many girls’ quests. As Blackwood notes in her analysis of the Persephone myth in girls’ fantasy texts, “The worlds between which girls float in these texts may not seem to conform to the strict definition of fantasy as secondary world, but even when these girls journey within domestic settings, they nevertheless cycle between alternative universes” (3). I have already touched on several texts in this dissertation in which girls’ quests mostly take place in domestic spaces, particularly in Chapter One. In this chapter, I suggest that part of the reason for these less prototypical secondary worlds in girls’ quests is due to the girls’ own fraught position in relation to the colonizing ideology implicit in the quest archetype.
allows for movement between worlds—effectively speaks to the girls’ own marginalized (or liminal) positions within the texts.

As Michael Joseph notes in his entry on liminality in *Keywords for Children’s Literature*, liminality is common in children’s and young adult literature, both in terms of liminal beings and liminal spaces. This is likely due to modern Western constructions of childhood and adolescence, in which both are seen as transformative spaces, a space of between-ness where children and adolescents are still forming and are not quite yet formed. Liminality as a term was originally coined by anthropologist Victor Turner in 1969, “who drew on liminaire, a term used by Arnold Van Gennep in his ethnographical writings on preindustrial societies to designate the middle, transitional stage of a three-stage paradigmatic rite of passage” (Joseph 116). In his definition of the term, Joseph says, “Liminality describes the quality of being socially segregated, set apart, and divested of status and relates to characteristics and qualities associated with this condition: indeterminacy, ambiguity, selflessness, and becomingness among them” (116, italics in original).

Both liminal spaces and liminal characters are relevant for my analysis in this chapter. Joseph notes that liminal spaces in children’s literature scholarship can be used in one of two ways, either “as a flexible concept in which space can refer (extensively) to literary time-space or to something more abstract” or “(intensively) to signify an interior state—a projection of creative power, yet another metaphor of the imagination” (117). In my usage of the term in this chapter, I am referring primarily to the former, though certainly such liminal spaces in fantasy literature are often also symbolic of the latter (e.g. creative power, the imagination), and such connections are sometimes made explicitly by the text.
In the case of liminal characters, Joseph notes that the term “liminal beings” has two common meanings:

The primary one, implying a person or character experiencing liminality, has a robust and growing presence in discussion of multicultural children’s literature, often pendant to the phrase *liminal existence* … The second usage, a variant of *liminal character*, appears in the domains of folklore and speculative fiction and defines a fantasy character who combines antithetical states. These doubled beings are granted an elevated status by force of their unique perspective and knowledge, but they are also viewed as unpredictable and dangerous. (118)

Joseph defines liminal existence in relation to marginalized characters, saying, “Existence connotes continuity rather than social affiliation and reinforces the idea that a marginal’s daily life is determined by a crucial disjunction, even opposition, between the values and expectations of the notional homeland and the oppressive new world. For marginals, liminality is all consuming and a priori: liminality precedes existence” (119). Both of Joseph’s definitions of liminal beings inform my analysis in this chapter. The main characters from the two texts I look at are liminal due to their intersecting identities (in terms of gender, age, race, and dis/ability), which contribute to their marginalized positions within their communities—while also accruing special powers and knowledges as a result of their in-between status. The girl heroes in these texts must constantly negotiate their liminality, reckoning with both the power and limitations afforded by such a position.

In the remainder of this chapter, I consider space and place as open, porous, located, and entangled with the objects and characters that become-with it. I analyze liminal characters and liminal spaces in *The Okay Witch* and in *Akata Witch*, exploring how they constitute one another.
Fittingly, the figure of the witch features prominently in both texts. Women accused and persecuted for witchcraft were typically socially deviant, often subverting white, patriarchal, Christian norms of femininity and gender roles (Bado-Fralick 380; Jackson 353, 357).

**Doubling in *The Okay Witch***

I begin with a discussion of the 2019 graphic novel, *The Okay Witch*, by Emma Steinkellner. The reason for this is because the depiction of the primary world and the secondary world is somewhat more traditional in its generic conventions—the two spaces are distinct from one another and largely do not “leak” into each other, though we do see magic performed in both spaces. *Akata Witch* by contrast, conveys its spaces as much more fluid, with some spaces in the secondary world appearing distinct from the primary world while other places seem to merely be a magical overlay on existing locations in the primary world.

This is not to suggest that the portrayal of space and place in *The Okay Witch* is not complex, however. Indeed, as Baetens and Frey contend, the materiality of the comics medium necessitates attending to space in a way that textually-based mediums, such as novels, simply are not required to do. They say:

---

19 Lehtonen notes that witches are commonly used figures in feminist revisions of fantasy texts, arguing that “the character of the witch function[s] as a form of critique of gendered practices … by celebrating features that have conventionally been associated with femininity and been regarded as unimportant, dangerous or inferior in relation to conventional masculine features, and by offering an example of a strong, independent, empowered female hero” (59).

20 In his 2012 chapter “Witch as Fairy/Fairy as Witch: Unfathomable Baba Yagas,” Jack Zipes traces the roots of the figure of the witch in folklore, exploring how witches and fairies connect to pagan gods and goddesses, arguing that they underwent a process of demonization due to the influence and spread of Christianity: “Witch is a word/concept/image that has undergone a process of ‘demonization that is still potent today’” (Zipes 56-7).

21 *The Okay Witch* is Emma Steinkellner’s first graphic novel that she has both written and illustrated. She has also made webcomics and has illustrated the comic book series, *Quince*, written by her sister, Kit Steinkellner, and created by Sebastian Kadlecik. She graduated from Stanford University’s Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Department, where she also created, wrote, and illustrated her thesis, *It Gets Weird*, as a graphic novel (Steinkellner, Emma).
Classic analyses of narrative and storytelling have been inclined to foreground action and plot naturally, at the expense of (visual and other) representations of space. These spatial aspects are definitely more important in the graphic novel than in narrative in general …

The reasons for this foregrounding of space are twofold. First, drawing a character often implies also drawing the setting in which that character will evolve. Second, and more importantly, the sheet of paper or the computer screen on which the artist is working is always a space itself, whose characteristics cannot be wiped out at the moment of publication, as is normally the case in modern verbal narratives, where the final format of the book does not censor only the hand of the author but also the spatial and visual specificities of the surface on which the work literally has been written. (167)

Thus, even in cases where artists choose not to represent the narrative setting, the physical space of the images, the panels, and the page layouts necessitate the reader’s engagement with space.

In this case of *The Okay Witch*, Steinkellner not only uses the comics medium to depict the settings visually, but she frequently leverages the comics medium to convey Moth’s liminal positions between spaces, frequently depicting her in the gutter and across multiple panels.

*The Okay Witch* tells the story of a biracial thirteen year-old girl named Moth Hush, who is obsessed with witches but is unaware of her own magical lineage. On Halloween, Moth learns that she is half witch, inheriting her magical abilities from her mother’s side. This sets off a series of events, and the majority of the book’s plot revolves around Moth’s journey to learn magic and to learn about her history, and the history of the town she lives in, Founder’s Bluff, Massachusetts. The history of the town is of course deeply entwined with Moth’s own history: her grandmother, Sarah Hush, fled from Europe with a few other witches in the 17th century,
fleeing the witch trials there. They arrived in Founder’s Bluff, a fictional town in Massachusetts that is located south of Salem and Boston and north of Plymouth. It is located on the coast, on the fictional “Kramer’s Bluff,” named after the Kramer family that has held political power there for centuries. The witches continued to face persecution there, primarily led by Judge Nathaniel Kramer, and they fled again, traveling all over New England and gaining more persecuted witches to their group. They eventually returned to the area of Founder’s Bluff where the witches, led by Sarah, created a magical sanctuary called Hecate, where they are safe from persecution and where time stands still.

Moth’s mother, Calendula, reluctant to spend all of her time in Hecate closed off from the rest of the world, returns to Founder’s Bluff periodically over time. She eventually meets and falls in love with Moth’s father in 2006, and after a dispute with Sarah where Moth’s father accidentally loses his memories, Calendula decides to swear off magic and raise Moth on her own in Founder’s Bluff. Moth uncovers this history throughout the course of the novel, learning more about how to perform magic in the process. The plot culminates in the modern day, where Moth, her mother, and her grandmother must face the current-day mayor, Bruce Kramer, whose ancestors have remained devoted to hunting witches over the years. They are aided by Moth’s friend, Charlie, who himself is the son of the mayor, and who, like Moth, must reckon with his lineage and his history. The story ends with the Hushes and Charlie’s triumph, and leaves open a possible redemption for the mayor (which feels a little sudden as well as unearned). Moth decides that she will be a part of both spaces—Founder’s Bluff and Hecate—

22 In her 2002 chapter, “Witches, Wives and Mothers: Witchcraft Persecution and Women’s Confessions in Seventeenth-Century England,” Louise Jackson examines women’s confessions to witchcraft, arguing that although some found the label empowering, many used it as a way to judge themselves, expressing their own anxieties in their roles as wives, mothers, etc. She also notes that, “Women were in a potentially extremely powerful position through their control over childrearing and feeding; the witchcraft persecutions can be seen as an officially sanctioned bid to control this threat and to reassert male power over women” (357).
and that she will continue her magical training with her mother while still living in the nonmagical world.

*Moth’s Liminal Position*

One way Steinkellner emphasizes Moth’s in-between-ness is through her age. As a thirteen-year-old girl, Moth is on the precipice of adolescence, existing in a stage between childhood and adulthood.23 This is common for characters in children’s quests, specifically because adolescence and pre-adolescence are perceived as transformative stages in which characters are navigating both newfound power and societal limitations and restrictions (Joseph 117). In children’s fantasy this transformation often takes on supernatural elements, which occurs in Moth’s case as well. Moth’s powers begin surfacing during school while Moth is sitting in her history class, learning an extremely doctored version of her town’s history. When they first appear, she has difficulty controlling them, and they affect her body in surprising and unfamiliar ways (Steinkellner, *Okay* 20-23). In one particularly telling image, we see Moth bent over backwards, pushed over by her own magic (20) (see Figure 3.2). Using the comics medium particularly effectively here, Steinkellner depicts Moth outside of the panels in the gutter, a white space without any borders, bleeding across the whole page. Faint yellow magic runes (some of which are associated with the goddess, Hecate) are shown surrounding her. In this moment, Moth is literally drawn in an in-between space, existing in a magical blank white space that dislocates her from the setting shown within the panels, while also emphasizing the

23 Of course, women and girls already hold marginalized positions within society. As Nikki Bado-Fralick notes in her 2009 chapter, “Magic,” “Identifying women as part of the uneducated, unsophisticated, and simpler folk, folklorists and anthropologists [of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries] considered them fertile sources of quaint and curious lore. It should not be surprising that women’s association with magic reflect in part their status and roles in society at large” (380).
connection between liminal space and Moth’s own liminal body. Her powers are shown to be very embodied in this example, and her experience of their onset has clear symbolic resonances with menstruation, which is common in girls’ literature. The text even alludes to this connection explicitly through a comedic comment from her mom, who asks, “Oh sweets, is this…‘Ladies’ business’?” (25). This depiction speaks back to sexist portrayals of girls’ and women’s bodies as dangerous and uncontrollable. By linking Moth’s changing, uncontrollable body to her witch magic, Steinkellner participates in a tradition of feminist retellings that reclaim the figure of the witch as a powerful figure for women and girls. Though at first she fears the changes and wishes to hide them due largely to the knowledge that the patriarchal space around her will not accept them, much of her quest is about her embracing her powers, resisting this patriarchal, sexist viewpoint. Her liminal, in-between body thus becomes a space of potential and creative power, rather than as a space to be subdued and controlled. The text thus directly connects Moth’s in-between position as a preteen girl to her position as a witch through her embodied magical abilities, portending the transformation and growth she will experience throughout the graphic novel.

24 In addition to this idea being emphasized through the association between menstruation and magic, it is notable that Moth’s powers also affect both her head and her hands in this scene. Mouths even appear briefly on her hands, further underscoring the connections between creativity, voice, and her magical powers.

25 Her name, “Moth,” alludes to this transformation as well. In a podcast interview, Children Chatting, hosted through the Los Angeles Public Library, Steinkellner notes that she felt the name fit the character due to its unusual quality and due to her “nervous energy” being akin to that of a moth, however, the name also bespeaks the metamorphosis moths undergo, transforming from eggs to larva to pupa to an adult moth. Notably, like the creature for which she is named, Moth has also learned to fly by the story’s end, and the graphic novel concludes with a final image of Moth standing up on her flying broomstick with her arms outstretched like wings, visually emphasizing her own metamorphosis throughout the graphic novel (Okay 272).
The text also emphasizes her liminality through her marginalized position as a girl of color. As Joseph notes, “Someone whose personhood is liminal lives beyond the pale of society or structure. For such persons, liminality is neither conventionally ritualized nor transitional but an open-ended way of life qualified by sets of cultural demands, ethical systems, and clashing processes that are irreconcilable” (118). While her race is not directly commented upon textually, her embodied experience as a girl of color is made explicit through the visual depictions inherent to the comics medium. As Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey argue in their 2015 piece, “The Graphic Novel as a Specific Form of Storytelling,” comics are able to depict characters’ bodies visually.
in extremely important ways due to its position as a visual medium (174). They note that while physical appearance is often a superfluous detail in discursive forms of story-telling, this is not the case in the graphic novel (and other visual mediums) where great attention must be paid to the body—particularly the face—in order to convey character depth and emotion. They say:

Thanks to our better understanding of the graphic novel, it is now possible to disapprove of much narrative speculation as excessively disembodied. This rediscovery of the body in cultural theory is far from being an isolated phenomenon: the flight into pure and virtualized bodies is a permanent temptation in a culture characterized by the split between body and mind, and the example of the graphic novel, which roots the story in stubborn materiality of characterization, is a modest but useful way of backing the efforts of those who … resist the “disembodying” effects of certain strands of posthumanist thinking. (175)

Moth’s interstitial embodiment is further underscored by her character design. Moth has curly dark brown hair, with one lighter streak running through it.26 This streak in her hair serves to differentiate her from the inhabitants of both Founder’s Bluff and Hecate, speaking to her position as a biracial black girl, and her indeterminate position between the two spaces (Steinkellner, Okay 4) (see Figure 3.3). Moth’s position as a biracial black girl serves to demarcate her as different from her classmates, both visually and narratively. Moth herself experiences bullying by her classmates for her position of being “different.” For example, one classmate asks her where she’s from and when she replies that she’s from Founder’s Bluff, he asks, “But where are you FROM from?” which clearly serves to signal Moth’s marginalization from the dominant (white, human) culture on account of her race and ethnicity (17). Negotiating

26 In her interview, Steinkellner describes it as “gray” though in the text it often appears to be a light brown (“Children”).
her own marginalized status—and thereby challenging the dominant white, male cultural
norms—ultimately becomes the main conflict driving her quest.

![Figure 3.3: Moth’s streak in her hair](image)

This marginalization on account of race and gender is further underscored through the
history of her grandmother’s escape from persecution. The Hush women’s marginalized
position in society is directly connected to their position as witches, which makes sense
given how most people accused of witchcraft were socially deviant in some way (Jackson 353).
Though all of the witches—mostly women, but a few men too—are shown to be rejected from
society, Sarah faces prejudice even among some of her fellow witches, presumably due to her
race, as most of the women following her appear to be white: “She was an outsider, but she was
their best hope. Sarah had to be twice as strong to keep the witches’ trust. Many were already
uneasy with her leading them, and fear and doubt were making it worse” (Steinkellner, Okay 36-7).
The text even notes, “Black, white, rich, poor…some of us were more used to judgment and
hate” (36). The text thus combines the two types of liminal beings Joseph discusses by directly
linking the witches’ marginalized status—that is, their liminal existence—to the form of
liminality commonly found in folklore and speculative fiction, where the character draws power from their access to antithetical epistemologies (118).

Moth is shown to occupy a further liminal position from her mother and grandmother through the reveal of her father. Moth, who has been raised by a single mother, has never known her father’s identity before, and she eventually learns that he is a nonmagical human. Her dad very much represents the “norm,” and is a product of the culture of the primary world, of Founder’s Bluff. Interestingly, his “human-ness” is commented upon much more than his race—none of the characters remark upon his race at all. Instead, his racial difference from the Hushes’ is only depicted visually (Steinkellner, Okay 133) (see Figure 3.4). Nonetheless, his race is important as it encourages the reader to understand Moth as biracial, an identity that is mirrored by her half-witch, half-human position. The direct link from her race to the magical and nonmagical communities is significant, as Moth eventually embraces both spaces, refusing to reject either one. She says, “I want to stay here…and I want to be a witch. No, I HAVE to be a witch. I can’t not be a witch. I made a commitment … I know it’s harder, but I have to be both a witch and a person” (266-7). In this example, Moth’s intermediate position is again emphasized through images as well as words. We see the back of Moth’s head as she is facing both her grandmother and her mother. Her grandmother and mother are shown on either side of her, located in distinct, separate panels, while Moth’s image exists in both panels, continuing across the gutter that separates the two panels (266) (see Figure 3.5). Even the background colors of the two panels are different (blue for her grandmother and red for her mother), emphasizing that Moth belongs to both spaces. She thus decides to maintain her liminal position in perpetuity, which reworks the prototypical “Master of Two Worlds” stage in the quest as outlined by Joseph

27 Her father’s own race is a bit ambiguous; nonetheless, he appears at least to be white-passing, thus aligning with the white, male, humanist cultural norms that his world represents within the text.
Campbell. He defines this stage, saying, “Freedom to pass back and forth across the world division, from the perspective of the apparitions of time to that of the casual deep and back—not contaminating the principles of the one with those of the other, yet permitting the mind to know the one by virtue of the other—is the talent of the master” (J. Campbell, *Hero* 196).

Figure 3.4: Panel of Moth’s father and mother

Figure 3.5: Moth spanning across two panels
This example also resonates with W. E. B. Du Bois’s concept of double-consciousness, in which black people are constantly aware of both their blackness and their Americanness, which are difficult to reconcile. He says:

[T]he Negro is … born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (8-9)

In Moth’s case, it is clear that she has experiences the double-consciousness that Du Bois discusses, and that coming to terms with both parts of herself is the main aim and outcome of her quest. She is a part of both the human, white, American world of Founder’s Bluff—and constantly not accepted as a part of it due to her position as a black witch from Hecate. For much of the graphic novel she does not feel she belongs to either place, and she feels the need to
repress her witchy side while in Founder’s Bluff, and is pressured to reject her ties to Founder’s Bluff while in Hecate. While she does wish to “merge [her] double self into a better and truer self” without either “of the older selves to be lost,” it is clear that in order to do so both spaces must change. While Founder’s Bluff as the primary world reflects our own world and its problems—and Moth faces the potential erasure of her witch background by the dominant, white, human culture—Hecate, as the secondary world offers a space that effectively imagines alternate possibilities for how she might move forward, creating a space in-between both of them that accepts both sides of herself. This thus contradicts Campbell’s (humanist) assertion that the spaces not “contaminat[e]” or change one another, instead reimagining a more optimistic possibility for both Moth and the spaces she engages with (J. Campbell, *Hero* 196). Though Moth has certainly grown throughout the course of the graphic novel, she makes clear that her transformation is only beginning, opening herself up to further change: “I need to be my own kind of witch. I don’t really know what that means yet. I barely know who I am or where I’m from as a person” (Steinkellner, *Okay* 266). And while the narrative itself is interested in commenting on and imagining the changes that are needed in the primary world, (and in our world, by extension), Moth herself neither claims mastery, nor chooses only one world. Moth acts as a portal herself—that is she “connotes a myriad of power associations and imbalances,” underscoring real-world problems—and she importantly does not merely return to the primary world, using the knowledge gained to “master” or improve it (L. Campbell 6). Instead, it is implied that Moth will continue to travel between the two, perhaps offering knowledge and change to both spaces.  

