

Reading for Pleasure: Revolutionary Potential in Queer Graphic Novels

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Abstract: In “Headiness,” creative writer Karen Brennan argues that “Mostly we read for pleasure, in Roland Barthes’ sense. We get cozy, turn pages, disappear into a text as into another world. What’s wrong with that?” Famously, Feminism and Queer Theory scholar Sara Ahmed points out the necessity of feminist killjoys. However, discomfort of the privileged does not necessitate discomfort of the marginalized. There are many avenues toward change, including ones that braid together joy¹ with resistance. The graphic novels *The Princess and the Grilled Cheese Sandwich* by Deya Muniz, *Cosmoknights* by Hannah Templer, and *The Well* by Jake Wyatt and Choo combine a form (graphic novels), a genre (the umbrella of speculative fiction), and an age category (young adult) that have each been traditionally dismissed as ‘not serious enough’ for academic study and intellectual rigor. Graphic novels, sci-fi, fantasy, and young adult literature are instead relegated, in this false binary, to the realm of pleasure. However, these texts all engage with a revolutionary queer sensibility. *The Princess and the Grilled Cheese Sandwich* examines gender roles/expressions and the need to change politics; *Cosmoknights* highlights the difficulty of women-as-possession as a matter of trade and diplomacy, especially in terms of class dynamics; and *The Well* explores issues of power and agency. Reading for pleasure can engage with resistance against hierarchies and oppressions.

Keywords: *Queer; Graphic novel; Genre; Young Adult; Resistance.*

In “Headiness,” Karen Brennan argues: “Mostly we read for pleasure, in Roland Barthes’ sense. We get cozy, turn pages, disappear into a text as into another world.

¹ of marginalized peoples

What’s wrong with that?” (62) Sara Ahmed points out ‘what’s wrong with that’ by introducing ‘feminist killjoys’ in her book, *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook: The Radical Potential of Getting in the Way*. Ahmed makes an argument that, “the feminist killjoy begins her political life as a stereotype of feminists, a negative judgment, a way of dismissing feminism as causing and caused by misery. In reclaiming the feminist killjoy for ourselves, we turn the judgment into a project, because if feminism causes misery, that is what we might need to cause” (2). There are many avenues toward change, including ones that braid together joy with resistance. The graphic novels *The Princess and the Grilled Cheese Sandwich* by Deya Muniz and *Cosmoknights* (Book One and Two) by Hannah Templer combine a form (graphic novel), a genre (speculative fiction), and an age category (young adult) to create a fictional multiverse of characters who fight for their rights and who become activists in their own right. Despite being dismissed as ‘not serious enough’ for academic study and intellectual rigor, these two young adult fictions have combined graphic novels and sci-fi/fantasy, to lend a voice to the spirit of resistance and activism. At the same time, they haven’t taken away the realm of pleasurable reading. These texts keep the joy of reading intact, engaging the readers with a revolutionary queer sensibility at the same time.

In “Queer Girlhoods in Contemporary Comics: Disrupting Normative Notions,” Mel Gibson writes about how “the representations of queer girlhoods in contemporary fictional graphic novels for young readers” demonstrate, “the disruption of normative notions, traditionally constructed relationships, gender binaries, and fixed designations” (1). Deya Muniz in *The Princess and the Grilled Cheese Sandwich* examines gender roles and gender expressions, as well as the need to change politics. Hannah Templer, too, focuses on gendered issues in *Cosmoknights*, as it highlights the problematic economic system of ‘women-as-possession’ as a matter of trade and diplomacy. Templer in *Cosmoknights* weaves in reminders about class dynamics to a greater degree than Muiz in *The Princess and the Grilled Cheese Sandwich* does. Rather than creating a mutually exclusive binary between reading for pleasure and

reading for revolution, these texts serve as examples of how reading for pleasure can engage with resistance against hierarchies and oppressions.