---

28 Whether this will come to fruition in the narrative remains to be seen as a sequel to *The Okay Witch* titled *The Okay Witch and the Hungry Shadow* is set to be released sometime in 2021. However, as it stands at the end of the first book, this is certainly the direction Moth is going.
Founder’s Bluff and Hecate as Primary and Secondary Worlds

The critique of our world is offered through Moth’s position as a portal, but is also portrayed through the depictions of both the primary world and the secondary world, and how the two interact with one another. The primary world, Founder’s Bluff is a fictional town located in Massachusetts. The depiction of the persecution of witches in the book is rooted in history, and is meant to call to mind the witch trials that occurred throughout the 17th Century across New England, of which the Salem witch trials are the most infamous. Moth’s grandmother’s name, Sarah, even conjures up the Salem witch trials specifically, as two of the three initial women persecuted were named Sarah (Sarah Good and Sarah Osbourne) (Wallenfeldt). The main difference between the historical witch trials and the witch trials in the book is that witches are shown to be real in the book. Still, the text purposefully links marginalization to the witches, thereby reflecting the real world witch trials as those accused of witchcraft were often socially deviant in some way (Jackson 353; Zipes 79). Throughout the graphic novel, Steinkellner draws connections between the town’s history and its continuing problems into the modern day. Moth’s history class and the Founder’s Fest pageant showcasing the town’s history are clear examples of these connections. In the former, Moth’s teacher regales the class with the story of Judge Nathaniel Kramer, who is cast as a hero for bringing wealth and prosperity to the town even when his son Peter disappeared, thought to have been taken by the witches who lived on the

---

29 It is interesting that Steinkellner links Moth’s family to the Sarahs from the Salem witch trials and to the history of European witch trials as well, especially when the first woman accused of witchcraft in Salem was Tituba, an enslaved black woman, likely from the Caribbean (Wallenfeldt). Indeed, due in part to the way time works in the graphic novel, the story largely skips over the history of slavery and the Civil Rights Movement, a strange omission given its interest in commenting on prejudice and marginalized communities, particularly in relation to Moth’s race. 30 Though a fictional character, Kramer shares a last name with real-life Heinrich Kramer who wrote the *Malleus Maleficarum*, (e.g. *The Hammer of Witches*), which was used in the persecution of witches during the witch trials in Europe.
outskirts of town (Steinkellner, Okay 18-9). While Peter did join the witches, he did so voluntarily, possessing magical abilities himself. In this version of the town’s history, however, Nathaniel Kramer’s persecution of the witches is skated over, and he is remembered fondly by the town: “We celebrate Nathaniel Kramer to this day for his sacrifice and struggle to make this town great, even in the face of terrible personal tragedy” (19). This version of history is drawn primarily from Nathaniel Kramer’s own journals and is clearly a biased, skewed version of history that effectively silences the witches’ perspectives: “according to Kramer’s journals, there were women who lived on the very edge of town. They didn’t obey Judge Kramer’s laws. They wouldn’t speak a word to the townsfolk, except to lay a curse on them. They were mysterious outsiders. Nobody knew where they came from, but it was clear they weren’t Founder’s Bluff women” (18). This twisted version of events is even re-enacted each year at the festival, further glorifying the Kramer family and obscuring the true history of the lives of the people he affected. In both cases, the history of the town is shown to have direct effects on the modern day, primarily through the treatment Moth receives from her classmates. Marked as an outsider, Moth has few friends at school and is repeatedly bullied by her classmates. During the play, she is even forced to stand in as the witch at the last second, wearing a costume that caricaturizes witches, forced to relive the trauma experienced by her ancestors. These examples are racially codified, bringing to mind American histories of blackface and vaudeville, as well as modern day holidays and monuments (e.g. Columbus Day, Thanksgiving, Confederate monuments, etc.) that continue to glorify these abhorrent figures and events while simultaneously erasing their histories of violence and racism. The Okay Witch thus uses its
portrayal of the primary world to make critiques of our world’s construction of history, making clear that Founder’s Bluff (and by extension, the reader’s real world\textsuperscript{31}) needs to change.

This critique of the primary world, Founder’s Bluff, is made clear through its contrast to the secondary world, Hecate. However, even in the case of the secondary world, Steinkellner is careful to show that it is not a perfect place either. Constructed by the witches, Hecate is named after the ancient Greek goddess of witchcraft and thresholds. The world offers a place of refuge where the witches can hide from the humans in secret, and is a space that is frozen in time, so that the witches do not age while they are a part of that space. As a haven for witches, who are “outsiders” in society, Hecate imagines a world that is much more accepting or inclusive than the primary world (or indeed, our own world). Importantly, Hecate is not a perfect utopia, and its flaws are remarked upon as well: “That is why we conjured Hecate, a world built for witchkind. Where we are free to be as we are … I tried to seal the realm as tightly as I could so the hate from this human world would not leak in. Alas, that perfect utopia will never be” (Steinkellner, \textit{Okay} 177). Though protected from persecution from humans, the witches are not without prejudice themselves, and the difficult work of bringing them all together is repeatedly emphasized; Calendula says, “It wasn’t easy for [Sarah] to gain the trust of all those other witches. Hecate isn’t this perfect dreamland where all kinds of witches just hold hands and forget their differences” (151). This idea has resonances with real-world issues of allyship and coalitions, which are not without difficulty and differences themselves. As an imagined space, Hecate thus emphasizes ways of being and thinking that are often overlooked or dismissed by the dominant society and culture of the primary world.

\textsuperscript{31} In this case, it is likely that Steinkellner has a primarily American audience in mind for her implied reader, given the graphic novel’s setting.
In addition to using the primary world and secondary world to comment on each other and the reader’s world, the depiction of both places works to emphasize the materiality of those spaces. As shown above, both spaces are shown to be distinct, but not disconnected from one another. The importance of time as a part of space—of the two not being able to be separated from one another—is shown through the contrast between Founder’s Bluff and Hecate. Founder’s Bluff is largely associated with time throughout the graphic novel. Though it is ultimately shown to be “stuck in the past,” it does change some throughout history, and the characters age regularly in that space (Steinkellner, *Okay* 228). Hecate, by contrast, is represented as a space frozen in time and none of the characters age there. Moth’s parents and grandmother are also associated with Founder’s Bluff and Hecate, respectively, and of time and space by extension. Moth’s mother’s name, Calendula, further bespeaks this connection as it is a name of a flower that is Latin for “Little calendar” (“Children”). As Massey notes, this dichotomy of space and time reflects the gender binary, which also must be rethought, as space is typically associated with the feminine while time is associated with the masculine (Massey, *Space* 259-60). She says:

It is important to be clear about what is being said of this relationship between space/time and gender. It is not being argued that this way of characterizing space is somehow essentially male; there is no essentialism of feminine/masculine here. Rather, the argument is that the dichotomous characterization of space and time, along with a whole range of other dualisms which have been briefly referred to, and with their connotative interrelations, may both reflect and be part of the constitution of, among other things, the masculinity and femininity of the sexist society in which we live. Nor is it being argued that space should simply be reprioritized to an equal status with, or
instead of, time … The point here however is not to argue for an upgrading of the status of space within the terms of the old dualism (a project which is arguably inherently difficult anyway, given the terms of that dualism), but to argue that what must be overcome is the very formulation of space/time in terms of this kind of dichotomy. (259-60)

The graphic novel sets up this cliché divide between the two worlds as well, as Founder’s Bluff, in addition to being associated with time, is shown to be very patriarchal, associated with the Kramer family of witch hunters. By contrast, Hecate is a matriarchal society created by witches. Both of these binaries are ultimately shown to be false through Moth. As the bridge between these two worlds, she makes clear how both spaces inform one another, as well as how time and space simply cannot be disconnected.

Hecate being a space absent of time also proves to be problematic, as there is little room for change, growth, or healing. As Massey notes in her reasoning for using the term “space-time,” the two are inseparable and should be conceived of together: “One way of thinking about all this is to say that the spatial is integral to the production of history, and thus to the possibility of politics, just as the temporal is to geography. Another way is to insist on the inseparability of time and space, on their joint constitution through the interrelations between phenomena; on the necessity of thinking in terms of space-time” (Massey, Space 269). This allows for a recognition that spaces and places change, and are not mere static containers in which events (time) happen, thus resisting previous trends in scholarship that have privileged the temporal over the spatial (Massey, Power-Geometries 33-4). While the witches are existing in (according to Julia Kristeva’s definition) a separatist woman’s time as defined by second wave feminists, which seeks to “defy the superiority of masculinist culture and patrilinear time,” by contrast, Moth
represents third wave definitions of feminine time, which Eileen Donaldson clearly links to ideas of “becoming” (41). In her 2013 article, “Accessing the ‘Other Wind’: Feminine Time in Ursula Le Guin’s Earthsea Series,” she explains:

In this case, the experiences of the Other, which always occur in feminine time (because it remains coded other to the masculine norm), may be brought into regulated linear time in order to effect change in patrilinear reality. Kristeva suggests that this approach to time offers the greatest potential for subversion of patriarchal culture because it neither denies the importance of Other time nor seeks to maintain its separation from patrilinear reality … what Kristeva calls the third generation has much in common with contemporary poststructuralist feminist approaches to feminine time which take as their starting point the writings of philosophers such as Deleuze, Bergson, and Nietzsche who use the term “the feminine” as a schema to denote a temporality that privileges “becoming” … As such, “becoming” is about infinite possibilities and not the achievement of a unified “identity.” (Donaldson 41)

In this way, Moth (and her mother) have knowledge to share with Hecate and its inhabitants (such as her grandmother), as much as the other way around. Both spaces are thus significantly shown to be entangled with one another, and both are in need of change. Ultimately, as the liminal character existing as the portal between the two worlds, Moth, shows how the two become-with each other, rather than seeing them as disconnected entities.

The vibrancy of both places is emphasized through how the spaces, objects, and characters are all shown to inform and become-with one another, though Hecate does this through supernatural means. In the case of Founder’s Bluff, for example, Moth and her classmates visit the local museum, further learning about Founder Bluff’s history. After getting
past the curated exhibits that mostly showcase the Kramer family—Moth even remarks, “Guns and swords from generations of the Kramer family. They should call it the Kramer History Museum”—she discovers a back room featuring various objects that are tied into other parts of the town’s past that have largely been forgotten (Steinkellner, *Okay* 103). There, she discovers the true history about her mother, who returned to Founder’s Bluff several times over the years, often assisting townspeople in need, before she permanently moved there in 2006. Her knowledge of Hecate is similarly introduced through people and objects. Moth finds her mother’s magical diary which she is able to go into when she reads it, watching and experiencing her mother’s memories in space, instead of merely reading them retold second-hand. She periodically revisits her mother’s diary, learning of her mother’s past in Hecate and about her own history as a witch. Moth’s experience with the diary thus acts as a guide for her magical training. By engaging with the diary, Moth is able access magical knowledge through her mother’s memories. In a sequence of images, we see Moth paralleled with a younger Calendula, practicing her magic after witnessing her mother in the diary (89-91) (see Figure 3.6). In this example, Moth is able to access her mother’s memories magically through the diary, learning of her own history and her ties to Hecate through them. Moth’s exploration of these artifacts makes clear how embodied these histories are, and how the spaces are entangled with the people and objects that are a part of them. Moth’s history is not merely relayed to her; instead, she finds it and experiences it through her engagement with the objects and the people that make up the spaces. Through this portrayal, Steinkellner not only offers a critique of the existing historical narratives, but effectively emphasizes other forms of knowledge that value how the discursive and the material entangle with one another, pushing against masculine, humanist narratives that tend to universalize experience.
Figure 3.6: Moth learns magic from her mother’s memories while in her diary

In the case of Hecate, the space connects liminal beings with liminal spaces rather directly in multiple ways. For example, the name Hecate is named after the Greek goddess of witchcraft, who is notably also the goddess of the crossroads. Associated with witches and Demeter and Persephone, Hecate herself often exists in an indeterminate state, and as such

32 In many versions of the story, Hecate aids Demeter in her search for her daughter, and in some versions even becomes a handmaiden to Persephone in the Underworld (Cartwright; Magliocco 26).
seems a fitting goddess for the crossroads, a space that is in-between, neither here nor there. Hecate’s association with the crossroads reflects Moth’s journey in the graphic novel, as she is at a metaphorical crossroads where she has to choose between the two spaces, and the two corresponding sides of herself. Notably, she ends up choosing a third, in-between option where she will continue to move between the two spaces, similar to Hecate herself, who was sometimes associated with the Underworld and who often moved freely between different worlds (Cartwright). Hecate the space is not only named in honor of the goddess, however, but actually seems to be the goddess in some sense. The space is created by the witches’ shared magic, and in order to cross over into it, an offering must be made. The witches offer all sorts of things—their beauty, wisdom, skill, honor, might, happiness, etc.—something that is a part of them: “Each witch had to offer something from within” (Steinkellner 38-40). Whenever an offering is made, an anthropomorphized apparition of the goddess appears in her triple form, a common depiction of Hecate in later works of art and sculpture that reflects her position as goddess of the crossroads (Steinkellner, Okay 41; Cartwright) (see Figure 3.7). In modern-day Neopaganism the triple goddess figure of the maiden, the mother, and the crone often features prominently, and many different goddesses from various pantheons are often associated with this figure, including Hecate (Hutton 37, 179; Magliocco 107). The vibrancy of the space is thus conveyed through anthropomorphism. The boundaries between being and space are collapsed through this portrayal of Hecate, a depiction that is mirrored through the other characters and their engagement with spaces. The image of the triple goddess, for example, is mirrored through a series of images several times throughout the graphic novel. Moth, her mother, and her grandmother are often used to mirror the triple goddess image of Hecate. In one example near the end of the graphic novel, Moth and her grandmother use their magic in order to save Calendula’s life.
(Steinkellner, *Okay* 257-60) (see Figure 3.8). They use their combined magic to save her, which appears as gold, glowing strings connected between their hands, which they then drape over her. Afterwards, the three appear in a panel together, mirroring the triple goddess—the maiden, the mother, and the crone—with each of the faces of the three generations of Hush women appearing in a row (Moth, Calendula, and Sarah, respectively). This example uses the fantasy genre and the graphic novel medium in order to illustrate their entangled lives and their shared histories together.

Figure 3.7: The witches create Hecate
A particularly poignant example in the graphic novel successfully connects liminal space with liminal characters, making effective use of the comics medium in doing so. Immediately following Moth’s decision to return to her mother in Founder’s Bluff, she pledges her commitment to Hecate, which magically ensures her continued liminal existence navigating between the two worlds. When Moth makes her commitment to Hecate, we see her mirrored directly above the Hecate figure in three panels, paralleling her to the triple goddess figure visually (Steinkellner, Okay 213) (see Figure 3.9). This is significant, as it underscores her own liminality through her connection to Hecate, as well as directly connecting her to the space. In this way, the images emphasize thematically what is happening at the narrative level.

Immediately following Moth’s decision to return to Founder’s Bluff and the commitment she makes to Hecate, Moth is shown falling out of one panel (in Hecate), tumbling through empty white space, before falling back into another panel (in Founder’s Bluff) (214) (see Figure 3.10). The decision to linger on Moth’s in-between-ness in space in this moment further

---

33 It is worth noting the sexual undertones in this image. Moth falls out of Hecate onto Charlie in a somewhat suggestive pose, covering herself with her arms as well (further denoting her own growing sexual awareness). Her growing sexuality mirrors her growth and maturation over the course of the novel, which begins with a menarche-magic association as mentioned previously. It does seem (perhaps) disappointingly conventional and heterosexist to
emphasizes her recent decisions, and the position she will occupy going forward, as a liminal character who is a part of both spaces. This moment thus once again resonates and speaks back to Du Bois’s concept of double-consciousness:

“Oh from the double life every American Negro must live, as a Negro and as an American … from this must arise a painful self-consciousness, an almost morbid sense of personality and a moral hesitancy which is fatal to self-confidence. The worlds within and without the Veil of Color are changing, and changing rapidly, but not at the same rate, not in the same way; and this must produce a peculiar wrenching of the soul, a peculiar sense of doubt and bewilderment. Such a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double social classes, must give rise to double words and double ideals, and tempt the mind to pretence or revolt, to hypocrisy or radicalism.” (160)

In Moth’s case, she will continue to live between two lives, but the consequence of this is more optimistic in Steinkellner’s graphic novel (though it is undoubtedly not without conflict). By embodying a space and place as open and processual rather than stagnant, Moth offers a potential way forward that does not see either world or its accompanying epistemologies—or importantly, herself—as static and predetermined.

conclude with an assumed heterosexuality as the norm, though Charlie does himself occupy many liminal positions similar to Moth throughout the graphic novel. Further examination of Charlie’s position in the story is warranted, though it lies outside the focus of this chapter.
Figure 3.9: Moth offers her commitment to Hecate

Figure 3.10: Moth falling between the two worlds
Decolonizing Space-Time in *Akata Witch*

Like Moth, Sunny constantly navigates between multiple spaces and negotiates her in-between position in relation to them. She similarly refuses to locate herself in only one space or identity, and her quest centers on her coming to terms with her various, shifting identities. *Akata Witch* further illustrates the intricacies of these relationships through its more nuanced depictions of space, emphasizing the fluidity and porosity between different places, underscoring Sunny’s ever-changing positionality in doing so.

_Akata Witch* by Nnedi Okorafor is a novel originally published in 2011 that follows twelve-year old protagonist, Sunny Nwazue, as she is initiated into the magical community (termed “Leopard People”) and conveys her journey as she learns more about her own magical abilities and her roots. Told in the limited third-person from Sunny’s perspective, the story follows Sunny and her three friends—Orlu (a thirteen-year old Igbo boy with dyslexia), Chichi (an Efik and Igbo girl of an undisclosed age who is a princess of Nimm), and Sasha (a fourteen-year old African American boy who has been sent to Nigeria as punishment for a magical transgression)—as they embark on their magical education to learn to practice juju. The book is the first of a trilogy, though it follows a complete story arc in which Sunny and her

---

34 Nnedi Okorafor has written many fantasy and science-fiction books for both children and adults that she defines as “Africanfuturist” and “Africanjujuist.” She has also written for some comic books, including a few runs of *The Black Panther* comics for Marvel. She has a PhD in literature from the University of Illinois, Chicago and two M.A.s in journalism and literature (Okorafor, Nnedi).

35 The novel is told in the third-person throughout, except for the prologue, which is told in the first-person from Sunny’s perspective.

36 Chichi is a Nimm princess because her mother is a Nimm priestess, “one of the last princesses in the Queen Nsedu spiritline” (Okorafor, *Akata* 82). Orlu explains to Sunny that “women who become Nimm priestesses are chosen at birth. Their intelligence is tested before their mother even gets a chance to hold them. If they pass, they’re ‘sold’ to Nimm, a female spirit who lives in the wilderness” (214). They also “all have ‘Nimm’ as a last name, and they’re never allowed to marry. And they reject wealth” (214).

37 The second book, *Akata Warrior*, was published in 2017 and Okorafor is currently working on the third book, though no title or release date has been announced as of yet.
friends track down and overcome the infamous Black Hat,\footnote{His real name is Otokoto Ginny.} who has been abducting children, draining them of their spirit life and using them as magical energy sources in order to bring Ekwensu—an evil being from the spirit world—into the physical world.

Set in Nigeria, the novel draws extensively from West African folklore and mythology, particularly Igbo culture, which is Sunny’s heritage. Okorafor herself is a first-generation American, born to parents who emigrated from Nigeria. Though she has never lived in Nigeria herself, she has returned to Nigeria throughout her life to visit and this upbringing had a huge impact on her worldview. Okorafor says of Nigeria:

The place where I have experienced my life’s greatest joys and greatest terrors. The place where I have never lived. Africa, Nigeria, to be exact. To set foot on Nigerian soil is to be filled with another 10 novels and 50 short stories. And these stories aren’t “normal,” oh no. They cannot be … I credit much if not most of this to two things. The first is my complex African experience, which on many levels has been a series of cultural mixes and clashes between being American and being Nigerian. The second being my personal view. The word is a magical place to me. (‘Organic’ 276)

It is thus unsurprising that liminality—in the form of hybrid positionalities, and fluid boundaries between spaces—is a central theme to most of her books, including the Akata series.

In this section, I explore Sunny’s liminal position as a character, and how this position is directly informed by the portrayals of liminal spaces in the novel. Compared to The Okay Witch, these relationships tend to be much more fluid and complex with more “leakage” and “messiness,” whereas The Okay Witch keeps the boundaries between the two worlds slightly more distinct. In doing so, Okorafor effectively emphasizes how people and other entities
become-with the spaces they are a part of, thus crafting a decolonizing quest narrative that more effectively speaks to the experiences of girls, particularly girls of color.

Scholarship on the book has already explored some of these ideas through various approaches. Alice Curry’s 2014 article, “Terrorousness, Invisibility and Animism: An Ecocritical Reading of Nnedi Okorafor’s West African Novels for Children,” “uses Val Plumwood’s ecofeminist notion of ‘traitorousness’” to explore Okorafor’s concept of “organic fantasy,” arguing that “this type of conceptual dismantling has significant implications for ecocriticism, as it is practiced in both postcolonial and western contexts” (37). “Tators” in Val Plumwood’s definition is “someone with a view from both sides, able to adopt multiple perspectives and locations that enable an understanding of how he or she is situated in the relationship with the other from the perspective of both kinds of lives, the life of the One and the life of the Other” (qtd. in Curry 39). Curry’s use of the terms “traitor” and “traitorousness” in her analysis of the text thus resonate with my usage of “liminal” in this analysis, as it is Sunny’s in-between-ness that allows her to be part of multiple spaces and embody multiple perspectives.

She examines a few of Okorafor’s children’s books—Akata Witch among them—analyzing how the books’ easily undo strict dichotomies in Western epistemologies, such as human/nonhuman, culture/nature, and spirit/material, by drawing on West African ways of thinking. She uses the concepts of traitorousness, invisibility, and animism as focal points for her analysis, showing how the main characters’ feelings of unbelonging provide them with a unique perspective that breaks through the barriers typically upheld by Western ideologies. Louisa Uchum Egbonike’s 2015 article, “Re-Presenting Africa in Young Adult Speculative Fiction: The Ekpe Institution in Nnedi Okorafor’s Akata Witch,” similarly examines how YA speculative fiction texts can disrupt Western ideologies by drawing on African culture and mythologies, imagining new,
decolonizing narratives in doing so. She notes that “discourse on dismantling colonial constructions of Africa has concentrated almost exclusively on literature written for an adult readership” and that “African children’s literature remains an under-researched area of study, in spite of its consistent development alongside African literature written for an adult readership” (144-5). Eg bunike argues that in the case of Akata Witch, specifically, Okorafor centralizes an African worldview in the novel by drawing on Nigerian culture and folklore, and by conveying Nigeria as a producer of creative knowledge and power (144). Eg bunike says, “Akata Witch explores contemporary issues of migration, diaspora, and the politics of ‘home’, whilst grounding the narrative within a particular Nigerian milieu” (147). Ultimately, she concludes that “Afrofuturism not only shifts the focus from Euro-American narratives to narratives of people of African descent, it also centralizes women and the female principle. For young female readers, Afrofuturist narratives can offer a liberating space in its capacity to subvert the male dominance existent in mainstream science fiction and fantasy literature” (Egbunike 153).