The Gender Problem

Both *The Princess and the Grilled Cheese Sandwich* and the *Cosmoknights* series target the problematic connections between womanhood and economic realities. In *The Princess and the Grilled Cheese Sandwich*, gender legally limits financial freedom. For example, protagonist Cam spends the vast majority of the graphic novel posing as a man, including the pretense of male pronouns, crossdressing, and going by the title of “count” to embody the part. This is not her idea, nor is it a choice freely made. Cam’s father (the previous count) insists that, since she is gay and refuses to marry, Cam should pretend to be a man to get around laws that only let men inherit from their fathers. While Cam is not trans, she goes along with this idea to keep herself from living in poverty upon her father’s death. Similarly, Cam’s friend Zola is only able to publicly run her own business because she’s widowed and without children. As Zola explains to Brie at one point:

You don’t understand what it’s like to be stuck in a loveless marriage for the sake of convenience. I was lucky to marry a man who allowed me to use his name to start a business he has no interest in, since I couldn’t legally do it under my own. I was lucky he was kind to me and allowed me more freedom than most. I was *lucky* to get to watch him take credit for my work. He was hailed as a genius, and I was seen as nothing more than his *trophy wife*. (Muniz 180-181)

The graphic novel is very clearly set up with the premise that there is no fundamental difference in skill that sets men and women apart. While society believes that Zola’s husband is the talented genius of the fashion world, it is, in reality, ‘her’ skills that are being praised. She is no less capable as a woman, but others are far less likely to acknowledge her talent than they were to praise her husband for it, though he did not

contribute anything other than his name and his status as a man. Similarly, Cam is charming to everyone as a man, but this quality doesn't disappear when she is outwardly a woman. The only thing that changes is society's perception of and acceptance of her. She has more freedom as a man, but that is a result of society's norms, not a result of inherent gendered or sexed differences between distinct categories of "man" and "woman."

While Cam is disguised as a man, the princess of the kingdom, Brie, falls in love with her. When Brie decides to propose to Cam, her friend says: "It's unheard of, right? A *princess* proposing to a man? *Any* noble lady proposing to a man?" (90-91) This in and of itself is presented as a queer notion—queer as in strange, but also queer as in anti-normative. Brie would be taking on the role typically reserved for a man. She would be claiming a kind of agency that is otherwise "unheard of." (What Brie does not yet realize at this point is that it is a notion that is also queer because she and Cam are both women.) If any woman in this narrative is in a position to challenge societal norms, that woman is Brie. As the crown princess, she has a certain level of power that most other people—even men—do not have. However, this entire proposal plan falls apart when Brie realizes Cam is a woman.

Instead of confronting Cam about it privately, Brie nearly outs Cam at a party. She says, "My grandfather definitely would've [thrown you in a dungeon]—vicious old man. If someone like you had shown up to court back then, with such pretty, long hair... y'know, it makes you look like a g—" (124). Cam is only saved by Zola's interference. This moment doesn't simply highlight the fact that Brie feels hurt and betrayed. Rather, there are a couple of layers here, in terms of the problems with power dynamics: firstly, as the crown princess, Brie wields a lot of power (something which Zola will later take her to task on), and therefore Brie could certainly use that power to harm Cam for her gender transgression. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler discusses anthropologist Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger*, noting in particular that -

the very contours of ‘the body’ are established through markings that seek to establish specific codes of cultural coherence. Any discourse that establishes the boundaries of the body serves the purpose of instating and naturalizing certain taboos regarding the appropriate limits, postures, and modes of exchange that define what it is that constitutes bodies:

ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created. (166-167)

Secondly, Cam often forgets that she’s in a very precarious situation (because of this, and because Cam is the protagonist, it is possible that the reader often forgets this as well. The reminders that Cam gets about this danger can be written off as coming from a worrywart of a character rather than signaling a real potential problem). Anyone could out Cam at any time and ruin her life socially and financially, in addition to the very tangible threat of imprisonment for violating the gender-based laws.

Cam later says, “I want to run away and hide. I want to dress however I choose and live however I choose” (Muniz 160). This is where choice comes to the forefront: Cam doesn’t *choose* to live as a man, but it is the best option available to her at the time. She may enjoy some aspects of this presentation, but it is not a gender expression that is freely made, either. Toward the end, she follows up with Brie by saying, “Living as a man doesn’t really bother me, but... I don’t know. I guess I just wish I could change things, you know?” (201) It is this attention to the need for societal change that lives in the undercurrent of the graphic novel throughout. Cam serves as an example of why the system is wrong in its denial of economic (and other) freedom to women

in this society. She doesn't try to change the world; in all likelihood, if Cam tried at any point to change things on her own, it would likely only get her into trouble. Zola calls for change, even if she cannot enact it on her own, because she a) understands the precarity of being a woman in this society, and even has awareness of how even less privileged women fare worse than her or Cam, b) she is a loyal friend to Cam, and c) she is in a position to convince the princess to listen. Brie is the one with the power to make change, which she only does in response to Zola's call to action (as will be explored later in this essay) and in response to her love for Cam.

In *Cosmoknights*, the gender critique comes through the economic system of women-as-possession as a primary means of trade and diplomacy. Cosmoknights were originally intended to fight for and win a right to the throne via marriage to the princess. This is framed as an avenue for upward mobility from lower class to royalty. However, since the inception of this practice, that has morphed into rich sponsors hiring cosmoknights on their behalf, negating the possibility of upward mobility through these marriages-by-combat. When protagonist Pan meets cosmoknight Cass and her wife Bee for the first time, she says

“Why compete? I expect this shit from dudes, but women? You're a bunch of vultures, fighting over those girls. Can't any of you think for yourselves? You fight on behalf of a bunch of entitled assholes who don't give a shit about you, or the princesses... Their only concern is the title that comes with marrying into a royal family. It's a game to them! How can you support that?” (Templer, *Book One* 58)

This draws lines between gendered expectations, clarifying a solidarity that Pan expects from other women based on gender. Women, Pan argues, should have the ability to see the problematic nature of these tournaments. Bee explains that they've been setting the princesses they win free.

Cass says to Pan that, “Bee tells me you’re a fan... fucking up the patriarchy, all that” (63). While delivered in a joking kind of way, this does directly point to one of the systemic injustices in place—the patriarchy. Later, Pan calls the games a “bunch of macho bullshit” (95), which further points to gendered issues with how this society is set up. In particular, ‘macho’ is not simply a synonym for ‘masculinity’. Macho is a specific performance of hyper-masculinity, one characterized by “negative characteristics such as violence and excessive aggression” (Rudolph 14). Lower-class men are positioned as violent brutes. Upper-class women are mere prizes to be won. Upper-class men are an enigma hiding behind their money and the cosmoknights they hire.

When Cass’ backstory is revealed, the reader learns that she was once a princess. She was miserable with the idea of the tournament and the enforced marriage; her mother told her, “Darling, I know you’re unhappy, but this is bigger than you. We all have our roles to play. You’ll come to understand that, just as I did” (Templer, *Book One* 129). Instead, Cass fights for herself and, in the ensuing chaos of her victory, she flees the planet and elopes with Bee. Cass represents one possible choice for a princess: escape and then help others escape. In Cass’ view, based on her own experience, being a princess is a prison; she is doing the other princesses a favor by kidnapping and freeing them.

Pan’s childhood friend Tara represents another possible choice for a princess: to escape and join an independent group, staying away from the games altogether. Pan is the one who helps Tara to escape. Since the reader is introduced to the world through Pan’s perspective, it becomes clear that a freed princess is bad for the planet. Pan’s planet’s economy is wrecked. This is hinted at, both through the disdain that others have for Pan, and through worldbuilding like Pan’s family’s free clinic. It is not impossible to imagine that one or more of Cass and Bee’s rescued princesses has left their planet in a similar dismal situation. But even Tara, who theoretically escaped this situation and found freedom, is not truly free of it. Tara leads a group of space pirates

now, and her rank of birth doesn't matter so much. She has been able to choose her path to some degree. However, she's still hired to go after Scottie, the princess that Cass and others have kidnapped. She cannot escape the system, even in her specific circumstances.