Sandra Lindow’s 2017 article, “Nnedi Okorafor: Exploring the Empire of Girls’ Moral Development” also considers Okorafor’s books in terms of the narratives they offer girls. She considers three of Okorafor’s novels (including Akata Witch) as Bildungsromane, examining the moral development of the girls over the course of the story. Lindow argues that Okorafor uses the fantasy genre in order to reimagine their developmental journeys, breaking away from conventional morality in order to better understand and find themselves. She says: “Okorafor has built a world of her own where girls can succeed through intelligence and courage” (Lindow 60). Deborah Williams’s 2020 article, “Witches, Monsters, and Questions of Nation: Humans and Non-Humans in Akata Witch and Trail of Lightning,” examines two YA novels, arguing that the two “present similarly paradoxical answers to the question about what it means to be human”
Drawing on Haraway’s definition of monsters, Williams explores how the protagonists’ positions as “monsters” in the novels “demonstrate how to create communities that are more capacious (if not in number, then in terms of inclusion) through a cosmopolitan ethos that seeks to bridge difference instead of eradicate it” (4). Her article contributes to the ongoing critical conversation on cosmopolitanism, which she argues “is a practice and not a static principle” (2). Drawing on Braidotti’s scholarship on cosmopolitanism, Williams says: “I suggest that these novels ask us to conceive of cosmopolitanism that is not solely about our obligation to humanity (over a nation or a tribe) but rather about our obligations to the globe (of which humanity is but a part)” (2). In the next section, I draw on existing criticism of Akata Witch in my analysis, analyzing how Sunny’s intersecting identities contribute to her liminality on multiple levels.

Sunny’s Liminal Position

Like Moth, Sunny occupies an in-between position between two different places and cultures. She is both Nigerian and American, having been born in the U.S. to Nigerian immigrant parents, and lived there for some time, and then she and her family moved back to Nigeria when she was nine. Throughout the novel, Sunny’s relationship to her position as “Nigerian” and as “American” constantly shifts—sometimes she feels herself to be more one than the other, sometimes she feels she is both simultaneously, and sometimes she feels like she is not enough of either one, all depending on the given context. Sunny even notes in the prologue that she “confuses people” and says she is “American and Igbo, I guess” (Okorafor, Akata 3). Okorafor speaks to her own experience with this complex relationship in her 2009 article, “Organic Fantasy,” saying, “my complex African experience, which on many levels has been a series of cultural mixes and clashes between being American and being Nigerian” (276). The title of the
book, *Akata Witch*, further emphasizes Sunny’s liminality. In Sunny’s case, “witch” is almost always linked to the word “akata” and is used to as a slur against her. *Akata* is a Yoruba word that means “bush animal” and is “used to refer to black Americans or foreign-born blacks” (*Akata* 11). Some people consider the term derogatory, while others argue its meaning is more neutral, or they have actively reclaimed the term. In either case, the term is used to delineate the group as different, locating them on the margins of West African society. Sunny herself has a complicated relationship with term that changes over the course of the novel. In the beginning of the novel she hates being called *akata*. After a classmate calls her a “stupid pale-faced *akata* witch,” the reader is privy to Sunny’s emotional reaction: “Sunny shut her eyes tight and gulped down a sob. She hated the word ‘*akata*’ … A very, very rude word” (11). As the novel progresses, however, Sunny reclaims the term and, by extension, her own liminal position. Though she still dislikes others using the term against her in a derogatory way, in a telling moment she admits that she sometimes feels like an “*akata*” herself due to her American upbringing. Empathizing with Sasha, who is African-American and therefore often ignorant of West African dialects and culture, she tells him, “So you know … I was born in the States, too. I came back with my parents when I was nine. That’s only three years ago … I may not talk about it much but most days I feel very much like an…*akata*.” (58). Using the Nigerian language term meaning, basically, “African-American” as part of the title further underscores Sunny’s hybrid position as Nigerian-American.39

Sunny is shown to be in a marginal position on account of her age and her gender, which further contributes to her liminal existence (Joseph 118). Sunny is a twelve-year old girl on the

---

39 While Okorafor is clearly interested in reclaiming the word herself, it is worth noting that the title of the book was changed when published in Nigeria and the U.K. to *What Sunny Saw in the Flames*, likely due to the offensive connotations of the term.
cusp of adolescence, in between child and adult. Her age is symbolically linked to her initiation into the magical world. The second word in the title of the book, “witch,” also speaks to her marginalized position in terms of her age and gender. The label “witch,” as mentioned previously, has historically been attributed to socially deviant women, particularly in an American context (Jackson 353). In a Nigerian context specifically, certain children were sometimes labelled “witches” and Sunny notes that “they were blamed for anything that went wrong, from illnesses to accidents to death. Eventually, the community would rise up and enact all kinds of punishment to get rid of their ‘magical powers.’ Really, it was just a form of child abuse” (Okorafor, Akata 78). The term is thus gendered in an American context and adultist in a Nigerian context, speaking to Sunny’s marginalized position as a girl who is a part of both cultures. It is also notable that the Black Hat is targeting children specifically, and that Sunny and her friends are the group that finally succeeds in overcoming him. One of the scholars\(^{40}\) notes that “[The Black Hat] is arrogant and has no respect for young people. He will not be expecting you, and when he sees you, he will think you harmless” (310). Thus, the reason The Black Hat is targeting children, and the reason Sunny and her friends succeed, are one and the same: he perceives children as weaker and less powerful, causing him to underestimate them. This example thus emphasizes both Sunny’s liminality as a result of her position as a child, as well as the relative power she is able to leverage as a result.

Sunny is further marginalized due to her position as a girl. Though the Leopard People are liminal beings, living in a secret shadow society that is hidden from the nonmagical, Lamb people, they are similarly shown to be flawed and prejudiced themselves. While they are more accepting of outsiders than the Lamb community, the magical world is specifically not a utopia,

\(^{40}\) Juju training is divided into various levels for a Leopard person. There are only eight living people in Nigeria who have reached the fourth, last level, which is called Oku Akama.
and Sunny faces discrimination there on account of her gender and her magical status—more on this later. Sunny’s marginalization as a result of her gender is set up early in the novel in the nonmagical world, as she and her mother occupy traditional gender roles in the family, expected to complete most of the domestic labor in the house. She also has a complicated relationship with her domineering father, who “hates her” and dislikes any actions that threaten his own display of power and control:

I knew I looked like a ghost. All pale-skinned. And I was good at being ghost-quiet …

I’d creep up on my father, stand right beside him, and wait. It was amazing how he wouldn’t see me. I’d just stand there grinning and waiting. Then he’d glance to the side and see me and nearly jump to the ceiling. “Stupid, stupid girl!” he’d hiss, because I’d really scared him—and because he wanted to hurt me because he knew that I knew he was scared. Sometimes I hated my father. Sometimes I felt he hated me, too. I couldn’t help that I wasn’t the son he wanted or the pretty daughter he’d have accepted instead.

(Okorafor, Akata 4-5)

Sunny is provided less freedom than her brothers, and is frequently excluded from playing soccer with them and their friends, even though she is an exceptional athlete: “Being albino made the sun my enemy; my skin burned so easily that I felt nearly flammable. That’s why, though I was really good at soccer, I couldn’t join the boys when they played after school. Although they wouldn’t have let me anyway, me being a girl. Very narrow-minded” (3). She faces similar discrimination in the magical world, where a group of boys nearly exclude her from playing soccer with them, and she has to prove herself to be better than average in order to just be included. Once she proves herself to be an exceptional soccer player, her teammates do ultimately come to accept her. By the end of the novel, Sunny even stands up to her father in a
confrontation, showing her growth and increased confidence in herself as a result of her magical training and experience in the magical world: “‘Dad,’ she said. Her voice shook. ‘I was up to nothing unholy or shameful or dirty. I was with my friends and—’ She skipped back as her father’s hand flew at her face. He missed. She held up a shaky hand. ‘No more, Dad!’ He came at her again and again. She dodged him each time” (338). As Curry notes, “The protagonists’ personal traitorousness, therefore, does not in itself challenge the status quo but does position the characters to adopt an empathetic and transgressive stance towards oppression” (45). Williams adds that, “Bolstered by the connections to a community that embraces her strangeness, Sunny has begun the process of re-imagining the narratives that constitute her local context” (13). While the world and the people around her have not dramatically changed, Sunny importantly is able to come to terms with her own liminal position and undo the sexist and racist thinking in her own mind.

At the beginning of the novel, Sunny notes that she “confuses people” due to various, seemingly disparate elements of her identity (Okorafor, Akata 3). In addition to being Nigerian and American, Sunny also “confuses people” racially. She says, “I have West African features, like my mother, but while the rest of my family is dark brown, I’ve got light yellow hair, skin the color of ‘sour milk’ (or so stupid people like to tell me), and hazel eyes that look like God ran out of the right color. I’m albino” (3). As a result of her albinism, she is forced to stay out of the sun for much of her life growing up, and she carries around a black umbrella wherever she goes. Her albinism marks her as different, and she incurs bullying as a result. Her appearance is often

---

41 While I agree with Williams’s point here, she does somewhat over-emphasize how much Sunny is accepted in the Leopard community, in my opinion. Though the space certainly allows her to grow, she faces extensive prejudice as a free agent, as I discuss later in my analysis. She also claims that “These communities resist both hierarchy and homogeneity, and are formed by choice rather than by assumptions about kinship or nation” which seems largely untrue, as a hierarchy is still definitely present, and issues of nation in the Lamb world remain important and inform the Leopard community in complex ways (12).
remarked upon by others. One of her classmates mockingly calls her *oyibo*, an Igbo word used to refer to white people, and even her friend Sasha says that she is “outside in,” i.e., “black on the inside but white on the outside” (83).

In addition to affecting how she is read racially, Sunny’s albinism serves to marginalize her in terms of dis/ability. There is some debate as to whether albinism should even be classified as a disability or not—even this uncertainty about its categorization bespeaks Sunny’s liminal status. When albinism is categorized as a disability under the medical model, it is primarily due to the vision complications that accompany the lack of pigment in a person’s hair, skin, and eyes (“Information”). However, Sunny’s albinism is more easily conceived of as a disability according to the social model, which “looks to environmental barriers that exclude physically, cognitively and developmentally disabled people” (Markotić 60). She is unable to move as freely through spaces due to the sun, and relies on her umbrella and clothes in order to do so. She also is regularly treated dismissively and as “other” due to her albinism by those in her community, further contributing to her marginalized status.

Interestingly, once Sunny is initiated into the magical world, she learns that her albinism is tied into her juju abilities. Juju is shown to be very embodied in the novel, and certain attributes—particularly a quirk or a characteristic that would be seen as a “bad quality” by Lambs—often correspond to a Leopard person’s natural ability42: “Certain attributes tend to yield to certain talents. Very, very tall people tend to have the ability to predict the future through the stars. Very, very short people tend to make plants grow. Those with bad skin usually know and understand the weather” (Okorafor, *Akata* 117). All Leopard People have a “natural ability,” a magical gift that they are naturally inclined towards, and in Sunny’s case she is a type

---

42 Disability also often becomes the source of a Leopard’s person’s natural ability: Orlu’s dyslexia signals his ability to undo juju, for example.
of shapeshifter, able to become invisible at will. Part of her shapeshifting abilities involve stepping into the spirit world (referred to as “the wilderness”) and being able to travel between the spirit world and the physical world with ease. Being albino and a Leopard person is seen to be especially rare. Chichi and Sasha describe Sunny’s abilities, saying, “She can make herself invisible … Because she has the natural ability to go into the wilderness whenever she wants. That’s what makes her invisible’ ‘She can mess with time, too … For the same reason. Time doesn’t exist in the wilderness’” (116). Following her initiation, Sunny’s body is changed materially as well. Once her magical abilities have been awakened, Sunny is no longer affected by the sun. Instead, the sun and her relationship to it are shown to be an integral part of her, both through her name and through her spirit face. Chichi explains to Sunny that a Leopard person’s spirit face is “more you than your physical face” and explains that every Leopard person also has a corresponding spirit name (Okorafor, *Akata* 65, 67). Sunny’s spirit name is Anyanwu, meaning “eye of the sun” in Igbo (152). The first time Sunny fully sees her spirit face, it is described thus:

It was her, but it felt as if it had its own separate identity, too. Her spirit face was the sun, all shiny gold and glowing with pointy rays. It was hard to the touch, but she could feel her touch. She knocked on it and it made a hollow sound. Her spirit face was smiling. Still, somehow, she knew it could be angry if it had to be. Her eyes were carved slits, yet

---

43 Curry says of Okorafor’s portrayal of invisibility: “However, Okorafor’s exploration of invisibility is distinctly West African with a focus on objects with special significance to traditional West African cultures … Such a heritage destabilises western understandings of human subjectivity by calling attention to the artificiality of the stable dichotomies between self and other, human and nonhuman on which successive instantiations of enlightenment humanism have been built” (43).

44 It could be argued from a disability studies perspective that this trope of magically overcoming her disability has problematic implications; however, it is interesting to note that Sunny still has to perform her disability—such as continuing to carry around her umbrella even when she no longer needs it—in the Lamb world so as to not reveal her magical status. Another possible reading is that instead of “erasing” or “correcting” her disability, the Leopard world acts as an imagined space in which the social structures that make a person disabled are effectively removed.
she could see perfectly. The nose was shaped like her nose … Her spirit face was beautiful. And it was utterly crazy-looking. And it was hers. (92-3)

Sunny’s natural ability, her spirit face presenting as the sun, and her albinism are all interconnected to one another, and all of them bespeak Sunny’s liminal position in various ways. Her ability to move between worlds with ease, speaks to her interstitial position, existing as a part of multiple spaces. Her spirit face is described as both her and not her, underscoring the multiplicity existing in Sunny’s own sense of self. As Curry notes, this works to “dismantl[e] the barriers between the human and nonhuman, earthly and spiritual” (42). She says:

The linguistic slippage from “its” to “her” to “hers” as Sunny’s focalization moves … suggests that this identification is done subconsciously and ritualistically—in a cyclic reencounter with her own invisible potential and a final recognition of belonging.

Sunny’s struggle to “know” herself thus sees her reject the scripts that have circumscribed her human subjectivity and instead animate scripts that actively nurture her capacity to be more-than-human. (42-3, italics in original)

The fact that both her natural ability and her spirit face connect to her albinism speaks to how Sunny must come to terms with this part of herself. Importantly, they are what make her powerful and are directly related to her magical abilities, which all tie back into Sunny’s quest to discover (and accept) herself, an idea that is emphasized through the sleepless night following her initiation: “All through the night, she battled herself. Or she battled to know herself. She fell apart and then put herself back together and then she fell apart again and put herself back together, over and over” (Okorafor, Akata 93).

Although the Leopard people as a group are themselves liminal due to their juju, Sunny occupies an additionally marginalized space even among them. As a person with two Lamb
parents, Sunny is considered a free agent by the magical community, meaning that she has some
distant ancestor who possessed juju, but neither of her parents did, and she grew up ignorant of
the Leopard community. As a result, she has quite a bit to learn at a much later age than her
friends, for example, none of whom are free agents themselves. Free agents’ magic is also
considered to be more powerful, unstable, and dangerous by comparison; Sunny’s introductory
book for free agents asserts that, “Free agents are the hardest to understand, predict, or explain”
(Okorafor, *Akata* 96). They occupy a unique and often difficult position, as they must navigate
both the Leopard and Lamb communities but exist on the margins of both. Prejudice against free
agents is common in the Leopard community, and Sunny encounters it throughout the
novel. This makes it clear that, though the Leopard world allows Sunny to grow and transform
herself, it is certainly not a utopia. Lindow says of Ginen, another of Okorafor’s magical,
imagined spaces, “As originally envisioned, Ginen is clearly not a utopia where everyone is
happy and equal, but a utopia-in-progress where humans behave no better or worse than they do in
our contemporary world. It inhabits a world that has the potential to be fairer and more
ecologically balanced than our own,” an idea that clearly applies to the Leopard world in *Akata
Witch* as well (61). For example, even the primary educational book Sunny uses to learn about
her position as a free agent is riddled with bias, prejudice, and condescension, reflecting just how
deep this discrimination against free agents is in the Leopard world. Sunny even thinks this
explicitly, comparing the book’s writing to racism: “What a pompous, discriminating idiot of an
author. If they have racism in the Leopard world, this book is so ‘racist’ against free agents!”
(Okorafor, *Akata* 97 italics in original).45 Her position as a free agent parallels her natural ability,

45 This example also reflects Okorafor’s idea that marginalized people often have to learn from experts who hated
them: “This is something people of color, women, minorities must deal with more than most when striving to be the
greatest that they can be in the arts: the fact that many of The Elders we honor and need to learn from hate or hated
us” (Whitted 211, italics in original).
and is thus symbolically intertwined with her race and ethnicity. As Curry notes, “Thus, traitorousness is a mode of resistance that does not ignore the dissonance accorded by multiple identification but in fact actively seeks to exploit the traitor’s ‘view from both sides’ in order to activate the privilege-cognisant scripts that will usher in more equal and empathetic social relations” (40). Sunny thus must move between the Leopard and the Lamb world, while on the outskirts of both, and is also able to move between the physical and spiritual world, underscoring her liminal position in multiple respects.

Entangled Worlds

Like in The Okay Witch, Okorafor uses both Sunny and the depictions of the Leopard and Lamb worlds in order to critique our world. Unlike The Okay Witch, however, the boundaries between the primary world and the secondary world are shown to be much more fluid, with secret pockets of the magical world showing up unexpectedly within the nonmagical world. The fluidity between spaces reflects Massey’s conception of space-time, which ultimately works to reimagine space and place as open, porous, and multifaceted—particularly important in this context given the colonialist perspective of Africa as uniform and static.46

Okorafor’s portrayal of Leopard Knocks, Nigeria, and the movement between them effectively materializes Massey’s definition of space-time. Leopard Knocks is the central

---

46 Okorafor’s portrayal of liminal spaces and Sunny’s negotiation with them also reflects Homi Bhabha’s definition of a Third Space in his 1994 book, The Location of Culture, which emphasizes the hybridity of cultures/places, and similarly resists “narratives of originary and initial subjectivities” (2). He says of the Third Space: “For a willingness to descend into that alien territory—where I have led you—may reveal that the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity. To that end we should remember that it is the ‘inter’—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the inbetween space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalist histories of the ‘people.’ And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves” (56, italics in original).
meeting place for the Leopard community in West Africa, but there are many other small magical pockets throughout Nigeria that appear in the novel. Leopard Knocks is shrouded in mist and is “on an island conjured by the ancestors,” which can only be accessed by a bridge that is “a patch of the spirit world that exists in the physical world” (Okorafor, Akata 65). When Sunny sees Leopard Knocks for the first time, it is described thus:

Huts stacked upon huts like hats at a hat shop. Not a European-style building in sight. All of this was African … All [the buildings] were decorated with white intricate drawings—snakes, squiggles, steer, stars, circles, people, faces, fish. The list of things was infinite … The buildings were crowded tightly together. Still, tall palm trees and bushes managed to grow between them, and a dirt road packed with people wound among the buildings. From somewhere nearby, up-tempo highlife music played. [Sunny] turned around and saw more people emerging from the mist. She stepped closer to Chichi, feeling like an intruder. (70-2)

The portrayal of the Leopard places are deeply rooted in Nigerian folklore and culture. This shows that, though the two communities are distinct with their own defining characteristics, they are also interconnected. It is clear throughout the book that the Leopard and Lamb communities are constantly affecting one another. For example, once Sunny is initiated, she begins to see various creatures in her house that she had not seen previously, such as ghost hoppers47 (Okorafor, Akata 109). The “leakage” of creatures, people, objects, and even weather, makes clear that a place is made up as much by its inhabitants as by its physical landscapes. The social and the material thus become—with each other—people, animals, and objects do not merely exist within the space, but actively create it as well. As Williams says, “In the Leopard world that

---

47 Ghost hoppers are a magical creature—a sort of insect—that exist throughout the Lamb and Leopard worlds, but are only able to be seen by members of the Leopard community once they have been initiated.
Sunny inhabits in *Akata Witch*, animals and insects are part of the magic, as are the trees and rivers: Leopards live in a sentient world, where spirits and knowledge can be found everywhere” (15). Significantly, this works to undo Western dichotomies such as nature/culture.