Scottie, the princess who they win and abduct during volume one, had intended to stay and use the power of the throne in particular ways. She says "I could've used my resources as queen for good. But y'all had to charge in and save the day and now... I have nothing" (Templer, *Book Two* 67). She also says "I know I'm a pawn, but I played my part because at least if it was me on that throne, I could do something to help. Rescuing me doesn't do anything for the people struggling on my planet" (116). Scottie demonstrates an understanding that the system isn't good; she uses Cass' mother's point about how "We all have our roles to play" to have agency over that role, even if it is as a 'pawn' and is extremely gendered. Cass, Bee, and Pan have imagined that the position of a princess can only be the one that is absent of agency, one that is lonely and suffocating. They did not imagine someone like Scottie, a woman who knows the score of the situation and isn't afraid to use that power to do the right thing. Whether this position is naïve, as some in the text would argue, or actually has some merit is ultimately up to the reader to decide.

How Do We Create Change?

While *The Princess and the Grilled Cheese Sandwich* tends to be lighter (in tone and color scheme) than *Cosmoknights*, and while it leans more into the romantic and humorous aspects, the issue of politics and the urgency to change certain political systems are key throughout the text. Muniz presents an option where revolutionary queer graphic novels can be centralized around other aspects, such as romance, but still weave in political, societal, and social justice considerations. Here, these pertain primarily to gender, sexuality, and the economic system of the fantasy world. However,

political issues are incorporated in several ways. For instance, Cam meets Brie at her no-fur ball and mentions admiring her activism (Muniz, 28).

Zola also mentions that, after she discovers Cam's secret, Brie will agree to marry Duke of Brussels Sprout because: "it's who the king wants her to marry. Apparently, it'd help with a weird disputed-territory situation" (164). It is Zola who gives a long speech about why Brie needs to reconsider what she's doing. Brie argues

Being the crown princess doesn't mean I can do whatever I want!
What would my father think? What would the other nobles think?
Would I be banned from court?! Would I be locked away?! I don't
know! For all I do know, the marriage wouldn't even be *valid*! You
haven't judged the decisions Cam made to stay safe... so please
don't judge mine. (165)

Zola doesn't accept this argument, however. She counters:

You're the *most powerful* woman in this kingdom, and you're
throwing away your happiness to be sold for a piece of land—why?!
Because it's *easy*? It might be easier for others to swallow, yes. But
at what cost to yourself? ... The only way I could own the brand I
started was for him to leave it to me in his will, and only if we
remained childless. I am very fortunate it all worked out in my favor,
and now I get to live the life I've always wanted. Marrying him was
a deliberate choice I made so I could live as freely as possible... I'll
bet you that's what Cam has been doing as well—time and time
again, choosing the least miserable option. I bet a lot of other people
are out there doing the same. People less fortunate than Cam and me.
We have some power and money, and yet neither of us could do
much to change this system we live in. We were just lucky enough
to get the chance to adapt. But *you* could do more. You're the *crown*

princess. You've been an activist for *years*. You can actually influence the law. You've done it before! ... Think of everyone else in this kingdom who is in a situation like yours but has no power! Think of how many people might also get a chance at happiness if you decided to chase your *own* instead of playing it safe! They deserve better, you deserve better, and *Cam* deserves better! (180-184)

Muniz takes the opportunity where Brie needs to be convinced of a civic transformation to have Zola lay out the facts and stakes of their world. The arguments are familiar to those who struggle under patriarchal structures in the real world. Readers may find themselves either reflected through the text or questioning the text that challenges the patriarchal world that they live in.

After Brie and Cam get engaged, people talk about Brie, saying, "She's always been a headache, but it seems she's getting bolder these days" (229). While it's not explicitly expressed, it hints at the use of the trope of 'difficult woman'. The idea that women—and people more broadly—who challenge oppressive systems are 'a headache' is one way to shame those interested in justice into accepting the status quo. There is also a headline toward the end of the graphic novel stating "Princess Brie Announces Plans to Reform Inheritance Laws" (229), which demonstrates that she is not only willing to take personal risk with her marriage to Cam, but also move to make legal and societal change in broader ways as well.