Okorafor’s portrayal of space and place also rethinks the global versus the local, both in the Lamb world and in the Leopard world. The West—particularly the U.S. and Europe—are set up in opposition to Africa, specifically Nigeria. As Egbonike notes, Okorafor importantly flips the colonialist script, “present[ing] Africa as the site of a global power base in which Africa occupies the position of producer rather than consumer of knowledge” (144). She says, “The novel’s rootedness in social structures which predate colonial contact, re-presents Africa as the birth place and home to a powerful global institution. The narrative is located with the Aba area of Igboland, but extends its cartographies beyond Nigeria and continental Africa, seeking to disrupt the binary of ‘local’ and ‘global’ through the examination of and engagement with this transnational secret society” (150). The political situation in the Leopard community in Nigeria is also shown to be intimately connected to both the Lamb community and to the U.S. through the Black Hat.48 While the Black Hat is himself is a Leopard person and was trained by Sunny’s grandmother, he has been funded by the Lamb community, by the United States specifically, which has allowed him to execute his plan to bring forth Ekwensu: “Otokoto was a Nigerian oil dealer who did big business with the Americans. But he had greater aspirations than financial wealth, just as he sought more than just *chittim*.49 He wanted power. That remains his greatest hunger, and his hunger has opened him to terrible powers of the earth. There is a forbidden juju,

---

48 See Williams’s article, “Witches, Monsters, and Questions of Nation: Humans and Non-Humans in *Akata Witch* and *Trail of Lightning*,” for an analysis of how the West, particularly the U.S., presents in Okorafor’s novel (8-10). See also Egbonike’s article, “Re-Presenting Africa in Young Adult Speculative Fiction: The Ekpe Institution in Nnedi Okorafor's *Akata Witch*,” analysis of Okorafor’s incorporation of the African-American experience into the novel through Sasha’s character (150-1).

49 *Chittim* is the magical currency in the Leopard world. It is gained magically through gaining knowledge, whatever form that may take (reading, practical experience, performing juju, etc.).
a black juju … The juju is to bring the head of the centipede through—Ekwensu” (Okorafor, *Akata* 308). As Williams says, “the border between ‘us’ and ‘other,’ between self and monster, is flexible, traversable. In *Akata Witch*, for example, the Leopard and Lamb worlds are contiguous: one of the Leopard cities is just across the river from a Lamb town; the evil Leopard Otokoto, who preys on small Lamb children, learned much of his wickedness in the Lamb world” (16). Okorafor thus rethinks the boundaries between the global and the local, showing how the two necessarily inform one another, without losing the specificity of either.50

The spirit world and the physical world further contribute to the idea of the fluidity between spaces; additionally, the porosity between the two can be seen as a manifestation of how we think about “real” and “imagined” spaces in our world. Sunny’s relationship to the physical and spirit world very much mirrors her movement between the Lamb and Leopard worlds. As a Free Agent, she is largely ignorant of Leopard practices, experiencing culture shock and often feeling like an “intruder” (Okorafor, *Akata* 72). This also, of course, mirrors her relationship with Nigerian culture and American culture, which she constantly navigates in both Lamb and Leopard spaces. Like in the physical world, the spirit world (referred to as “the wilderness”) has a culture and landscape that defines it, as well as its own inhabitants that frequently move between physical and spiritual spaces.51 For example, the spirit world has its own language, Nsibidi, which is the magical language of the spirits (Okorafor, *Akata* 154). Though it is the language of the spirits, this language is not contained to the spirit world, and many of the

---

50 Williams argues that, “Motivated by commitments to both indigenous narratives and feminism, *Akata Witch* and *Trail of Lightning* register the possibility that ‘the local’ cannot be a model for the global without revision and re-imagination … In their abilities to find common cause, despite individual differences, these communities demonstrate a cosmopolitan ethos that embraces otherness—even in the shape of monstrosity—and amplifies women’s voices. These affiliative communities represent a shift away from kinship; they become ‘spheres of intimacy’, which reconfigure local allegiances into more flexible and complex spaces” (11-2).

51 Sunny’s (and Moth’s) liminal position between various spaces also resonates with Braidotti’s concept of the “nomad” and the “polyglot,” discussed in Chapter One.
symbols can be found on the buildings in Leopard Knocks. Sunny also speaks a word in Nsibidi at the end of the novel in order to send Ekwensu back to the spirit world, though the major showdown occurs at a gas station in the Lamb world: “Sunny knew she had only one word to speak. She spoke it in a language she didn’t even know existed. ‘Return,’ she said” (327). In fact, the spirit world is constantly influencing the events of the novel, showing that the two spaces are not disconnected at all. Before Sunny is even initiated, a being from the spirit world sends her a vision through the flame of a candle, showing her the end of the world. As Abok, one of the scholars tells her, “All free agents are what they always were—Leopard. And she is a child of the physical and spirit world. Sunny, you have friends and enemies in the spirit world, for before you were born you were a person of importance there … A friend or enemy of yours showed you that vision in the candle” (307). There are even pieces of the spirit world that overlap with the physical world, such as the bridge that leads to Leopard Knocks. In this way, Okorafor not only uses the spirit world to comment on the real world, but suggests that the spirit world is already present in our real world.

Associating the spirit world with “the wilderness” further works to undo the dichotomy between the immaterial and the material. Often, the wilderness, associated with nature, the female, and the “Other” is seen as supremely physical, and is defined in opposition to concepts such as culture, which are associated with the (male, white) Human (Plumwood 161-4, 215). By associating the wilderness with the spiritual and the immaterial, Okorafor thus resists upholding Western Humanist epistemologies. This portrayal also resonates with Nigerian (specifically Igbo) folklore, in which the land features prominently in Igbo folktales and culture, and is understood as a complex entity that becomes-with the entities that inhabit it, rather than as an empty, static container:
Tales told as true purport to offer factual information about the past of the land and the people among whom they are told. For the tellers, they epitomize the existential, sacerdotal, political, economic, and other aspects of the people’s relationships with one another and with the world around them. Thus, for example, in the Ibo term *akuko-àlà*,\(^{52}\) land (*àlà*) is not only understood to refer to the people’s habitat (usually contested space) agricultural land, economic property, and the political boundaries of a motherland or fatherland; it is also seen as representing the eternal relationship between the people and the earth as the source of their being and sustenance, a relationship honed in the veneration of the earth as the earth-goddess, exemplified among the Igbo by *àlà* (*Ànà, Ànị, or Álf*). (Azuonye 707).

This desire to question the dualism between the material and the immaterial (as well as the fantastic and the real) corresponds with Okorafor’s own view of her writing. In “Organic Fantasy,” she tells an anecdote of riding a Nigerian bus as a child. She says: “Why wouldn’t it be logical to illustrate myself literally changing shape when I write about this bus ride? My reaction certainly was just as physical as it was mental. And everything about that bus ride was fantastical and surreal. There was far more going on than what was on the surface. When I pull up this memory, I see Masquerades, ghosts, demons, fairies and spirits mixing with the mundane” (Okorafor 278). By refusing to uphold the dichotomy between the material and the immaterial, Okorafor emphasizes the porous nature between spaces as well as the vitality of those spaces. In doing so, she imagines a decolonizing, affirming quest narrative for girls—particularly girls of color—that resists the colonizing Western ideologies that have long been implicit in classic children’s quest narratives.

---

\(^{52}\) One of the two categories of Nigerian folktales. This category refers to “tales told as true” or “true tales” and in Igbo it translates to “tales of the land” (Azuonye 706).
Conclusion

Okorafor’s desire to show the connections between the material and the immaterial also relates to the binary between fantasy and reality, a dualism that has long been at the heart of fantasy studies and fantasy texts. Due to a long-standing dismissal in the academy of the fantasy genre as “escapist” or “disconnected from reality,” fantasy scholars have often argued for its validity by commenting upon the rich potential of the genre to construct imaginary worlds that have meaningful bearing on the real. This often has meant reading fantasy symbolically in scholarship, exploring how its depiction of imagined, secondary worlds are used to comment upon and critique our primary, real world, while occasionally imagining alternate possibilities to implement in our real world.

Although this is a useful line of argumentation—and is one that certainly applies in the case of the two books that I have analyzed here—it also comes directly out of Western, Cartesian, post-Enlightenment ways of thinking that endeavored to create stricter boundaries between science and magic, and by extension fantasy and reality. There is an anxiety that persists in fantasy scholarship that resists reading texts too literally, upholding a strict binary between fantasy and reality that mirrors the material/discursive binary of the linguistic turn. However, many non-Western epistemologies embody more fluid understandings of fantasy and reality, and

53 As Bado-Fralick notes in her 2009 chapter on magic in folklore, “Recent works have opened promising lines of inquiry, ways of thinking and writing about magic without simply dismissing, ridiculing, or explaining it away as scholars have traditionally done. Magic emerges as a ‘particular way of training the imagination’ (Magliocco 2004), a way of ‘developing and training the body-in-practice’ (Bado-Fralick 2005), a ‘de-centered perception, a natural aspect of mind, that enables an awareness of participation with other phenomena in the cosmos’ (Greenwood 2005), and a technique of ‘opening doorways to other realities through the senses’ (Hume 2007). Contemporary folklorists and anthropologists explore the world of magic as a stream of possibilities, a multiplicity of consciousnesses that leaves behind the limitations of Cartesian dualism and opens up possibilities for ‘consciousness as a process that is inclusive of body,’ as well as other beings in nature, and even perhaps an ‘intrinsic quality of a wider universe’ (Greenwood 2005: 5-6)” (380-1).
of the spiritual and the material. As Okorafor reflects in her article “Organic Fantasy,” understanding a story merely symbolically is not always enough: “I tend to wonder if there is more to these stories than metaphor and dreams. When visiting Nigeria, I once asked my granduncle if people could fly. Without a blink of an eye, he responded, ‘Of course people can fly!’ It wasn’t the first time I heard Nigerians speak of flying people in a literal sense” (280). In order for fantasy texts and fantasy scholarship to engage seriously with fantasy that draws on non-Western epistemologies, we must be willing to question the fantasy/reality binary that remains pervasive in a genre (and scholarship) that has been so historically white, male and West-centric. Such an approach is necessary in order to create a more inclusive, anti-sexist, anti-racist, and anti-colonialist space that better reflects the stories and experiences of marginalized girls. In doing so, we may be able to better imagine alternate, liberating narratives that have material consequences in the lives of girls: “This is the heart of organic fantasy. Like most forms of fantasy, it has to power to make something familiar strange … Organic fantasy, however, blooms directly from the soil of the real” (Okorafor, “Organic” 278).

***

In this chapter, I explored how two books’ depictions of liminal spaces and liminal girls worked both to critique our world, and to imagine alternate narratives and spaces for girls by undoing various dualisms inherent to Western ideology, including nature/culture, material/discursive, physical/spiritual, and reality/fantasy. Subverting these binaries is a necessary step towards making these narratives more authentic to the experiences of girls—particularly girls of color—who have been consistently othered by these self-same binaries that have served to colonize and marginalize them (e.g. adult/child, male/female, white/non-white, Western/non-Western, etc.). In this chapter, I explored how the authors subverted these
ideologies (to various degrees) through the ways the girl heroes negotiate their positions in-space and how they are shown to become-with the spaces they traverse. While *The Okay Witch* questions and critiques some of these binaries, it does so within a Western context, drawing on and subverting the existing archetypes in order to imagine a narrative that speaks to the doubled experiences of multiracial girls and girls of color. By comparison, *Akata Witch* offers an alternate framework altogether—that of Okorafor’s organic fantasy—in order to more authentically speak to the experiences of girls across non-Western and Western contexts. Though *The Okay Witch* effectively represents Moth’s continued liminal position and the powers implicit in such a position, *Akata Witch* does this and more by emphasizing the fluidity between the spaces, portraying the potential for the fantastical and the real to materially affect one another. They thus each offer distinct, alternate models that reimagine archetypal quest models, though both effectively speak to the varied experiences of girls.

This chapter looked at the portrayal of real and imagined spaces and the liminal girls that move between them; my next (and final) chapter considers the various mediums that are used to convey a story, and how these mediums matter. In this way, my next chapter both builds on this chapter by considering the real, material spaces/objects of the books themselves, and comes full-circle by returning to the idea this dissertation began with—that the types of stories we tell (and how we tell them) matter.
Chapter Four

Materializing the Language of Girls’ Quests

In her 2016 book, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Donna Haraway repeatedly asserts the idea that “It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories” (Haraway, *Staying* 12). In her book, Haraway emphasizes the importance of undoing entrenched Western dichotomies of male/female, linguistic/material, human/nonhuman, mind/body, and others, seeking a new, fundamentally different way to think the world with. Haraway draws extensively from Ursula K. Le Guin’s 1986 essay “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” which puts pressure on pervasive masculine, universalist, “Techno-Heroic” tales that feature a Hero who conquers and masters lands, objects, animals, and people. Le Guin instead argues for carrier bag stories: “I’m not telling that story. We’ve heard it, we’ve all heard about all the sticks and spears and swords, the things to bash and poke and hit with, the long, hard things, but we have not heard about the thing to put things in, the container for the thing contained. That is a new story. That is news. And yet old” (Le Guin 167). Haraway, citing and echoing Le Guin, notes, “A careful student of dragons, Le Guin taught me the carrier bag theory of fiction and of naturalcultural history. Her theories, her stories, are capacious bags for collecting, carrying, and telling the stuff of living: ‘a leaf a gourd a shell a net a bag a sling a sack a bottle a pot a box a container. A holder. A recipient’” (Staying 118). Drawing also from Bruno Latour and Anna Tsing, she argues instead for “Gaia stories,” “in which ‘all the former props and passive agents have become active without, for that, being part of a giant plot written by some overseeing entity.’ Those who tell Gaia stories or
geostories are the ‘Earthbound,’ those who eschew the dubious pleasures of transcendent plots of modernity and the purifying division of society and nature” (Haraway, *Staying* 41).

Haraway and Le Guin are essential starting points for this chapter, which explores the materiality of storytelling in its various mediums through two girl quests: Cornelia Funke’s 2003 novel, *Inkheart* and Nidhi Chanani’s 2017 graphic novel, *Pashmina*. I also draw extensively from book history scholar Johanna Drucker’s ideas on bibliographic alterity. Drucker questions the persisting colonizing ideologies underpinning the field of book history, and her approach seeks to fundamentally alter the way book history scholars conceive of the book as an object of study.

Though much of my analysis does pertain to *books* as they are normally understood—that is, a codex\(^1\)—my analysis also considers other storytelling mediums, including oral storytelling and the visual medium of the graphic novel.\(^2\) In the case of *Pashmina*, my analysis considers objects other than books (as the titular pashmina plays a central storytelling function). Though the field of book history is a bit of a misnomer and is certainly not limited just to books, it still does primarily focus on linguistic-based materials and mediums. For this reason, it is necessary to draw from other material culture scholarship. I primarily draw from *Artifactual Literacies: Every Object Tells a Story*, a 2010 book by education scholars Jennifer Rowsell and Kate Pahl, which defines the term “artifact” and usefully expands the definition of literacy. Though I find many of the ideas espoused in this book not incompatible with Johanna Drucker’s bibliographic

---

1 *The Broadview Introduction to Book History* (2017) defines codex as “a document, either printed or in manuscript, in which multiple sheets are stacked bound along a spine, and generally enclosed by a cover; i.e., the format of most modern books, as opposed to scrolls” (Levy and Mole 183).

2 Though the latter would also be classified as a book, due to its position as a primarily visual (rather than linguistic-based) medium, it warrants consideration as a separate medium—comics—as well (Postema xvi).
alterities, some of the usage of key terms (such as text, object, and artifact) can differ slightly between the two.

In this chapter, I explore the materiality of different forms of storytelling in *Inkheart* and *Pashmina*, analyzing how they contribute to the idea of reception as production and evaluating their efficacy to imagine alternate narratives for girl heroes.

**Thinking-with Carrier Bags, Bibliographic Alterities, and Artifactual Literacies**

At the root of Donna Haraway’s thinking is her conception of the term “SF,” which she defines as, “that potent material-semiotic sign for the riches of speculative fabulation, speculative feminism, science fiction, speculative fiction, science fact, science fantasy—and, I suggest, string figures” (“SF”). She introduces the term in her 2013 Pilgrim Award\(^3\) acceptance speech, “SF: Science Fiction, Speculative Fabulation, String Figures, So Far,” which she later expands on in her 2016 book, *Staying with the Trouble*. In her essay, Haraway acknowledges the potential for speculative fiction, science fiction, and fantasy to help us imagine other worlds and other possibilities. She gives a cursory definition of all the ways she uses SF, and how it has usefully produced different kinds of thinking for her. SF can stand in for a variety of related terms, such as string figures and speculative fiction. Through these terms and her writing style, Haraway begins to conceptualize other ways of thinking, writing, and doing research (which are, of course, all connected) that necessarily help to produce other ideas and worldviews as a result. She uses the image of string figures in particular to help model worlds and connections between beings in order to begin to see the world (or worlds) differently.

\(^3\) From the Science Fiction Research Association.
In *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Haraway calls for radical changes in how we do research and in how we conceptualize the world(s). Although Haraway’s work would likely be seen within the tradition of arguing for a posthumanist worldview, Haraway herself is interested in creating new terms for thinking through (with) these ideas. Rather than posthumanist, she argues for “compostist,” for example, arguing, “We are compost, not posthuman; we inhabit the humusities, not the humanities. Philosophically and materially, I am a compostist, not a posthumanist. Critters—human and not—become-with each other, compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time and stuff in sympoietic tangling, in ecological evolutionary developmental earthly worlding and unworlding” (*Staying* 97). By contending that “it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with,” Haraway demonstrates the way thinking differently, or not allowing our preexisting assumptions to determine how we write, research, think, and tell stories can help to imagine something new (12).

In this chapter, I am primarily concerned with the part of Haraway’s thinking that touches on reimagining ways of telling stories, and how the way we tell stories directly affects the types of stories we tell. Drawing on Le Guin, she questions the universalist masculine narrative that has been reproduced at multiple levels in Western culture—from research to fiction—arguing

---

4 Much of Haraway’s argument outlines her thinking on “companion species,” re-conceptualizing relationships between human and nonhuman entities, including animals, plants, and bacteria. Although this informs some of my thinking throughout my analysis, I do not engage with this part of her theory directly. While an exploration of the relationships between humans and nonhuman entities in girls’ quests (e.g. animals, mythical creatures, etc.) is warranted, that subject lies outside the purview of this project.

5 In their 2012 book, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, Mel Chen similarly attends to the materiality of language, taking a linguistics approach. On the materiality of language, they say, “But in spite of, or because of, the so-called linguistic turn … and the influence of poststructuralist thought, language in theory has in many ways steadily become bleached of its quality to be anything but referential, or structural, or performative … Words more than signify; they affect and effect. Whether read or heard, they complexly pulse through bodies (live or dead), rendering their effects in feeling and active response.” (53-4).
instead for new narratives to conceptualize our world that are multiple and site-specific. In this chapter, I am interested in exploring how these texts incorporate new ways of thinking in order to reimagine a genre—the heroic quest story—that has been historically rooted in white, Western, masculine, colonizing ways of thinking. Part of the way this is done is by commenting on storytelling itself in the text and attending to its materiality.

In Le Guin’s essay, she sets up the “carrier bag” as an alternate form of storytelling, contrasting it to the “Techno-Heroic” tales so prevalent in Western culture. She says:

It sometimes seems that the story is approaching its end. Lest there be no more telling of stories at all, some of us out here in the wild oats, amid the alien corn, think we’d better start telling another one, which maybe people can go on with when the old one’s finished. Maybe. The trouble is, we’ve all let ourselves become part of the killer story, and so we may get finished along with it. Hence it is with a certain feeling of urgency that I seek the nature, subject, words of the other story, the untold one, the life story. It’s unfamiliar, it doesn’t come easily, thoughtlessly, to the lips as the killer story does; but still, “untold” was an exaggeration. People have been telling the life story for ages, in all sorts of words and ways. Myths of creation and transformation, trickster stories, folktales, jokes, novels… (Le Guin 168)

Le Guin argues that these heroic tales have been historically masculine and linear: “So the Hero has decreed through his mouthpieces the Lawgivers, first, that the proper shape of the narrative is that of the arrow or spear, starting here and going straight there and THOK! hitting its mark (which drops dead); second, that the central concern of narrative, including the novel, is conflict; and third, that the story isn’t any good if he isn’t in it” (169). She instead offers up the bag as an

---

6 This resonates with Braidotti’s concept of “nomadic subjectivity” as well, discussed in Chapter One.
alternate model of storytelling: “I would go so far as to say that the natural, proper, fitting shape of the novel might be that of a sack, a bag. A book holds words. Words hold things. They bear meanings. A novel is a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us” (Le Guin 169). Haraway adds:

So much of earth history has been told in the thrall of the fantasy of the first beautiful words and weapons, of the first beautiful weapons as words and vice versa … In a tragic story with only one real actor, on real world-maker, the hero, this is the Man-making tale of the hunter on a quest to kill and bring back the terrible bounty … All others in the prick tale are props, ground, plot space, or prey. They don’t matter; their job is to be in the way, to be overcome, to be the road, the conduit, but not the traveler, not the begetter. The last thing the hero wants to know is that his beautiful words and weapons will be worthless without a bag, a container, a sack. (Staying 118)

In this chapter, I consider how these girls’ quests reimagine traditional heroic quest stories, to different degrees. One key way this is done in both texts is through their exploration of the materiality of storytelling.

Part of the idea that is central to Le Guin’s Carrier Bag Theory and emphasized further in Haraway’s conceptions of SF and tentacular thinking could be characterized as “reception as production.” Le Guin’s alternate model for storytelling is that of the receptacle: “a leaf a gourd shell a net a bag a sling a sack a bottle a pot a box a container. A holder. A recipient” (166). Haraway states this idea even more explicitly, saying, “string figures are thinking as well as making practices, pedagogical practices and cosmological performances” (Staying 14). This idea of thinking and making as interconnected is related to definitions of becoming-with versus being; Haraway says, “Ontologically heterogeneous partners become who and what they are in
relational material-semiotic worlding. Natures, cultures, subjects and objects do not preexist their intertwined worldings … The partners do not precede the knotting; species of all kinds are consequent upon worldly subject- and object-shaping entanglements” (Staying 12-3).7

This idea is echoed in Johanna Drucker’s conception of bibliographic alterities. Generally speaking, book history scholarship can be described as fitting one of two categories. The first follows a descriptive bibliography tradition, in which the book as a physical object is considered. The second school of thought is associated with the French Annales school, which extended the field to other areas including “commerce, politics, economics, and other aspects of book history that would not be immediately extractable from the object, but required analysis of account books, documents and records, and other historical materials” (Drucker, “Preliminary” 5). While this second method extends the field beyond the study of the book as a physical object in isolation, studies in this model still often perceive the book as an object in circulation—in other words, the object and the action remain essentially independent or isolated from one another. As Drucker notes in her 2014 article, “Distributed and Conditional Documents: Conceptualizing Bibliographical Alterities:” “Each, however, assumes the existence of a book as an object, a priori. But … [t]here may not be an object in play at all, only a distributed condition of literacy and/or semiotic communication across physical traces and inscriptional or productive apparatus” (16). Drucker summarizes the two trends in book history, defining book history overall as:

the explicit narrative discussion of the origins and development of the book (broadly considered), that emerges from the combined traditions sketched above: the study of classical and biblical texts and their transmission, the enumeration and description of books and collections, the analysis of the physical object and its production history, and,

---

7 It also resonates with Barad’s concept of intra-action rather than interaction.
more recently, engagement with the book as a cultural object whose meaning and value depend upon its use. (Drucker, “Preliminary” 5)

In her scholarship on biblio-alterity, however, Drucker questions the existing models of book history scholarship, and calls for a fundamental reconsideration of the field. She posits a decolonizing model of book history, one that resists the progressive narrative of “cultural development in which literacy moves from oral to written to print and then other communications media” (Drucker, “Preliminary” 9). As part of this she argues against using only books as the objects for study, arguing for an expansion of the field that studies a wide range of literacy technologies, including documents, digital media, and even oral transmissions. Importantly, rather than seeing books or other literacy technologies only as objects that represent history and culture, she sees them as artifacts, or agents that produce culture as well as represent it. She states:

Marking, making, inscribing, reading, are all aspects of a system of social and cultural production. A semiotic object does not sit inside it, like a gem in a setting, in a context-based model of object and conditions. Instead, the object is constituted, like an organism in a medium, as an effect of the very conditions that bring it into being. In the same way that cell walls and chemical/physical/biological processes create the conditions of semi-autonomy that define a living organism in an ecological system, the semiotic “object” is an effect of constitutive conditions in the culture of which it is an integral part. Its reception is a secondary act, provoked by the material traces of production, but reception is a primary act in so far as it constitutes a text or artifact as an event, a performative reading or engagement. (Drucker, “Distributed” 16-7)
Furthermore, she emphasizes not only the books in isolation, but how the reception of them works as a type of production as well; she says: “Finally, I would suggest that this model provides a different conception of artifacts (books, documents, works of textual or graphic art), one in which reception *is* production and therefore all materiality is subject to performative engagement within varied, and specific, conditions of encounter” (Drucker, “Distributed” 12-3).

Although Drucker’s methodology is my primary guide for this chapter, it is not quite enough on its own. While Drucker’s methodology does expand the purview for the field of book history studies, her focus still largely remains on text-based—or at least language-based—media. For this reason, I also draw from the methodology Kate Pahl and Jennifer Rowsell implement in their 2010 book, *Artifactual Literacies*. In their book, they use the terms object and artifact interchangeably, though the topic of their study focuses specifically on an artifact-based approach. They define artifact as “a thing or object” that “has physical features that makes it distinct, such as color or texture”; “is created, found, carried, put on display, hidden, evoked in language, or worn”; “embodies people, stories, thoughts, communities, identities, and experiences”; and “is valued or made by a meaning maker in a particular context” (Pahl and Rowsell 2).

Pahl and Rowsell set this definition of artifact largely in opposition to their definition of texts. They say: “texts are representations that are inscribed—written or drawn—as opposed to artifacts that are found, created, and made for a purpose. Texts have a more representational quality” (Pahl and Rowsell 4). They note that “artifacts bring in everyday life. They are material, and they represent culture” (Pahl and Rowsell 2). Though the distinction they make between artifacts and text-based objects (such as books, documents, etc.) is too strict for my purposes, I nonetheless do recognize some characteristic differences between text-based and non-text based
artifacts. While I agree that “texts are representations that are inscribed—written or drawn” I disagree that they cannot also be “found, created and made for a purpose,” or conceived of as artifacts themselves. Rather than focusing on the minutiae of these differences, however, my chapter is more interested in deconstructing this false binary between text and object. Instead, I aim to explore how these two works conceive of the materiality of storytelling within their respective storyworlds through multiple mediums, both linguistic-based and not.

In this chapter, I use the term “artifact” to refer to material objects that both produce and are produced by culture. This includes both text-based objects, such as books, and non-text-based, created objects. By “book,” I mean a codex (defined previously), which in this chapter includes both written novels and visual graphic novels. When I refer to “the text” I am using a literary definition of the term, which generally distinguishes the content of a book from the book as a material object (though there certainly can be some slippage between the two). 8

**Critiquing Quest Archetypes through Reception as Production in *Inkheart***

“Reception as production” is a central theme of Cornelia Funke’s novel, *Inkheart*. Originally published in German as *Tintenherz*, the book was translated into English for U.K. and U.S. audiences by Anthea Bell in 2003. 9 It was received well both popularly and critically. 10 It is

---

8 According to *The Broadview Introduction to Book History* (2017), the definition of a text or a work is: “A literary work (such as *King Lear*) may exist in multiple texts … In some cases, the differences between texts reflect changes in the *authorial intentions* for the work. In other cases, they reflect imperfections in the production of the text. Where several texts of a work exist, scholars debate whether they should be treated as different witnesses to the same work, or as different versions of the work, or as different works. In the first case, an *eclectic edition* could combine evidence from several texts to produce a new and better text of the work than any existing text. In the second case, an editor might edit two or more versions and present them on facing pages for comparison. In the third case, two different editions might be required” (Levy and Mole 201).

9 The book has since been translated into many languages, and has been translated into a total of thirty-seven different languages (Peschel).

10 Part of its popularity was likely due to the Harry Potter phenomenon. Published concurrently as the fifth Harry Potter book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, many fantasy books experienced heightened popularity as readers sought other fantasy series to read as they waited for the next Harry Potter book release.
worth noting that the English translation was particularly well-received by readers in the U.S., a
difficult feat for translated books in general.\textsuperscript{11} In my analysis, I focus on and quote from the
English version of the text, though I do bring some comparisons of the German text into my
discussion later.

The first of a trilogy (titled \textit{Inkworld}), the text follows twelve-year-old Meggie and her
father, Mo, on an adventure where the two of them (along with their other companions) run into
various book characters that have been magically read out of the books that originally housed
them. Most of these characters come from a mysterious book, also titled “Inkheart,”\textsuperscript{12} which
Meggie’s father accidentally read them out of when she was still very young, sending her
mother, Teresa, and their two cats \textit{into} the book in the process. Capricorn, the villain of both
“Inkheart” and \textit{Inkheart}, seeks to harness Mo’s ability in order to bring the “Shadow” out of the
book as well—a powerful, magical being that Capricorn weaponizes for his own ends. Other
companions join Meggie and Mo in their adventure, over the course of the story, including
Dustfinger—a fire juggler from the book “Inkheart” who desperately wants to return to his home
story—Elinor, Meggie’s great-aunt on her mother’s side who collects rare books—Farid, an
unnamed boy from “The Thousand and One Nights” who Mo accidentally reads out of the
story—and Fenoglio, an older Italian man who is the original author of “Inkheart.” About
halfway through the story, Meggie discovers that she has inherited her father’s ability to read
things out of books, at which point Capricorn aims to use her to read the Shadow into the world
instead of Mo. The text concludes with Fenoglio writing an alternate version of the story, which
Meggie reads (with some final assistance from her father), leading the Shadow to instead enact

\textsuperscript{11} It was popular enough to be adapted into a film in 2008 (originally produced in English), though the film was
poorly received and the rest of the trilogy was never adapted.
\textsuperscript{12} For clarity, I distinguish between the novel, \textit{Inkheart}, and the book within the book, “Inkheart,” by using italics
for the former and quotation marks for the latter—though of course the two do occasionally overlap.
vengeance on Capricorn, and dispersing most of Capricorn’s followers as well (Funke, *Inkheart* 509-10). Meggie and Mo are reunited with Meggie’s mother, who had since been read back out of “Inkheart” and forced into service as a maid to Capricorn (under the name “Resa”), losing her ability to speak as a result of this second transportation.\(^{13}\)

Although *Inkheart* is the first of a trilogy,\(^{14}\) I focus on this novel specifically because it is still largely a complete story on its own. While *Inkspell* and *Inkdeath* are more directly connected to one another, *Inkheart* resolves its central conflict, and both Capricorn and the Shadow are overcome by the novel’s conclusion. Though there are of course some loose ends that remain open, allowing for the possibility of sequels (such as Dustfinger’s ending, for example), the story is more-or-less neatly wrapped up. Funke even mentions on her official website that she originally only planned to write *Inkheart* and decided to continue the story with *Inkspell* and *Inkdeath* after the fact (Funke, *Cornelia*). Another, arguably more important reason for the selection is due to the transformation of Meggie’s character over the course of the series. *Inkheart* has a third-person limited omniscient style of narration. While it does not follow Meggie’s perspective exclusively throughout, Meggie’s perspective is the one the reader receives most frequently, effectively centering her in the narrative. As the books, progress, however, Meggie’s role is downgraded more and more, and the third book in particular has received criticism for forgetting its roots and for essentially sidelining Meggie to a romantic interest subplot, rather than focusing on her as the hero: “More disappointingly, the formerly feisty

---

\(^{13}\) Capricorn has employed another reader, Darius, who has some ability to read people and objects out of books, though his ability is more imprecise than Mo’s, and people and objects are often incomplete or altered in the process.

\(^{14}\) Funke recently announced that a sequel to the trilogy titled *Die Farbe der Rache* (The Color of Revenge) will be published sometime in 2021 in Germany (Funke, *Cornelia*). It’s unclear yet what exactly its contents will be, but seems plausible that the book will be more of a companion text set in the same universe as the *Inkworld* trilogy than a true, direct sequel. Since the book has not yet been published, I refer to the three existing, published *Inkworld* texts as a trilogy throughout this chapter.
Meggie, barely into her teens, has little to do but choose between two suitors. Funke seems to have forgotten her original installment was published for children” (Review of Inkdeath). As such, I selected Inkheart due to its complete story arc and its centering of Meggie as a girl hero.

Most scholarship on Inkheart and the rest of the Inkworld series attends to its position as metafiction, considering how the book engages the reader and how the presentation of reading and writing in the books comments on the relationship of the child reader and the adult author(ity). Claudia Nelson’s 2006 article, “Writing the Reader: The Literary Child in and Beyond the Book” examines a few metafiction children’s books (Inkheart among them), exploring what these books reveal about adult conceptions of child readers, as well as the way child readers in the text are shown to subvert adult authority. She says, “The metafiction discussed in the present article brings to light not only children’s readiness to enter into criticism of adult authority but also the awareness of this readiness on the part of certain adult writers and illustrators” (Nelson 233). Poushali Bhadury’s 2014 article, “Metafiction, Narrative Metalepsis, and New Media Forms in The Neverending Story and The Inkworld Trilogy,” by contrast, sees the portrayals of these transgressions in Funke’s texts as more ambiguous, saying, “While celebrating the power of the imagination, the ‘violence’ inherent in such transgressions also lays down the essentially negative, cautionary aspect of excessive imaginative play by the child reader” (302). Bhadury looks mostly at the latter two books in the series—Inkspell and Inkdeath—considering how Funke represents different types of both good and bad readers, through her attention to the materiality of books:

15 The Oxford English Dictionary defines “metafiction” as “fiction in which the author self-consciously alludes to the artificiality or literariness of a work by parodying or departing from novelistic conventions (esp. naturalism) and narrative techniques; a fictional work in this genre or style.”
Orpheus’\textsuperscript{17} model of bad readership—reflected here in his callously utilitarian attitude toward a story he loves, essentially mining it to serve his own interests … —is also pre-figured in the way he physically (mis)treats the books in Elinor’s library in \textit{Inkspell}. He mishandles the tomes and volumes he is surrounded by, paying attention only to their textual content so that he may edit the stories and wrest control of the narratives as an author. He is otherwise utterly uncaring about damaging the rare and precious books … Funke thus draws a clear connection between the two kinds of abuse one may perpetuate on books (considered in their imaginative capacity as well as their material dimensions), delineating how both instances starkly subscribe to models of bad readership. (Bhadury 305)

Bhadury’s article concludes by exploring how these texts encourage reader engagement similar to other new media forms: “I contend that these works of children’s metafiction invite their readers to (inter)actively engage with the story beyond just the book (i.e., codex) format, and implicitly gesture toward other media—commodities and spin-offs such as video games, films, etc.—via which one may also access them” (Bhadury 302). In the rest of this section, I draw attention to how \textit{Inkheart} emphasizes the materiality of reading and writing in various ways, showing how the text reflects Drucker’s concept of reception as production, analyzing how this attention to the material affects the narrative overall.

The materiality of books and of reading are central to \textit{Inkheart}. Funke often lingers extensively on the physicality of books and their significance to the experience of reading. This importance is portrayed early on through Mo’s job as a bookbinder; he restores old, deteriorating books for a living. Meggie “[doesn’t] think the word [bookbinder] describe[s] Mo’s work

\textsuperscript{17} The main antagonist of \textit{Inkspell} and \textit{Inkdeath}.
particularly well” and refers to him as a “book doctor” instead, which connotes the importance Meggie attaches to books and works to ascribe bodies to the books, emphasizing the care they require (Funke, *Inkheart* 13). Meggie and Mo constantly think about books as if they are living creatures, giving them a vibrancy that is not normally attributed to objects: “They were [Meggie’s] home when she was somewhere strange. They were familiar voices, friends that never quarreled with her, clever, powerful friends—daring and knowledgeable, tried and tested adventurers who had traveled far and wide” (Funke, *Inkheart* 15). The anthropomorphism used to describe the books importantly does not divest them of their materiality, as critics have pointed out can sometimes occur when non-human entities are given “human” characteristics.18 Instead, it further emphasizes the materiality of the books and works to construct them as material-discursive phenomenon that are entangled with the world and people around them.19 In the case of *Inkheart*, though the books and stories are frequently anthropomorphized, they are not literally seen as having a soul. Instead, the anthropomorphic language used to describe books and stories help to emphasize their materiality.20 In *Inkheart*, books and the experience of reading them are taken seriously and afforded vibrancy, while resisting the impulse of “humanizing” them—on the contrary, the books are still very much books.

---

18 Such as in certain talking animal stories, for example, where the animal characters are merely stand-ins for human people.
19 As Jane Bennett notes in her 2010 book, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, anthropomorphism has the (albeit, imperfect) potential to ascribe vibrancy to objects without further upholding anthropocentric values (120).
20 This also relates to Mel Chen’s definition of animacy, which builds off of Bennett’s work on the vital materialism of objects. Chen draws attention to the hierarchies implicit in language, in which certain subjects are seen to be more “alive” than others, while others are considered closer to death, and how this aligns with a hierarchy of being that places the (white, male, western, heterosexual, able-bodied) Human at the top, with other entities—such as women, people of color, animals, objects, etc.—falling progressively below this norm (5-13). In their book, Chen does not aim to “reinvest certain materialities with life, but to remap live and dead zones away from those very terms, leveraging animacy toward a consideration of affect in its queered and raced formations” (11).
In addition to attending to the books themselves, *Inkheart* emphasizes the materiality of storytelling and of reading. Importantly, it is the act of reading aloud that has the power to bring books to life in the story. Funke’s description of Meggie’s first attempt to magically read something from a book clearly portrays how important the act of reading (particularly aloud) is in the context of the narrative: “She shaped every word with her lips the way she had seen Mo do it, almost tenderly, as if every letter were a musical note and any words spoken without love were a discord in the melody. But she soon realized that if she paid too much attention to every separate word the sentence didn’t sound right anymore, and the pictures behind it were lost if she concentrated on the sound alone and not the sense” (Funke, *Inkheart* 284). Both the sounds of the words and the meaning of them are equally important to reading aloud effectively. Meggie finally successfully reads the character Tinker Bell out of the book *Peter Pan*. When she does so, we see that she balances the linguistic and the material as well as the imaginary and the real—she considers the physical embodied experience of reading the words, and pictures in her mind the meaning the words convey:

She let her finger run along the lines, over the rough, sandy paper, while her eyes followed the letters to another, colder place, in another time … *A moment after the fairy’s entrance the window was blown open*, whispered Meggie, hearing the sound of the window creaking as it opened, *blown open by the breathing of the little stars, and Peter dropped in. He had carried Tinker Bell part of the way, and his hand was still messy with fairy dust … “Tinker Bell,” he called softly, after making sure that children were asleep. “Tink, where are you?” She was in a jug for the moment, and liking it extremely; she had never been in a jug before. Tinker Bell. Meggie whispered the name twice; she had always liked the sound of it—you clicked your tongue against your teeth, and then there
was the soft B sound slipping out of your lips like a kiss. (Funke, *Inkheart* 363, italics in original)

This description of Meggie’s magical reading abilities emphasizes the materiality of the text and of the language used to make up the story, as well as the embodied experience of reading the story. As Mel Chen notes, “Language is as much alive as it is dead, and it is certainly material. For humans and others, spoken and signed speech can involve the tongue, vocal tract, breath, lips, hands, eyes, and shoulders. It is a corporeal, sensual, embodied act. It is, by definition, animated” (53). Funke draws a direct line from Meggie’s physical interaction with the book (scanning the text with her finger) to her embodied experience of reading the words aloud (the lingering over the pronunciation of Tinker Bell’s name) to the images and experiences Meggie imagines/creates as a result of the narrative (she hears the sound of a window creaking open, and it is ambiguous if this is actually occurring in Meggie’s world or only in *Peter Pan*). In doing so, *Inkheart* effectively shows the entanglement between the discursive and the material, constructing reading as a material-discursive phenomenon.

The issue of reception as production is central to *Inkheart*. Funke constantly emphasizes both the book as object and human engagement with it. Importantly, neither one comes at the expense of the other—neither the book as object, the narrative it contains, nor human engagement with it takes precedence. Not only does one not take precedence, but the way each of these elements constitute one another is emphasized throughout the text. As Bhadury notes, “While seeking to instruct her young audience in the life cycles of books, Funke complicates their awareness on the levels of interaction and complexity that may characterize one’s relationship with a book … shaking an unquestioning assumption that only the artifact and its

21 Nelson notes that Funke “suggests that the ability to read aloud others’ words well is a rare talent with considerable creative power of its own” (229).
consumer exists in an imaginative/interactive milieu, with no one else in the equation” (303). She does not convey the book as merely an object that is an enclosed entity that exists within a certain context, nor does she convey reading as a merely passive action where the reader is only a receptacle for the narrative (Drucker, “Distributed” 16-7). Instead, both “holders” or “bags” (to borrow Le Guin and Haraway’s terms) are thought of as producers as well as receivers. As a result, Funke clearly conveys Drucker’s concept of reception as production in which “the semiotic ‘object’ is an effect of constitutive conditions in the culture of which it is an integral part” and “reception is a primary act in so far as it constitutes a text or artifact as an event, a performative reading or engagement” (Drucker, “Distributed” 16-7). The depiction of the storyworld of “Inkheart” and the in-text author Fenoglio’s relationship with it is particularly telling in this regard. Fenoglio is the creator of “Inkheart,” which proves important in the narrative, and yet the level of his author-ity is continuously questioned throughout the text.22 Once outside of the text (and inside it as well),23 the characters do things outside of the boundaries of what Fenoglio has written. They are just as “real” as Fenoglio and he holds little power over them—Capricorn and his followers treat him with contempt and easily capture him as their prisoner: “‘But I am no ordinary prisoner, madam, let’s get that quite clear,’ [Fenoglio] roared. ‘Without me, none of this would exist at all, your own less-than-delightful self included.’ The Magpie cast him a final contemptuous glance” (Funke, *Inkheart* 482-3). By questioning Fenoglio’s authority, Funke emphasizes the vitality of the object. While Fenoglio’s position as the author is not unimportant, Funke makes clear that he is just a part of a larger storytelling phenomenon, engaging with the narrative and the characters he has created.