As happens with the characters in *Cosmoknights* too, each group member's experiences help to make the revolutionary ideas bolder and more radical in their efforts toward a better future. *Cosmoknights* makes direct commentary on class dynamics. This happens in more subtle ways, such as, the fact that Pan meets Bee and Cass because of the free clinic her mother runs. Cass, Scottie, Pan, and their fugitive ally Kate, all tend to represent different approaches to resistance. Cass has a practical

route of the jousts; Scottie wanted to change things from within. Pan, perhaps naively, argues at one point that, “If I had that kind of money, I wouldn’t spend it on a game. I’d use it to fix things. Like figuring out a way to get the rest of the city above the pollution line. Or making sure everyone has somewhere to live and enough to eat,” (Templer, *Book Two* 171), and Kate replies with, “You only get that kind of money by disempowering other people” (171). Political theorist, Iris Marion Young, catalogues five types of oppression, specified as exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence (64), which can be seen in this speculative world, especially in Kate’s jaded assessment of it.

Importantly, in “Predicting a Better Situation? Three Young Adult Speculative Fiction Texts and the Possibilities for Social Change,” Abbie Ventura writes about how “without an understanding of the machines of late capitalism and capitalism’s effect on all degrees of citizenship, social change is an impossibility” (100). While *Cosmoknights* has a very ‘a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away’ kind of feel to it, the parallels to class dynamics in our society (such as the 21st century America Templer writes about in her work) are not difficult to uncover.

In *Cosmoknights*, Kate is often voice of radical resistance. Like Zola does in *The Princess and the Grilled Cheese Sandwich*, Kate is also frequently a catalyst, purposefully using her skills and positionality to provoke change as much as possible. Kate calls the nobility “Rich fucks” (Templer, *Book One* 157) “Bloodsuckers” (Templer, *Book Two* 33). The rich exploit the poor (the cosmoknights, the factory workers, and so on), and, to a certain degree, they exploit even noble women. Both of these groups—the poor/working class and the princesses of the noble class—are made to feel powerless and helpless in this system – a system that benefits a select few. Even the entertainment of the tournaments is meant to further marginalize and enact violence upon the poor/working class.

Though they are theoretically fighting on the same side, Kate tells Scottie: “We have nothing in common: different laws, different worlds, different universes. You talk about change, doing ‘good’ with what you’ve been given, but I know your type... you’ll do anything to save your own neck, even if it means stepping on mine” (190). *Cosmoknights* is, much like *The Princess and the Grilled Cheese Sandwich*, a balancing act. While the politics are much more central to the *Cosmoknights* story, Templer is still providing something fun and pleasurable in the reading—mech suits fighting, queer relationships, and exploring different planets. The characters, however, have many opportunities to argue about and make a stance on different political issues throughout. Kate’s skepticism is one perspective that ensures the text doesn’t fall into unchallenged optimism or easy solutions. She ensures that the stratification of society is never forgotten – a society that thrives on different laws, different worlds, and different universes. Scottie’s intentions are all well and good, but it is hard to tell what measures are being taken to ensure true change.

Kate believes that they should focus on organizing and using the growing visibility of Cass to bring people together who would hold a rally against the system. Kate is complex. She is often positioned as the jaded realist when talking to Pan or Scottie. But Cass paints her as the optimist, insisting that Kate’s “‘manifesto’ idea is a pipe dream” (70). Cass takes the position, in this conversation, as the pragmatist, doing the ‘real work’ of freeing the princesses through the jousts. At one point, Pan’s childhood friend Tara, now an adult, tells Pan that “this is what they want—to watch us destroy each other!” (216). In some ways, this highlights the problem with so many different perspectives—the disenfranchised, arguing about what to achieve and how to achieve it, which do not end up in a place of unity. This is evident when figures like Cass, Kate, and Scottie end up in arguments even though they theoretically all fight on the same side. Scholars of social justice, Alex Khasnabish and Max Haiven, discuss the radical imagination as -