22 He is even transported into “Inkheart” *himself* by the conclusion of the story.
23 Nelson notes that Fenoglio completely loses his author-ity in *Inkspell*, “as his fictional creations increasingly go their own way and words refuse to do what he would have them do. He oscillates between despair … an overweening self-confidence … Both modes encourage the child reader to doubt him” (231).
The importance of the reader and of reading is constantly emphasized throughout the text, further emphasizing the concept of reception as production. Nelson suggests that the portrayal of reading and the reader in children’s metafiction conveys the message that “‘reading is fun. But a major reason why reading is fun, these authors suggest, is that it promises an alternative to and an escape from adult hegemony. These works of children’s metafiction figures story as rebellion, a rebellion that may extend even to the fictional adults’” (233). The relationship between the reader and the author is made especially clear at the novel’s climax where Fenoglio and Meggie concoct a plan to free themselves in which he writes a new ending to “Inkheart” and she turns it into a reality through her reading: “The point is Blodeuedd24 didn’t do what was expected of her. And that’s our new plan: Your voice and my words, beautiful, brand-new words, will see to it that Capricorn’s Shadow does not do what’s expected of him!” (Funke, *Inkheart* 422, emphasis in original). Interestingly, only Fenoglio seems to be able to write this change—or at least, the characters act as though this is the case—but he also needs Meggie to read the words. Ultimately, Meggie successfully reads the Shadow out of the book, changing it in the process:

“Yet one night, a mild and starlit night, the Shadow heard not Capricorn’s voice when it was called forth, but the voice of a girl, and when she called his name he remembered; he remembered all those from whose ashes he was made, all the pain and all the grief ... He remembered,” she read on in a loud clear voice, “and he was determined to be avenged—avenged upon those who were the cause of all this misfortune, whose cruelty poisoned the whole world ... Indeed, he wanted revenge,” Meggie read on. If only her voice weren’t

---

24 The allusion Fenoglio makes here is to a tale from Welsh mythology in which Blodeuedd is a woman created entirely from flowers by the magician Gwydon for his nephew who is cursed to die if he ever touches a woman. Blodeuedd, however, falls in love with another man after she is created and together they kill Gwydon’s nephew. Gwydon then transforms Blodeuedd into an owl, “and to this day all owls sound like a weeping woman” (Funke, *Inkheart* 421-2).
shaking so much, but it wasn’t easy to kill, even if someone else was going to do it for her. “So the Shadow went to his master and reached out to him with ashen hands…” (Funke, *Inkheart* 509, italics in original).

While Meggie successfully calls forth and alters the Shadow with her words, she has trouble delivering the final lines, reluctant to be the one responsible for killing Capricorn. Mo takes over for her, reading the lines, “And Capricorn fell down on his face, and his black heart stopped beating, and all those who had gone burning and murdering with him disappeared—blown away like ashes in the wind,” and together they successfully prevail over Capricorn and save those who would have been his victims (Funke, *Inkheart* 510, italics in original). This example drives home an idea prevalent throughout the text—that of the reader’s creative power when interacting with an author’s work. Indeed, the boundary between author and reader is frequently blurred—earlier in the novel Fenoglio rewrites the ending to Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Steadfast Tin Soldier,” a text for which he is primarily a reader as he is not the original writer. Meggie decides to become a writer herself at the end of the novel: “She wanted to learn to make up stories like Fenoglio. She wanted to learn to fish for words so that she could read aloud to her mother without worrying about who might come out of the stories and look at her with homesick eyes.

So Meggie decided words would be her trade … As Mo had said: writing stories is a kind of magic, too,” (Funke, *Inkheart* 534). This example further emphasizes the connection between readers and writers, as well as the slippery boundary between the two. It furthermore underscores the ethical implication of the stories we tell—that the stories we tell matter—as Meggie’s wish to become an author comes from a desire to tell stories that do not cause pain to the stories’ subjects.
In addition to the creative powers of the reader and author, the storyworld of “Inkheart”—in other words, the text/book itself—is ascribed a vibrancy of its own. The storyworld seems to exist beyond both the reader and the author, as the world inside the book changes its trajectory when characters and objects are brought in or out of it. This idea is emphasized through Meggie’s mother, Resa, who experiences the world of “Inkheart” after several of its essential characters—Capricorn, his henchman, Basta, and Dustfinger—have left: “perhaps there really was something behind the printed story, a world that changed every day just like this one. I only heard of [Capricorn] there, [Meggie’s] mother wrote. They spoke of him as if he had gone away for a while. But there were others just as bad. It’s a world full of terror and beauty” (Funke, Inkheart 529). In addition to the storyworld and its inhabitants having a vitality of their own, there is acknowledgement of the fact that much more goes into making a text than author and reader alone. While I have already mentioned the attention paid to Mo as a bookbinder,25 perhaps the most telling example is the description of some of the images in “Inkheart.” One especially interesting example is the image of an unnamed woman who looks quite a lot like Meggie’s mother; Mo describes the image, saying, “There was a picture in Inkheart … It showed a group of women standing under an arched gateway, in splendid clothes as if they were going to a party. One of them had hair as fair as your mother’s. You can’t see the woman’s face in the picture, she has her back turned, but I always imagined it was her” (Funke, Inkheart 263). Though Resa was not originally a part of the written story, it is heavily implied that the image is Meggie’s mother, which indicates the importance of images and illustrations in constructing a narrative as well. This importance has been frequently remarked upon, particularly

---

25 There is also extensive attention paid to Meggie’s great-aunt Elinor’s position as a book collector, thereby touching on another part of a book’s “life,” however delving into her role in the novel is outside the scope of this chapter.
in relation to picture books within children’s literature—illustrators of picture books add new elements to the narrative, shaping the story, sometimes adding whole subplots that are conveyed entirely visually, and sometimes even contradicting or questioning the written narrative through the visual one. Although “Inkheart” is decidedly not a picture book and is rather a book featuring illustrations, the importance of these images is still suggested through the example of Meggie’s mother. Though not directly commented upon by the text of “Inkheart,” the image of her further makes clear that there are other, unseen creative forces that shape the narrative—both in terms of the unnamed illustrator of “Inkheart” and in terms of the unnamed characters that exist as complete entities in the world of “Inkheart.”

Finally, even the position of the listener is portrayed as a creator in “Inkheart.” Though it is Mo and Meggie’s reading aloud that clearly affects changes to both their world and the “Inkheart” world, the experience of the listeners are again essential. It is notable that it is the listeners—people, animals, and even objects in the vicinity—that are drawn into the book. The characters that come out of the book similarly seem to “hear” the reader as they are called out it. When forced to read from “Treasure Island” for Capricorn to sate his desire for wealth, Mo purposefully misreads Long John Silver’s name, hoping to avoid accidentally bringing him out of the book; he says, “Yes, I thought that might help. Perhaps the savage old pirate won’t feel we’re calling to him then, I told myself, and he’ll stay where he belongs” (Funke, Inkheart 178). More telling though, is how the experience of the listeners is described. We see such an example through Meggie when she hears her father read aloud for the first time: “There was nothing but Mo’s voice and the pictures forming in their minds from the letters on the page, like the pattern of a carpet taking shape on a loom” (Funke, Inkheart 175). In this example, Funke again draws a
direct connection between receiving and creating; the listeners, responding to Mo’s speaking, create pictures of the story in their mind.

Unfortunately, in the case of *Inkheart*, while the message and premise of the book are strong, the narrative is somewhat lacking. In her review of the novel, Diana Wynne Jones asserts that “you feel an enormous prospect opening up, promising marvels … But this time I am not sure the promise is quite fulfilled, though the story is undeniably exciting” and she finds the characters to be flat, saying, “Meggie, the heroine, wobbles between spunkiness and helpless blankness” (Jones, “Leaping”). While the book tries to imagine a girl’s quest, it ultimately falls a little short. Though there is some desire to attend to Meggie as a girl hero—for example, Elinor notes of her bravery, “She wanted to compare Meggie to a hero from some story, but all the heroes she could think of were men, and anyway none of them seemed to her brave enough for a comparison with the girl standing there”—it is telling that her character is sidelined in future novels in the trilogy (Funke, *Inkheart* 496). Although this novel concludes with Meggie desiring to become an author, this dream never comes to fruition in the course of the series, and Meggie is mostly denigrated to a stereotypical marriage plot. This omission and sidelining is less surprising when juxtaposed with some of the issues of gender and authorship in the novel however. For example, though it seems likely that Fenoglio is meant to mirror the author, Funke, through the paralleling of their last names, it is fairly telling that the stand-in for the author is a quintessential “author” figure (e.g. male, and a bit older) rather than reflecting Funke herself or imagining alternate possibilities. While Nelson suggests that *Inkheart* “chronicles a loss of voice, and thus of agency, on the part of both of Meggie’s parents” and that it depicts, in general, Meggie’s (and by extension, children’s) ascension to power while adults lose their author-ity, I argue that the issue is actually more complicated in the text (Nelson 232). While Funke is very interested in
exploring the power of the reader, Meggie’s creative power tends to be more talked about than truly shown. For example, though Meggie reads the climatic rewriting of Inkheart to Capricorn, she neither writes the pages herself (they are written by Fenoglio) nor does she make any changes to the words while she is reading them, which feels like a missed opportunity to explore her own power and creativity. Furthermore, the final sentence to successfully bring about Capricorn’s end is read not by Meggie but by her father, clearly as a desire to protect Meggie’s childhood innocence. This point notwithstanding, it is hard to ignore the symbolism present in the image of her father taking over control of reading the book—thus controlling the narrative—however kind and well-intentioned his actions may be in the context of the plot.

Finally, the depiction of Meggie’s mother, Resa, further speaks to this erasure of women’s voices and narratives. Read into the book by her husband, and back out of the book by Capricorn’s inept reader, Darius, Resa literally loses her voice in the process. Given her frequent narrativized position, the loss of her voice in the process is symbolic of the lack of women’s and girl’s voices in the written word. Though this may very well be intentional commentary on Funke’s part, it is still nevertheless disappointing that alternate models of storytelling are not imagined. While Funke offers critiques of male quest narratives through Meggie, and even comments on the erasure of certain stories, ultimately there is little imagining for alternate forms of narrative that offer girls and women different roles than those that have pervaded prototypical masculine texts for centuries.

---

26 In addition to Resa’s voice loss, Funke also comments throughout the novel on those stories that never get told, that are lost to time: “Several times the beam of headlights fell on ruined houses, but Elinor didn’t know stories about any of them. No princes had lived in those wretched hovels, no red-robed bishops, only farmers and laborers whose stories no one had written down, and now they were lost, buried under wild thyme and fast-growing spurge” (113).
Crafting Personal and Cultural Histories through Feminine Creativity in *Pashmina*

By contrast, 2017 *Pashmina* by Nidhi Chanani, similarly portrays the idea of reception as production, while emphasizing girls’ and women’s creativity in the process. The graphic novel centers around a sixteen-year old Indian-American girl named Priyanka (who frequently goes by Pri) and her journey towards self-discovery and self-acceptance by way of her mother’s pashmina. In the graphic novel, Priyanka constantly asks her mother questions about her ancestry which she refuses to answer, questions pertaining both to her absent father and to India—a country Priyanka can only access in mediated forms, through stories from her mother and through books and tourist pamphlets about India. Eventually, she comes across her mother’s pashmina stowed away in an old suitcase. She puts the pashmina on, and it magically transports her into a colorful, idealized version of India. She continues to put the pashmina on several more times, growing more curious about India and her own origins. Her mother eventually relents, allowing Priyanka to travel to India to visit her *mausi.* Once there, however, the pashmina’s magic stops working. Through her quest to find the origins of the pashmina, Priyanka discovers that it is a gift from the goddess, Shakti, and that it allows women and girls to see their choices in life. The story ends with Priyanka giving the pashmina to her *mausi* to pass down to her daughter—though once the daughter is born the shawl is picked up by a different, unnamed woman cleaning in the hospital. Priyanka herself returns home to her mother with a new understanding of herself, her mother, and India, reconciling with her mother and creating a comic of her own, “Pashmina,” which details her journey.

In this my analysis of the text, I consider the pashmina as an artifact in all of the forms it appears: as the material object of the pashmina shawl that is central to the graphic novel; as the

---

27 Hindi for aunt.
graphic novel “Pashmina” that Priyanka creates within the narrative; and as the graphic novel, 
*Pashmina* by Nidhi Chanani. In my definition of artifact, I draw from Pahl and Rowsell’s 
definition in *Artifactual Literacies*, as mentioned previously. They define artifacts as “a thing or 
object that has the following qualities: has physical features that makes it distinct, such as color 
or texture; is created, found, carried, put on display, hidden, evoked in language, or word; 
embodies people, stories, thoughts, communities, identities, and experiences; is valued or made 
by a meaning maker in a particular context” and further note that artifacts are material and 
represent culture (2). They expand the definition of literacy, understanding it as material, 
situated, and multimodal: “By thinking about literacy as multimodal, it becomes a wider 
experience of not just words on the page, but the feel of the page, the sound of a voice talking, 
the curve in a drawing. Literacy, as a multimodal practice, is material” (5). They also distinguish 
artifacts from texts, saying: “we use the word *texts* to mean books, writing, physical 
manifestations of ideas. Texts are representations that are inscribed—written or drawn—as 
opposed to artifacts that are found, created, and made for a purpose. Texts have a more 
representational quality” though they do acknowledge that “texts can be both multimodal and 
have material qualities, since they contain words and images and these both work together to 
create meaning” (Pahl and Rowsell 4). As mentioned previously, this dichotomy is too strict for 
my purposes. Not only can books be considered artifacts due to their position as created objects 
themselves, but in this chapter, I am specifically interested in exploring works that push at the 
boundary between text and object.

Furthermore, the comics medium further resists such distinctions. In her 2010 book, *Graphic 
Women*, Hillary Chute looks specifically at women’s graphic autobiographies, noting that many 
of them “are rigorously handmade … call[ing] attention to their crafted-ness throughout, to their
hand-drawn images and hand-formed moments” (11). She also notes that the comics medium “offers a constant self-reflexive demystification of the project of representation” (9). While this self-reflexivity is certainly possible in other mediums—and is not present in every comics text—the form does seem to have some affordances that make this self-reflexivity a common trend in many comics. As Baetens and Frey note, “storytelling cannot be separated from its inherent materiality; the form is critical” (164). Thus, in my use of the word “text” I continue to draw on the book history definition cited previously, though I find Pahl and Rowsell’s definitions of artifacts and literacies productive for my analysis.

While *Inkheart* celebrates storytelling through the novel’s emphasis on reading and writing, *Pashmina* opens this up even further by emphasizing orally transmitted stories, artifactual literacies, and the comics medium, which is a primarily visual medium (Postema xiii, xvi). As Drucker notes, a decolonial approach to book history and bibliography must resist the colonizing narrative of “progression” in which cultures “progress” from oral to written to print, thus privileging inscribed texts and literacies over other forms of literacy (Drucker, “Preliminary” 9). Drucker cites an example in “Robert Fraser’s *Book Through Postcolonial Eyes* (2008) [which] opens with a case study of printing in India that leapfrogged from oral to print,

---

28 While Chute attends to women’s autobiographies specifically, this can certainly be true of other types of narratives told through the comics medium, and it certainly applies to *Pashmina*, which is a fictional autobiography of sorts.

29 As I discussed in Chapter Three, Baetens and Frey also note the ways in which graphic novels tend to foreground space due to their visual representations of the setting, but also—and more importantly—due to the necessary attention to the material composition of the graphic novel itself. They say: “the sheet of paper or the computer screen on which the artist is working is always a space itself, whose characteristics cannot be wiped out at the moment of publication, as is normally the case in modern verbal narratives, where the final format of the book does not censor only the hand of the author but also the spatial and visual specificities of the surface on which the work literally has been written” (167).

30 As Barbara Postema notes in her 2013 book, *Narrative Structure in Comics*, though many comics do rely on linguistic codes and the interplay between the linguistic and the visual, “all comics employ visual codes” (xvi).
upending the fallacy of a single progressive model” (Drucker, “Preliminary” 9). Indeed, the privileging of the written word is a Western concept in itself and is not common to all cultures.  

I do not mean to suggest that written texts are not considered important in an Indian or Hindu context, or in Asian cultures more generally—on the contrary. As Drucker notes:

Scroll and print production flourished in the Far East in the production and copying of Buddhist prayers, Hindu manuscripts, and legal, administrative, and literary documents. Knowledge of woodblock printing, paper production, and other technologies used for the printing of texts in China and India, was not transferred to Europe during this period [the middle ages]. It is important to keep in mind that literate communities in the Indian subcontinent were well established at this time, as they were in China (Drucker, “Chapter 4” 1).

Indeed, the invention of paper took place in China around 105 C.E. and wood-block printing was used to produce Buddhist texts as early as the 11th Century—several centuries before printing became widespread in Europe (Drucker, “Chapter 5” 2-3). Paper-making began in India in the 13th Century, and the earliest known grammar books are also Indian (Drucker, “Chapter 5” 4). Still, the reverence towards the written word looks different since Eastern religions and

31 This emphasis in the West, specifically in English-speaking cultures is not unrelated to the pervasive influence of monotheistic, Judeo-Christian religions that emphasize sacred texts, specific doctrines, and the word of God. As Drucker notes, “The Christian philosophy of the word, conceived in connections between the archetypal book (of God) and the metagraphic book (of communication), was embedded in the Franciscan view of writing and book” (Drucker, “Preliminary” 9). The history of the written word in alphabetic languages, such as English, and Western print culture are deeply entwined with Christian theology and ideologies in particular, as many medieval illuminated manuscripts were reserved for religious texts that were deemed sacred and important enough to warrant the use of such expensive resources (Drucker, “Chapter 4” 2-3). In the West “from the fourth century, the compact, portable codex (manuscript volume) had replaced the single-sided scroll as the predominant book form, a development closely linked with the expansion of Christianity” (Demers 3). This trend continued with the spread of printing in Europe following Johann Gutenburg’s printing press in the 15th Century, which innovated existing printing technology. Religious texts continued to be some of the most produced, now both for wealthy and poorer audiences since cheap print made texts more widely accessible (Drucker “Chapter 5” 8).
philosophies are so different from Judeo-Christian ideologies. Even terms like “Hinduism” or “Shaktism” themselves are a bit of a misnomer in that they tend to imply a shared doctrine or belief system (akin to Christianity) that is more uniform and unified than they actually are in practice. Instead, Hinduism or Shaktism tend to be more fractured and even contradictory, with many different ways of believing, thinking, and practicing coexisting at once. Furthermore, these differing or “contradictory” ways of understanding Hinduism are often found in the same person—attempting to find one universal “Truth” is simply not of concern for many Hindus. As June McDaniel says of Shaktism in her 2004 book, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls: Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal*: “Monism, monotheism, dualism, polytheism, henotheism: all of these are legitimate positions in Shaktism, and each is widely held; sometimes more than one position is held at a time” (5) She later adds that “although we can find pure examples of these styles of Shaktism, the cultural tendency is to mix and match, and most of these will be seen in combination with other types of Shaktism, as well as other forms of Hinduism and even other forms of religion” (13).

---

32 It is worth noting that there are some groups who are interested in solidifying these beliefs and drawing lines over what “counts” or does not. For example, McDaniel notes of tantric Shaktism (one strand of Bengali Shaktism), that there is a divide between folk or popular tantra and classical or scholastic tantra. The former emphasizes ritual practice and is largely an oral tradition; many practitioners are illiterate, and when texts are used they tend to be taken literally. The latter emphasizes texts, which are usually understood metaphorically (9-10). There is also a gender divide here, as the latter tend to be mostly men, whereas more women practitioners are found in folk or popular traditions. There is also a desire in Shaktism to differentiate between a “true” Shakta and a “false” one, which again is divided along class/caste and education lines. McDaniel says, “From this brahmanical perspective, often found among many Western-educated Shaktas, the boundaries of true Shaktism extend to the educated elite and their followers, but can include any people with philosophical knowledge and a universalist perspective. There is a subtle political claim here, basically that the rational and educated elites of all countries and faiths are closer to each other than members of the folk tradition and the elite classical traditions of the same country, even if they worship the same deity” (18). I would speculate that some of this push to draw these lines and essentially canonize these beliefs comes in part from India’s post-colonial context and the influence of the West. In order to make Hindu or Shakta beliefs and practices legible to Western audiences and Western-based systems of power, solidifying or defining what it means to be Hindu is a sometimes necessary response in order to protect and preserve Hindu culture.
Pashmina follows in and draws inspiration from this tradition. Shaktism is of particular relevance for this text, as the goddess Shakti plays a major role in Priyanka’s quest. June McDaniel defines Shaktism simply as “goddess worship” and goes on to note that there are two main types of Shaktism, which are divided geographically: south Indian worship of the goddess Shri or Lakshmi and worship of the goddess Kali in northern and eastern India, such as West Bengal, Assam, Bihar, and Orissa. This latter type of Shaktism focuses on “the goddess as the source of wisdom and liberation … Kali, Tara, and sometimes Durga are the main forms of the goddess in this tradition, and there are ten different forms of Kali that are worshiped … There is also worship of both local and pan-Indian goddesses … All of them may be understood as aspects of Shakti, the feminine power of creation and transformation.” McDaniel’s book focuses on Shaktism in West Bengal specifically, which includes three types of strands of Shakta belief and practice itself: folk/tribal Shaktism, tantric/yogic Shaktism, and Shakta bhakti, the last of which she further categorizes into four subtypes. It makes some sense to consider Bengali Shaktism for Pashmina specifically, as at least some of her ancestors seem to come from there, and her mausi is currently living in Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal, though overall Chanani draws on Shaktism rather broadly. Chanani states of the spirituality of the story that, “As much as there are religious components to Pashmina, I don’t think of that first. I really think of it as a feminist story, and I believe gods and goddesses are feminists” (Makhijani). In the case of Pashmina, spirituality and cultural tradition are not antithetical to a feminist narrative as they are sometimes conceived, particularly in mainstream feminism. Feminine creativity pervades the

---

33 Notably, many people who believe or practice Shaktism may not identify themselves as such for a few reasons: “It is also difficult to determine who is a Shakta because people often do not define themselves in this way … Some people are secret Shaktas, unwilling to admit their faith because it is not as well accepted as Vaishnavism or Shaivism … Some people have Shakta tantric family priest (kula gurus) but claim to be personally agnostic or atheist. Some people have a goddess as their personal deity (ishta-devata), but may keep other deity images in the house for public worship” (McDaniel 16-7). Shaktism can also be understood loosely as a subset of Hinduism—the main distinction is the particular attention to goddess worship emphasized by the term Shaktism.
graphic novel through various mediums as well. For example, there is the magical pashmina originally made by Rohini, Priyanka’s “Pashmina” graphic novel she completes by the end, the stories Priyanka’s mother tells her, the school Priyanka’s mausi taught at in Kolkata, as well as the creativity present in mothering and motherhood both from creating life and from raising a child (in this case, specifically daughters). In response to a 2017 interview question asking if *Pashmina*, a “story about the intersection of power, community and identity,” is best told in comic form, Chanani replies:

I think the question sometimes presumes that comics is better than other mediums. But it’s simply another medium to me. I do believe it has merits that are different than others. I believe there are access points to comics that traditional prose cannot touch. I don’t limit myself to comics. I want to explore all mediums. And within anything, I do want to challenge things and hopefully create dialogue and a narrative that goes beyond the page. 