the ability to imagine the world, life and social institutions not as they are but as they might otherwise be. It is the courage and the intelligence to recognize that the world can and should be changed. But the radical imagination is not just about dreaming of different futures. It's about bringing those possible futures “back” to *work* on the present, to inspire action and new forms of solidarity today... The radical imagination is also about imagining the present differently too. It represents our capacity to imagine and make common cause with the experiences of other people; it undergirds our capacity to build solidarity across boundaries and borders, real or imagined. (3)

If a group of people can get to a place of solidarity, conflict is not necessarily a negative thing. Political theorist Nathan DuFord, for instance, argues in *Solidarity in Conflict: A Democratic Theory* that, “an openness to challenge that is necessary for members of a polity to articulate their self-conceived needs or desires” (15).

Though Kate sometimes acts in ways that seem paradoxical, she rightly argues that, “We share the same goals, even if our methods differ” (Templer 203: i). Gibson writes about the ability of graphic novels for young readers to “engage with the emotions, and the emotional roots of belonging to the self and to the community,” specifying that “Diverse, rather than monolithic, girls’ cultures are key and these texts critique norms, or create worlds not dominated by heteronormative girlhood” (14). The multitude of ideas, approaches, and methods brought together in *Cosmoknights* puts a kind of twist on Cass’ mother’s idea that “We all have our roles to play” (129). Instead, it takes that idea, which is meant to argue *for* the system, and takes it up as a way to *tear down* the system more completely and effectively.

As scholars of Children’s Literature Sara K. Day et. al write in *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction*:

young women in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century dystopian fiction embody liminality, straddling the lines of childhood and adulthood, of individuality and conformity, of empowerment and passivity. They may also be understood as representations of contradictions, of strength and weakness, of resistance and acquiescence, and, perhaps especially, of hope and despair... the rebellious girl protagonist... directly contradicts the common perception that girls are too young or too powerless to question the limitations placed upon them, much less to rebel and, in turn, fuel larger rebellions. (4)

Pan insists on helping Cass and Bee directly, saying “I’m sick of being told to just stay quiet and just... watch things happen. I wanna make a difference. Like you” (Templer, *Book One* 81). In the next volume, she echoes this by saying “I can’t just sit by and watch. I gotta do something” (Templer, *Book Two* 85). Pan’s desire to do something to better the world(s) fails when she sets Tara free, and perhaps that same impulse fails when Bee and Cass set the other princesses free. Scottie certainly feels this is a failure on their part, especially at first. The impulse to change the world may reflect the reader who is drawn to a similar kind of activism or advocacy, or, again, it may make the reader consider such action for the first time. Ultimately, when they discover that the important game is going to be rigged, Pan decides to combine Kate’s idea of making a statement, Cass’ plan regarding which princess to save next, and Scottie’s warning that the capital already did a back-door deal for the princess. It is by bringing different ideas together that they find success as the resistance. This is only possible because each of them had such a different positionality and experience in this speculative world.

At the end of volume two, Kate is the one who discovers how the capital was going to fix an important game, one that would determine who gets particularly valuable mines, by using robot cosmoknights instead of human ones. She gets on TV,

saying, “The nobility never intend on sharing their wealth, and this is the proof: the games are rigged. Their laws rob everything from us... but together, we can take it all back” (222). Her call to solidarity—a drum she beats throughout her appearance in these graphic novels—gets broader here, potentially world-wide. In “A Glimpse of Hope at the End of the Dystopian Century: The Utopian Dimension of Critical Dystopias,” political theorist Peter Seyferth writes about how, “there is... a nucleus of utopia in dystopia.” (7). Even against odds that seem so expansive and unbeatable, it somehow feels possible (even if difficult) for this team of misfits to win against the system. And if they can take on all these worlds and all these nobles, then perhaps the fun queer space adventure that a reader was attracted to will make changing our one little planet seem all the more achievable.

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