(Makhijani)

In the case of *Pashmina*, the comic form certainly offers something to the narrative that may not have been possible in other mediums; however, Chanani resists the impulse to replace one hierarchy with a different one, emphasizing the affordances of different mediums through their materiality.

Not only does *Pashmina* resist privileging certain mediums over others, but it even portrays the boundaries between mediums as fluid. While it is true that different mediums offer certain possibilities and potentialities that are specific to their form, *Pashmina* successfully conveys the idea that the knowledge learned in one form can be transformed and translated for
use in another form. For example, the shared cultural histories, memories, and stories of women in/from India are conveyed orally, which transmutes to the pashmina, which further transmutes to Priyanka’s graphic novel “Pashmina” at the end. Priyanka even becomes a physical part of this history herself. After one of her encounters with the pashmina, she finds that a strand of her hair has become thread; she thus physically embodies the pashmina and has become a part of its story herself (Chanani 58) (see Figure 4.1). A conversation between Priyanka and her mom after she returns from India further speaks to this shared history. Although Priyanka has had the thread in her hair for the majority of the novel, none of the characters comment on it or seem to notice it—until Priyanka’s mother admits that she had always known that Priyanka had found the pashmina due to its presence in her hair (154) (see Figure 4.2). The thread in Priyanka’s hair blurs the boundaries between her own body and the pashmina, emphasizing the material connections between them. Her mother’s ability to recognize this connection speaks not only to her own connection to the pashmina, but to the shared (and yet, still individuated) history between this lineage of Indian women.

34 This resonates with Winnicott’s theory of transitional objects, specifically the idea that the experience of the transitional object remains and is experienced through the imagination, even after the object itself has lost meaning (19).
Figure 4.1: The thread appears in Priyanka’s hair

Figure 4.2: Priyanka’s mom admits to knowing that Priyanka found the pashmina

*Pashmina* also conveys the transmission of narrative through the object of the pashmina, emphasizing its materiality in doing so. A pashmina is “a multipurpose, oblong piece of woven fabric that is used most often as a dress accessory for women” (Betrabet Gulwadi 227).

The yarn is made out of *pashm*, or fine wool, carefully combed from *changra*, or domestic Asian mountain goats, usually after winter has passed. The harvested wool goes through dehairing, scouring, and bleaching before it is hand spun or machine woven to produce the pashmina textile. Shawls made from handspun yarn are superior in quality, feel (softness), and life span when compared with those created from machine-spun yarn. The fine yarn is often woven from the delicate fiber using plain, twill, or diamond weave and is dyed using natural (e.g., vegetable or saffron flower) and chemical dyes. (227)

It is worth noting that the term “pashmina” is sometimes used to almost interchangeably with the word “shawl,” referring to a specific article of clothing. However, since Kashmir Pashmina received a Geographical Indication (GI), becoming one of the registered protected products in 2008 under the Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration & Protection) Act, 1999, the term specifically refers to the textiles made from the specific wool (a form of fine cashmere) of the *changra* goats who live in the Himalayan foothills (227-8). In the case of the graphic novel, the characters use the term in its popular usage, referring generally to an Indian shawl. The pashmina does not seem to be a “true” pashmina as its origins are not in Kashmir and it is stated as being made of silk rather than wool. Though not without its problems, Chanani seems more

---

35 Geographical Indication is “a name or sign used on certain products that corresponds to a specific geographical location” (“Kashmir”).
36 As best I could tell, Kashmir Pashmina received a GI in 2008, as an article from the *Hindustan Times* published in 2008 reported on the recent registration.
37 I am indebted to a 2019 blog entry by artist Aditi Raychoudhury titled, “Pashmina by Nidhi Chanani: An In-Depth Look at a Misnomer” for making me aware of this discrepancy in the name. She critiques the graphic novel for its use of the term, arguing that a different name would be more authentic as the histories of textile production in India are site-specific and can vary from state to state (Raychoudhury). While the question of authenticity is outside both my area of expertise and the focus of this chapter, it seems a valid critique to make of the graphic novel’s representation. For one, there are very real consequences for those making Kashmir Pashmina, as imitation pashminas threaten the subsistence of the indigenous artisans and craftspeople (Bettrabet Gulwadi 228). The
interested in establishing connections between the gendered history of textile production in India at large to other forms of feminine creativity across time and place.

The pashmina within the graphic novel is made out of Sualkuchi silks from Assam, which the area is famous for. It was made by a woman named Rohini Mitra, who worked in a factory in Warangal, which is currently located in the state of Telangana (a state founded in 2014), but it was formerly a part of Andhra Pradesh. A major part of Priyanka’s quest involves tracking down the origins of the pashmina in order to better understand her culture, the legacy of women’s creation and narrative that she is a part of, and, through these ultimately, herself.

Jacqueline Reid-Walsh, drawing on scholarship of Althinodoros Chronis and John Urry, explores the concept of artifactual memory in her 2013 chapter, “Artifactual Memory: Fragmentary ‘Memoirs’ of Three Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Moveable Books about their Child Owners,” saying:

[Chronis] cites the work of John Urry (1996) about how societies collectively remember the past, how a wide range of artifacts—from buildings to people’s personal possessions—carry a kind of memory through their material form as objects. Urry (1996) observes that objects as embodied memories involve multiple senses so that the interpretation of the artifacts is through bodily experience. According to Chronis, engaging with the objects by sight and, if possible, by touch creates a synesthetic effect that provides an emotional experience. (197)

registering of Kashmir Pashmina as a GI is part of the effort to protect this intellectual property. On the other hand, it seems plausible that many Indians and Indian-Americans especially might not make such a distinction in casual conversation, particularly given pashminas’ and shawls’ complicated place in the history of British colonization and imperialism, in which cashmere shawls became hugely sought after, and there were many (largely failed) attempts to replicate them elsewhere (Geczy 264; Betrabet Gulwadi 226-227).
She further goes onto note that, “In order to give voice to these artifacts, I anthropomorphize the moveable books themselves as rememberers who can narrative their life stories” (Reid-Walsh 198). This is precisely what happens in the case of *Pashmina*. Once Priyanka makes her way physically to the place of where the shawl was created, Rohini comes out of the pashmina to tell her the story of how the pashmina was made. Due to the injustice the women workers experience while working at the factory, they decide to raid the factory, stealing silks, though they quickly become enraged and the building catches fire. Receiving a vision from the goddess Shakti in the flames, Rohini, at Shakti’s instruction, uses golden silk to weave together and embroider the pashmina (Chanani 142-5) (see Figure 4.3). By centralizing the pashmina’s origin story, Chanani not only animates the object, but she also emphasizes its own creative potential for conveying stories, showing Rohini, Priyanka, and the pashmina’s shared history in doing so.

Figure 4.3: Rohini makes the pashmina
While many white, Western new materialists have largely avoided using the concept of “the soul” due to its associations with Cartesian dualism that clearly separates the mind/body, as Rosemary Jolly and Alexander Fyfe note in “Introduction: Reflections on Postcolonial Animations of the Material” (2018), non-Western epistemologies have conveyed materialist ways of thinking for centuries, and such ideologies often embrace animism as a way of attending to the material:

The complication here is that, as Zoe Todd points out in no uncertain terms, the notion of objects as not inert matter, and humans and objects as co-constitutive within force-fields such as the climate, is a multigenerational, centuries-old concept of numerous Indigenous and Aboriginal groups. At issue is the fact that when Cartesian intellectuals live alongside colonized peoples for whom the Enlightenment is an element of their oppression, and not replacement for their non-Cartesian beliefs, the inadequacy of the Cartesian regime to the complicated dimensions of what that regime putatively calls the object, is bound to rub off on erstwhile Cartesians at some point over 400 or more years. (297)

Pashmina draws from these types of epistemologies through its inclusion of beliefs and practices of Shaktism. For example, in folk Shaktism goddesses reveal themselves to people, often in rocks or other natural objects (McDaniel 8). A goddess may also “appear in the form of an old woman, whose knowledge is reflected in her years … as Old Woman, she teaches tribal traditions and gives revelations” (9). In folk Shaktism, “encounter[s] with the goddess may occur in dream or vision, and on rare occasions results from reading books” (McDaniel 9). These ideas are conveyed visually in Pashmina as well. The images Rohini embroiders on the pashmina are significant as they clearly tell her/its story as well: we see images of fire and the goddess Shakti embroidered onto the pashmina. Direct connections are established between the visions the
pashmina enables—that of women’s possible choices—and its materiality. Anytime someone goes into the pashmina, the embroidered pattern begins coming off of the pashmina, surrounding the person and glowing a reddish-orange color reminiscent of fire and even possibly the gold silk Rohini uses to embroider the pashmina. Furthermore, the fluid boundaries between Rohini, Shakti, the pashmina, and Priyanka are shown visually in the graphic novel (Chanani 146) (see Figure 4.4). The orange embroidery of the pashmina is shown encircling all of them as Rohini transforms into the goddess Shakti. Even after her transformation, the design continues to encircle her, paralleling the pashmina that is wrapped around Priyanka’s shoulders (Chanani 147) (see Figure 4.5). The pashmina thus establishes direct connections between narratives, artifacts, and feminine creativity.

Figure 4.4: Rohini transforms into Shakti
Figure 4.5: Shakti and Priyanka are paralleled through the pashmina

The transmission of narrative across mediums is seen in the relationship Priyanka has with the pashmina throughout the graphic novel as well. Repeatedly, we see Priyanka’s mother struggle to communicate both the beauty and the trauma of her life as a woman and girl in India to Pri. Though Priyanka lacks the capacity to fully understand her mother’s stories before her
own trip to India, it is clear that some of the stories her mother is telling are getting through to her even then through the depictions of her sojourns into the pashmina. The main focus of her idealized, fantastical trips to India usually directly connect to a conversation with her mother in the immediate preceding pages, whether it be about food, famous locations, or clothes. The most telling example, though, features a conversation with her mother about Indian dress for girls and women and the ensuing trip into the pashmina, prominently featuring saris. In their conversation, Priyanka’s mother notes that “it’s harder to be girl in India than [she] thinks” and shares that Priyanka’s *mausi*, Meena, was teased because she wore old clothes, so Priyanka’s mother saved up money to buy her new salwars38 (Chanani 50). After dismissively stating that girls get teased for their clothes in the U.S. too, Priyanka asks her mother if she wore a sari every day to which she replies: “Not at your age. I wore salwars like this, but when I was older, before coming here, yes. Every day. Looking at new saris was your mausi’s favorite time pass, she loved fabric and embroidery work” (51). After this conversation, Priyanka travels into the pashmina, experiencing a vision in which she is dressed in a sari and adorned with traditional Indian accessories. Once dressed in the sari, she proclaims, “I feel so…INDIAN!” (Chanani 57). Her mother’s oral storytelling thus directly leads to her pashmina vision. Notably, Priyanka’s understanding of India is still lacking—she’s fascinated by the superficial elements that make up her culture (such as fashion), but is reluctant to learn the stories of the people who are entangled in the histories of these objects and places, and in her. Rohini’s shadow is seen trying to reach her in this sequence, and is even shown in the mirror as Priyanka’s reflection (57) (see Figure 4.6). It is also following this excursion that Priyanka finds the aforementioned piece of thread in her hair upon her return, all of which serves to link Priyanka to this history of storytelling across various mediums. It is

---

38 Indian women’s dress.
not until she goes to experience the real, physical India for herself that she is fully able to understand all of these narratives.  

Figure 4.6: Priyanka dresses in a sari and sees Rohini’s shadow in a mirror

**Reading *Inkheart* and *Pashmina* as (Meta)Texts and Objects**

Thus far I have considered how *Inkheart* and *Pashmina* comment on the materiality of different forms of storytelling within the text. In this next section, I consider how each work plays with the boundaries between text and object, analyzing how their contents work with their own material components to erase these boundaries, to different degrees of success. I attend to their

---

39 A similar emphasis on direct experience and embodiment exists in some forms of Shaktism; McDaniel notes, “Practitioners whom I have interviewed often claimed to be nonscriptural or *ashastriya*, finding books to be only a beginning of deeper knowledge of the divine” (10, 4).
position as metanarratives\textsuperscript{40} as well as their paratextual\textsuperscript{41} elements, in order to examine each work as both texts and artifacts.

In the case of \textit{Inkheart}, the work invites a reading as a work of metanarrative both at the textual level and at the material object level. In the paragraphs that follow, I explore some of my own experiences reading the text, drawing on a descriptive bibliographic approach in order to consider the way \textit{Inkheart} plays with its own boundary between text and object. The version I read of the text was the English translation version, translated by Anthea Bell, and published in October of 2003 by The Chicken House, which is owned by Scholastic, in both the U.K. and the U.S. The original was published in German by the publishing house Cecilie Dressler Verlag in September of 2003. The version I read is the first edition of the version published in America; since this run other editions have been released in several other countries.

The experience of reading different editions of the same text already creates a significant difference in the reading experience. In the case of a translated text, this difference is perhaps even larger. The experience of reading a text in its translated language versus its original is a substantial difference in both obvious and often intangible ways.\textsuperscript{42} Knowing no German myself, it is difficult to articulate exactly what those changes are.\textsuperscript{43} Even still, there are some clear

\textsuperscript{40} The \textit{OED} defines “metanarrative” as “any narrative which is concerned with the idea of storytelling, spec. one which alludes to other narratives, or refers to itself and to its own artifice.”

\textsuperscript{41} A paratext is “any of the textual elements that surrounds the main body of a printed book, including but not limited to title pages, half-titles, advertisement leaves, prefaces, errata slips, blurbs, dedications, epigraphs, annotations, appendices, and indices” (Levy and Mole 196).

\textsuperscript{42} I do not mean to disparage the translation itself or translation process, but often something is lost—or at least changed—when a text is translated. Anthea Bell, the translator for \textit{Inkheart}, notes that she tries to make sure the texts “read as though it had been thought and written in English in the first place” (Lear).

\textsuperscript{43} One of the largest differences that has been commented upon actually pertains to the second book in the series, \textit{Inkspell}, which is titled \textit{Tintenblut} in the original German. The original German translates more directly into English as “Inkblood” but the change was made to “spell” for English audiences. This later becomes an issue in the plot, as the words “heart,” “blood,” and “death” (\textit{Inkdeath} is the title for the third novel) are addressed directly in the third book. It is also worth noting that all of the original titles emphasize a bodily connection to the written word, anthropomorphizing it, whereas “spell” obscures this connection.
material differences between the English and German editions that are apparent without a thorough comparison of their text.44

The covers of all the editions vary widely, and the differences between the original German and English covers are particularly stark. Each one speaks to the text as object in slightly different ways, though neither version fully succeeds in collapsing the boundary between text and object. Tintenherz features illuminated letters on its cover—different letters of the alphabet in individual squares on its cover with designs and images around them—meant to call to mind illuminated manuscripts common to the Middle Ages, which the characters even discuss directly in the text at one point45 (see Figure 4.7). This contributes to making the book feel magical, alluding to the theme of the power of stories that pervades the novel. The cover is also a direct connection to the text “Inkheart” in the book, which is described thus: “There weren’t many illustrations, but the first letter of each chapter was itself a little decorative picture. Animals sat on some of these initial letters, plants twined around others, one F burned bright as fire” (Funke, Inkheart 48). The first letter of the chapters of Tintenherz and Inkheart bespeak this connection: both have the first letter of each chapter in a larger font size, though notably neither

44 One interesting change between the two editions is the opening poems that serve as epigraphs for the books. Inkheart opens with Shel Silverstein’s poem “Invitation” from Where the Sidewalk Ends which invites the reader to “come in” and listen to the “flax-golden tales” the speaker has to tell (Silverstein 9). The epigraph for Tintenherz is a couple stanzas from Paul Celan’s poem, “Engführung,” which translates to “Stretto” in English. The stanzas quoted are translated thus: “Came, came./Came a word, came./Came through the night, wanted to shine, wanted to shine.//Ashes./Ashes, ashes./Night./Night-and-night.—To/ the eye, go, to the moist.” (Celan 69). The differences in the choice of poems is quite marked. While the intended audience for Silverstein’s poem is undoubtedly children, Celan saw himself as a German poet, and wrote many poems that dealt with the difficulty of reconciling being a Jewish man and continuing to write in the German language following the Holocaust (Joris 18). The poem of “Stretto” was also written in this context, though the stanzas emphasized here do not make that clear when isolated (26). Still, these stanzas are much darker in tone than Silverstein’s poem and more ambiguous towards the potential of the spoken or written word. These stanzas emphasize the power and danger of both words and fire—which are themes throughout Funke’s novel. “Stretto” additionally emphasizes the musical quality of the spoken word, since the term is used to refer to “a direction to perform a passage, esp. a final passage, in quicker time” in music (“stretto”).

45 “‘Yes, the art of illumination,’ [Elinor] said, ‘Once only rich people could read, so the pictures painted around the letters were to help the poor to understand the stories, too’” (Funke, Inkheart 39-40).
one features any illustrations around the letters. *Tintenherz* makes this connection more strongly than *Inkheart* as well, as these first letters also are in a script-like font, whereas *Inkheart*’s first letters are in the same typographic font as the rest of the text. The images throughout the text of both *Tintenherz* and *Inkheart* at times contribute to this connection. The images within the text are drawn by Funke herself, who was an illustrator before she became an author (Boreen 28). The images appear at the ends of each chapter and are the same illustrations in both versions of the text; however, the images do not appear in the same place in each version. For example, the image at the end of the first chapter of *Tintenherz* (“Ein Fremder in der Nacht”) is an illustration of Dustfinger’s horned marten companion, Gwin, while the image featured at the end of the first chapter of *Inkheart* (“A Stranger in the Night”) is a stack of books (Funke, *Tintenherz* 20; *Inkheart* 11). The same picture of the marten can be found later in *Inkheart* at the end of chapter three, “Going South,” and the stack of books is similarly featured elsewhere in *Tintenherz*, after chapter two, “Geheimnisse”46 (*Inkheart* 29; *Tintenherz* 29) (see Figures 4.8 and 4.9, respectively). Though the pictures do occasionally appear in the same place across editions, they largely appear to be placed randomly, sometimes connecting only tangentially to the chapter they appear in, and sometimes not at all. I speculate that a lot of the placement is simply due to the size of the image and how much space is left at the end of the chapter, which can differ significantly between the two editions due to the differences in language, formatting, and publishing. While some of the illustrations are clearly connected to *Inkheart*’s narrative, some of the illustrations do not connect to the story at all, and seem to match the description of the images featured in “Inkheart.” Some images, for example, seem to be purely decorative and even seem to model the style of imagery that appears in illuminated manuscripts (Funke, *Inkheart*

---

46 Translates to “Secrets” in English.
And of course, some images are relevant to *Inkheart* and “Inkheart” due to their overlapping characters and narratives. The images of Gwin are the most obvious example since the marten comes out of the book “Inkheart” in the novel, and Meggie even directly remarks on an image of him in the text: “I saw Gwin … I mean I saw him in the book … Why does Gwin look like the animal in the book?” (Funke, *Inkheart* 52-3). This example of Gwin in particular works to establish the book in the reader’s hand as potentially the same one in Meggie’s world due to his being illustrated in both “Inkheart” and *Inkheart.*
Figure 4.8: An image of a Dustfinger’s marten, which appears at the end of chapter one in *Tintenherz* and at the end of chapter three in *Inkheart*.

Figure 4.9: An image of a stack of books, which appears at the end of chapter one in *Inkheart* and at the end of chapter two in *Tintenherz*.

Figure 4.10: Illuminated manuscript-esque image in *Inkheart*. 
Though the front cover of *Tintenherz* establishes thematic connections to “Inkheart” (or in this case, “Tintenherz”), *Inkheart*’s front cover goes one step further in erasing the boundary between the novel in the reader’s hand and the book inside the narrative that is so central to the plot. The front cover of *Inkheart* is all red with a box “cutout” in the center (see Figure 4.11). There are embellishments on the right-hand corners and along the left-hand side along the spine, which continue onto the back cover and onto the spine of the book itself. These, along with the ornate font used for the title and author invite the reader to read the covers as a book cover with a piece that has opened up in the middle of the front cover, going inside of the book. Inside the cutout box there is an image featuring a landscape in the distance which resembles the world of “Inkheart” as it is described in the text. Incidentally, this could resemble some of the landscapes featured in *Inkheart* itself, as Capricorn purposefully builds his village (located in southern Italy) in a place strongly reminiscent of his home within “Inkheart”; Fenoglio comments, “Do you know, this village is very like one of the settings I thought up for *Inkheart*? Well there’s no fortress, but the landscape around is similar, and the age of the village would be about right. Did you know that *Inkheart* is set in a world not unlike our own medieval times? Of course I added some things—the fairies and the giants” (Funke, *Inkheart* 316-7). In the foreground of this image, we see fingers coming out of the image, wrapped around the border as if someone is pulling their way out of the book. Spilling out of this image onto the red borders around the square are various creatures and items: a lizard, a fairy, insects, coins, pearls, gemstones, a seashell, and a key. This design choice clearly suggests that the physical book in the reader’s hand is like the book within the text—perhaps its inhabitants will come out at any moment.
While *Inkheart* establishes many connections between itself and the version of “Inkheart” featured within the text, the two are clearly not one in the same. There are key differences between the way “Inkheart” is described in the text and the novel’s material characteristics, which prevents a reading wherein those boundaries are fully collapsed. For example, “Inkheart” is described as a book “bound in linen, silvery green like willow leaves” while both *Tintenherz* and *Inkheart* are both made out of paperboard and red is the dominating color on both covers. While some of these characteristics would be impractical, expensive and/or impossible to replicate in the modern book publishing industry—linen is obviously not going to be used for popular, mass-produced books today—other characteristics could have purposefully mirrored the description of the book in the text but the publisher chose not to—such as using the color red.
instead of green. Still, the metatextual connections between the two emphasize a fluid boundary between them, and between other texts as well. If Meggie’s world looks so much like ours—featuring a plethora of allusions to works of literature that exist in our world—then it invites us to think about our own world similarly. While I am not suggesting that we are all literally characters inside a book, this depiction does nonetheless invite us to take the stories we tell seriously, emphasizing how the ways we narrativize our own lives and experiences matter: “it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with” (Haraway, *Staying 12*).

While *Inkheart* alludes to this idea through its position as a metanarrative, *Pashmina* realizes it by fully connecting its thematic elements at the narrative level to its construction as an object at the artifactual level. As mentioned previously, Priyanka receives stories of herself and her culture through both the women in her life (especially her mom and *mausi*) and through the pashmina; however, she is also depicted beginning to create her own story throughout the graphic novel. The final example of narrative transmission between mediums *Pashmina* makes is through its own position as a graphic novel. Like *Inkheart*, *Pashmina* includes metatextual references to establish the connection between making and reading comics and its own position as a created and read graphic novel. In addition to the titles of the graphic novel being the same inside and outside of the text, the front cover we see featured within the text is suggestive of the actual cover of the graphic novel (Chanani 162-3) (see Figures 4.12 and 4.13). Both feature Priyanka centrally on the text, surrounded by the pashmina and its design, with the title listed across the top. The images are still not exact, however, there are enough similarities to invite a reading in which the graphic novel in the reader’s hands is meant to be one and the same as Priyanka’s creation at the end. The authors’ names are obviously the biggest difference between

47 As I discussed at length in Chapter Three in my discussion of primary and secondary worlds in fantasy.
the two, but even there the parallels between author and character are too numerous to discount. Aside from the obvious similarities—they are both Indian-American, raised by single mothers, and were both resistant to spirituality growing up—the journey of *Pashmina* largely is also the story of creating the first Indian-American coming-of-age graphic novel in the U.S. Priyanka is constantly negotiating her Indian and American sides of her identity, and her quest is largely about reconciling those two sides. In doing so, she is finally able to write her Indian-American graphic novel, which explores precisely that journey—which is very much Chanani’s process in creating the graphic novel too. Chanani notes that she was constantly aware of *Pashmina*’s status as the first graphic novel wholly created (written and illustrated) by an Indian American while she was working on it: “I was aware of it as I wrote and drew every panel” (Makhijani). In Priyanka’s case, we see her drawing a white character early on, attempting to figure out the graphic novel she wants to write (Chanani 16) (see Figure 4.14). Her English teacher is also shown asking her if she’s “Working on the next great American comic” later on, to which she replies “Not really,” though eventually the answer ends up being both yes and no (73). In this moment, Priyanka still feels conflicted in her own identity as an Indian American, and being Indian makes her feel excluded from being “American” at this moment, as her experiences and her story does not fit the restrictive “normal” (i.e. white) American experience as it has been constructed. During her trip to India and her quest to find the origins of the pashmina though, we see her beginning to draw her own story instead, seeing images of the goddess Shakti in her drawn panels (Chanani 149) (see Figure 4.15). By the end, both Priyanka and Chanani use this experience of not belonging and the journey to reconcile different parts of themselves in order to imagine an alternate narrative—one that has been historically marginalized and invisibilized. As Priyanka exclaims, “I wrote my own comic book!” (161, emphasis added). In doing so, this
graphic novel successfully embodies the concept of reception as production through its attention to materiality, emphasizing that the stories we tell—as well as the means through which we tell them—matter.

Figure 4.12: The cover of Priyanka’s graphic novel within the text

Figure 4.13: Front cover of *Pashmina* by Nidhi Chanani
Using the comics form to communicate her own story makes a lot of sense, as the comics form can emphasize the materiality of objects, spaces, and narrative forms (such as comics) efficaciously. As I have shown, in the case of *Pashmina* it effectively elicits the materiality of the pashmina and of the graphic novel. It is an additionally apt form for this narrative due to its ability to showcase feminine creativity and narratives about girls and women. As I have noted throughout this chapter (and this dissertation), girls and women have been historically excluded from the written or printed text, and the proto-typical narratives conveyed in these texts are
usually masculine in nature. Historically, women’s narratives and labor were largely relegated to oral traditions and to material handicraft, such as weaving. Now, stories of women and girls in texts often continue to infuse the feminized material with the linguistic. A graphic novel is a hybrid form in multiple aspects, including being both an inscribed codex and a primarily visual form. Comics is also a largely feminized form; as Chute notes:

We may understand the very form of comics as feminized, too, not only because of its “low” and “mass” status, but also because of its traffic in space … Images are constructed, in Mitchell’s ledger, with space, the body, the external, the eye, the feminine; words with time, mind, the internal, the ear, and the masculine (110) Mitchell also suggests that, in this schema, blurred genres are feminized, while distinct genres are masculinized. Thus, while we may read comics’ spatializing of narrative as part of a hybrid project, we may read this hybridity as a challenge to the structure of binary classification that opposes a set of terms, privileging one. (10)

In this case, it is the perfect form to effectively tell a story of feminine creativity, both for its attention to the material and for its refusal to privilege one form over another.

**Conclusion**

Though both *Inkheart* and *Pashmina* have interesting premises and make compelling inquiries into the materiality of storytelling, *Pashmina* ultimately imagines an alternate, affirming narrative for girls more effectively. While both convey ideas of reception as production, *Pashmina* takes a decolonial approach, exploring the possibilities of multiple mediums for storytelling and recognizing multiple forms of literacy. Both attend significantly to the materiality of types of storytelling—the embodied experience of engaging with a story, the physical characteristics of an artifact, and the labor that goes into the creating the narratives—
and both understand reading, writing, orating, and creating as a material-discursive phenomenon, in which an object does not exist independently of the social and cultural forces that create it.

While both narratives portray Drucker’s concept of reception as production, *Pashmina* speaks to Haraway’s assertion that “it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with” more compellingly. Although *Inkheart* provides critiques of traditional, masculine quest narratives, it does not successfully imagine alternate heroic narratives for girls. Conversely, *Pashmina*’s depiction of Priyanka’s quest more effectively imagines a new quest model for girls, prioritizing the girl’s creativity and resisting traditional prototypical masculine quest narratives. In doing so, Chanani effectively connects the themes within the graphic novel to its composition. By emphasizing materiality at every level, she successfully creates a girl’s quest that fundamentally reimagines the genre—refusing to merely reproduce the male quest archetype, and instead imagining a multiplicity of alternate possibilities for girls.

To conclude this dissertation, I end with the coda, “Still Exploring,” which summarizes my findings and offers a reflection on the project in general.
Coda

Still Exploring

Someone needs to tell those tales. When the battles are fought and won and lost, when the pirates find their treasures and the dragons eat their foes for breakfast with a nice cup of Lapsang souchong, someone needs to tell their bits of overlapping narrative. There’s magic in that. It’s in the listener, and for each and every ear it will be different, and it will affect them in ways they can never predict. From the mundane to the profound. You may tell a tale that takes up residence in someone’s soul, becomes their blood and self and purpose. That tale will move them and drive them and who knows what they might do because of it, because of your words.

- Erin Morgenstern, The Night Circus

Though my last chapter centered largely around Donna Haraway’s assertion that, “It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories,” this idea informs my larger project as well (Staying 12). At its heart, Reimagining Her Quest embraces the idea that the stories we tell to frame our perception of the world matter, an idea that directly connects to the epigraph included above. Because the stories we tell have the potential to influence our perspectives, to “[take] up residence in someone’s soul,” the stories that are available to tell—as well as how we tell them—also matter.

In the context of this project, I was specifically interested in girls’ quest narratives, and how authors played with and changed the traditional quest archetypes in order to construct quest stories that are more authentic to girls’ experiences. In addition to reflecting girls’ lives, these narratives often go a step beyond this, imagining liberating possibilities that exist outside of girls’ lived realities. As I mentioned in the introduction, my interest in this project began from a personal place for me; however, its importance extends far beyond my own experience.
As I have emphasized throughout each of the chapters in this project, the prototypical quest narrative as it has traditionally been constructed is imbued with characteristics that are not fitting for a girl hero’s quest due to the white, Western, male ideologies that are intrinsically entangled in its structure. In each chapter, I have looked at the ways girls’ quests alternately critique, subvert, rework, or speak back to these (often sexist, racist, heteronormative, etc.) archetypes. One way these quests do so is in offering a multiplicity of potential girls’ quest narratives, rather than trying to construct one, universal female quest narrative to replace the existing one, thereby flattening girls’ varied experiences and erasing difference.

In my first chapter, “There and Back Again?: Nomadic Girls and Narratives,” I looked at the narrative structure of girls’ quests more broadly, examining how they draw from and combine different archetypes from fantasy literature, women’s fiction, and children’s literature in order to produce a new narrative befitting a girl’s quest. Using Braidotti’s definition of nomadic subjectivity, I mapped how the girls’ movements through space work to reimagine new narrative possibilities. While the traditional male quest model goes from home to away and back again, girls, who have often been confined to the domestic sphere, negotiate this trajectory somewhat differently. For Sophie in Howl’s Moving Castle, the boundaries between home and away are nebulous, and much of her quest occurs in domestic spaces. For September in The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making, she is destined to follow Persephone’s trajectory, continuously cycling between her home in Nebraska and Fairyland in perpetuity, rather than returning to a state of stasis upon her return home. In Nimona, the titular character embodies nomadic subjectivity perhaps the most of the three examples, continuing her nomadic existence at the graphic novel’s end, and, in doing so, conveying a fluidity of being that emphasizes her continued growth and change. In addition to their movement through space, I
considered how the characters’ shifting bodies further contributed towards Braidotti’s notion of a 
nomadic subject, as these portrayals “[resist] settling into socially coded modes of thought and 
behavior” (5). In rethinking the girls’ movements and their bodies within that space, the authors 
of these texts successfully rethink the quest trope that sees the hero as a fully formed and fully 
developed individual at the quest’s end, instead reimagining the quest as only one piece of a 
much longer journey.

My second chapter, “‘She will be her own doll’: Questing for Girlhood Objects,” 
similarly explored how girls’ quests renegotiate traditional quest models, in this case in terms of 
the object to be quested after. Since girls have often been the objects of quests themselves, their 
relationship with their own quested-after objects tends to look different. Child heroes in 
particular tend to leave their object behind once they no longer have any need of it and/or the 
object ceases to “work” for them and is divested of its magic. Using Winnicott’s theory of 
transitional objects alongside feminist scholarship, I examined how girl heroes negotiated their 
relationships with the objects of their quests in two texts. In both Coraline and Anya’s Ghost, the 
objects of their quests are anthropomorphized as ghosts, and the connection between the main 
characters and the objects are emphasized. Not only does this anthropomorphism of the objects 
work to convey the vital materiality of objects, but it speaks back to the history of quest 
narratives in which girls were treated as passive objects themselves. These texts also flip the 
script by making the girls’ objectification part of the trials to overcome in their quests; the girls 
must find ways to fight or subvert this objectification. In Anya’s case, she learns to empathize 
with her ghost and antagonist, Emily, and in doing so, she learns to resist the male gaze she has 
internalized. Coraline similarly empathizes with the ghost children, though in her case she 
subverts the other mother’s objectification of her, using the other mother’s stereotypical
perception of children in order to save herself, her parents, and the ghost children. Both girls also set their objects free by the story’s end, rather than abandoning or destroying the object. By emphasizing the materiality of the objects and the girls’ relationship with them, these texts effectively push at the boundary between subject and object, and in doing so, create quests that speak more accurately to girls’ lived experiences.

Chapter Three, “Girls in Liminal Spaces: Decolonizing Quest Narratives,” shares some overlap with Chapter One, though with a different focus. In this chapter, I examined the spaces and places portrayed in the quests specifically. Drawing on Doreen Massey’s definitions of space-time and place (as well as scholarship on liminality in children’s literature and scholarship on portals, primary, and secondary worlds in fantasy), I explored how the girl heroes’ relationship with the spaces they move between works to reimagine the traditional quest narrative. In my analysis, I examined two texts, *The Okay Witch* and *Akata Witch*, both of which position their protagonists as witches in order to emphasize their marginalized position in their respective communities. In this chapter, I explored how the liminal positions of the characters entangles with the portrayal of the spaces and places in the texts. Rather than conceiving of the places as empty, static, closed containers or the girls as separate, bounded entities within the space, these texts emphasize how the girls become-with the spaces they are a part of. In portraying the girls and the spaces as entangled with one another, the texts thus subvert traditional colonialist male quest tropes that end with the hero becoming a “Master of Two Worlds,” using the knowledge gained from the “other” world in order to reestablish order in his own. Like in Chapter Two, this chapter explored how authors reimagine this trope in order to convey a narrative more fitting for girls—one that does not seek to conquer or possess either land
or people. By emphasizing the entangled relationship between girls and spaces, I found that these texts instead craft affirmatory, decolonizing quest narratives for girls.

In my final chapter, “Materializing the Language of Girls’ Quests,” I considered *Inkheart* and *Pashmina* as metanarratives, as well as their position as material objects, in order to explore how they comment on and reimagine storytelling *itself* in the way they go about storying girls’ quests. Drawing on Haraway and Le Guin alongside book history and material culture scholarship, this chapter explores different forms of storytelling, including oral, written, drawn, and crafted forms. In attending to the materiality of each form, I examined how these texts put pressure on the boundary between the material and the discursive, a dichotomy that was largely upheld by the linguistic turn in scholarship. Language itself is of course not absent of ideology, and written texts have predominantly focused on white, Western male narratives, centering correspondingly white, Western male characters. By attending to their own mediums and materiality, these two texts question the fundamental modes used to tell stories, and present alternate forms of storytelling (to varying degrees of success). I explored how both critique the dominance of the written word prevalent in Western culture, and how they each embody Drucker’s concept of reception as production, undoing the strict boundary between creating and receiving. *Pashmina* in particular draws on traditionally feminine methods of storytelling in its narrative, combining it with stereotypically “masculine” models in order to produce new forms fitting for a girl’s quest narrative. In doing so, I found that these texts destabilized the boundary between the discursive and the material, as well as the real and the imagined, ultimately rethinking the stories we tell girls’ stories with.

At the outset of this project, I was interested in exploring how the girl hero’s quest differed from prototypical male quest narratives. I wondered how authors might reimagine a
genre that has historically excluded them in order to better reflect girls’ experiences. Given associations between the material and the feminine in Western epistemologies, I postulated that girls’ quests might reimagine the quest narrative by attending to the material directly, pushing at and reworking this association in order to reimagine new narratives. I thus studied how the texts’ various engagements with the material in multiple forms—e.g. objects, spaces, the body, and mediums—act as a locus for imagining new narratives for girls, by questioning, subverting, and otherwise undoing the binaries intrinsic to Western, Humanist epistemologies. In this dissertation, I explored the many approaches girl quest narratives have taken in recent years in order to imagine new kinds of stories that can better speak to the multiplicity of girls’ experiences. Ultimately, I found that these texts open up rather than restrict, embrace fluidity not fixity, and emphasize plurality instead of essentializing, producing new affirming narratives for girls that offer more possibilities than those that came before.

***

In the interest of fully completing the Hero’s Journey, I end this dissertation where it began—with a brief personal reflection. As a girl, I loved fantasy stories, and I spent many years dreaming of traveling to another, magical world. This fascination with the otherworldly has stayed with me as an adult and is much of what continues to drive my interest in the genre. Now, as an adult, I am additionally concerned with the girls who have and will come after me, and I hope that they will find a place in the stories that matter to them. And I hope for the women whose girlhood memories still occupy a central place in their memory that these girl quests might continue to resonate with them as well.

I am wary of sounding too solipsistic in this coda, and yet it would be untruthful to downplay the personal nature of this project for me. The journey of studying girls’ quests in fantasy, of trying to make sense of what they are and how they work, does not feel so different
from my childhood self who used to go exploring, looking for secret doorways in unexpected places. In many ways, this dissertation was written for the memory of that girl, and I would not have made it through these last few years of study and research without her.

I am not sure that I found all of the answers that my girl-self was looking for, but I know now at least that there is more importance in the questioning than in the answering, more value in the seeking than in the returning. And more important than any of this, the girls in these texts have shown me that perhaps the division between “away” and “home” is not as great as I had once thought. Though the girls in these texts often do learn valuable lessons and experience growth during the course of their quest, they consistently buck preconceived notions about what such a narrative should even look like, rethinking the boundaries between typical Western, Humanist, Cartesian dichotomies (such as male/female, child/adult, real/imagined, and discursive/material) in the process.

I end Reimagining Her Quest with a reimagining of my own story, which not only brings this project full circle, but also emphasizes the materiality of the dissertation itself. While my introduction began with a personal reflection told through words, my Coda ends with a reflection told via the comics medium, which seemed only logical due to the focus of this project. In doing so, I hope to disrupt the genre of the dissertation somewhat, hopefully imagining a form that is more fitting for the narrative I want to tell, one that emphasizes continuation instead of closure. Over the next few pages, I conclude with a brief graphic memoir that reflects upon my own quest—the journey of a girl who never stopped exploring.

---

1 The graphic memoir was originally created in 2016 for my Graphic Feminisms seminar that I was taking at the time. I have included it here with some revisions.
When I was a little kid, I was really into fantasy books (still am).
I was fascinated by the idea of entering a different, magical world.

I used to imagine what it would be like to stumble upon a portal to one of the worlds I read about.

More than that, I used to wish for it, to yearn for it.

But as much as I wished for it...

...it never happened.
Nevertheless, I created stories in my head where I was able to enter those other worlds.

(Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland)

There were so many worlds to choose from! I imagined connecting portals so that I could move freely between them.

(Coraline)

(House of Many Ways)
In grad school, I started to study girls’ quests in fantasy...

...it was more high-brow-sounding, but now I think I was still trying to achieve my childhood goal.

Reimagining Her Quest: Representations of the Material in Girls’ Fantasy Literature
What a pointless endeavor! If I’d done my reading well enough, I’d have remembered that you can only go through the wardrobe as a child.
Still...
Maybe,

One day...
I’ll find my way back.
Bibliography


“stretto, adv. and n.” *OED Online*, Oxford UP, December 2020,


Treftz, Jill. “‘All little girls are terrible’: Maud as Anti-Villain in Catherynne M. Valente’s *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making.*” *A Quest of Her Own: Essays on the Female Hero in Modern Fantasy*, edited by Lori M. Campbell, McFarland, 2014, pp. 248-266.


Wallenfeldt, Jeff. “Salem Witch Trials.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 24 Apr. 2020,

www.britannica.com/event/Salem-witch-trials.


APPENDIX

Chronological List of Fantasy Texts by Publication Date

- 1986: *Howl’s Moving Castle* by Diana Wynne Jones
- 2003: *Inkheart* by Cornelia Funke
- 2011, April: *Akata Witch* by Nnedi Okorafor
- 2011, May: *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making* by Catherynne M. Valente
- 2011, June: *Anya’s Ghost* by Vera Brosgol
- 2015: *Nimona* by Noelle Stevenson
- 2017: *Pashmina* by Nidhi Chanani
- 2019: *The Okay Witch* by Emma Steinkellner
# ABBREVIATED VITA

**Colette Slagle (she/her/hers)**

## Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Field</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>Dual-title Ph.D., Curriculum and Instruction and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies</td>
<td>The Pennsylvania State University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>M.A., English</td>
<td>The Pennsylvania State University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>B.A., English Literature</td>
<td>The University of Pittsburgh, magna cum laude</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Professional Appointment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Field</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2021 – 2022</td>
<td>Assistant Teaching Professor</td>
<td>The Pennsylvania State University, Department of English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Awards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Award Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>Sara Woods Outstanding Graduate Student Teaching Award</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Selected Publications

### Book Chapters


### Book Reviews


### Selected Conference Presentations


