

Controversies of Authentic Adolescent Realism in Isabel Quintero's *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces* (2014) and Louise O'Neill's *Asking For It* (2015)

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Abstract

This chapter analyses the controversies surrounding authentic adolescent representation in two contemporary works of young adult (YA) realism: *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces* (2014) by Mexican American author Isabel Quintero and *Asking For It* (2015) by Irish author Louise O'Neill. The context and circumstances of these two texts are similar: both authors explore the injustices and hypocrisies of gendered expectations and social stigmas around perceived acceptable sexual behaviour for adolescents. Whereas Quintero takes an experimental approach to realism with *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces*, O'Neill's *Asking For It* is more conventionally typical of the genre of "the problem novel." Despite this contrast, both novels have been received and celebrated as particularly realistic and authentically representative of youth culture and adolescents. In each case, literary elements that contribute to the novels' realist status work in tandem with other aspects that construct a sense of authenticity around the fictional narratives, such as the author's personal experiences—revealed in the peritext, reviews of the works, and author interviews. This chapter argues that these novels' reputation for authenticity deserves further analysis and highlights a need for sustained critical attention to be given to how YA authors shape realist narratives.

Keywords

realism – adolescence – youth culture – taboo – "rape culture" – rhetorical strategies – growth

1 Introduction

This chapter analyses the controversies surrounding authentic adolescent representation in two contemporary works of young adult (YA) realism: *Gabi, a Girl*

in Pieces (2014) by Mexican American author Isabel Quintero and *Asking For It* (2015) by Irish author Louise O'Neill. The context and circumstances of these two texts are similar: both authors explore the injustices and hypocrisies of gendered expectations and social stigmas around perceived acceptable sexual behaviour for adolescents. Whereas Quintero takes an experimental approach to realism with *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces*, O'Neill's *Asking For It* is more conventionally typical of the genre of "the problem novel." Despite this contrast, both novels have been received and celebrated as particularly realistic and authentically representative of youth culture and adolescents. In each case, literary elements that contribute to the novels' realist status work in tandem with other aspects that construct a sense of authenticity around the fictional narratives, such as the author's personal experiences—revealed in the peritext, reviews of the works, and author interviews. This chapter examines what these texts reveal about some of the controversies surrounding contemporary YA realism and its interpretations. In doing so, the chapter argues that these novels' reputation for authenticity deserves further analysis and highlights a need for sustained critical attention to be given to how YA authors shape realist narratives.

In this chapter, I question the extent to which the perspective on reality that Quintero and O'Neill's works offer readers is bound up with the authors' own experiences as teenagers and ask whether the works having been perceived as powerfully authentic reveals more about adult anxieties to do with adolescent youth culture than teenage realities. Catherine Sheldrick Ross says that "the change of status that comes with new knowledge" is "at the heart" of YA realism as a genre (174). I consider how growth, or lack of growth, complicates realistic characterisation in these texts, and how aspects of author biography influence their perceived "truth." I find that O'Neill's text is bound up with YA realism's traditional functions as a literary genre, whereas Quintero's text offers innovation in its rejection of that didactic function. In O'Neill's case, the realist text has some parallels with autobiography as James Olney describes it whereby the text acts as a "monument of the self" in that it becomes difficult to separate the author and their world view (34). Comparatively, Quintero's realist text aligns with Robert Alter's description of a strain of literary realism that he calls the "self-conscious novel," which "probes into the problematic relationship between real-seeming artifice and reality" by drawing attention to its constructed nature as a literary text (x).

2 Young Adult Literary Realism

Mike Cadden reasons that the degree to which characters might be deemed "authentic" depends on their "relative position to ourselves (the most real thing

possible, after all)" (32). Identification, Cadden maintains, has become associated "not only with critical success but with the genre of realism as well, and this has helped make realism the more 'literary' or 'serious genre'" (20). The association that Cadden makes between realism, and perceived seriousness and importance is longstanding. Writing in 1980—at a time when "moralistic pressures" were markedly evident in the "New Realism" works that had emerged in the 1970s—Corinne Hirsch notes the prevalence of responses to realist literature, which assumed that "by breaking taboos and dealing with unpleasant subject matter, fiction becomes realistic" (12). Hirsch raised concerns for a lack of critical attention to realist fiction and called for more realist works to present taboo or difficult subject matter in all its complexity rather than be presented as a problem. These concerns are relevant to an issue that Cadden highlights about YA literary realism today: the problematic assumption that "realistic settings and circumstances necessitate that characterisation will be realistic" when, in fact, realism often contains exaggerated and unreal characters (20).

Although contemporary YA works seem to have achieved a higher standard as more realistically representative and less morally didactic than earlier realism, realistic setting and circumstances may mask certain "unrealities," and the inclusion of taboo subject matter remains a significant criterion by which contemporary YA works are appraised as realistic. *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces* and *Asking For It* deal with taboo subject matter by engaging with perceived "rape culture" ("a complex set of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women" Buchwald et al., xi). In Quintero's novel, sixteen-year-old protagonist Gabi's friend Cindy is raped and becomes pregnant. The protagonist of O'Neill's novel, eighteen-year-old Emma, is sexually assaulted by four boys at a party. The novels' subject matter is undoubtedly part of why they have been received as authentically realist works.

3 Critical Responses to *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces* and *Asking For It* as Realism

Quotations from reviewers and other authors on the dust jackets of Quintero's and O'Neill's novels express the positive reception the texts have received regarding their authentic and audacious representation of topics relevant to the lives of contemporary teenagers. Marketing-driven blurbs may not be reliably representative of a work's reception but taken into account with reviews they add to the overall picture of how the works have been received. *Kirkus*

Reviews describes Quintero's novel as "a fresh, authentic and honest exploration of contemporary Latina identity"; *Publisher's Weekly* attests to the strength of Gabi's voice; poet Laureate of California, Juan Felipe Herrera, says that he "cannot think of any book today for young adults as voracious, bold, truthful and timely." On one edition of *Asking For It*, the *Telegraph* describes O'Neill's novel as "a brave and important book," and *The New York Times* says it is "riveting and essential." On another edition, *The Sunday Independent* says that the book "deserves to be read by male and female, young and old, the world over," and author Jeanette Winterson says that "O'Neill writes with a scalpel." The evaluations about the "honest" nature of *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces* and the "brave" nature of *Asking For It* reveal expectations that these realist novels will deal with societal problems and tackle controversial or once taboo subjects frankly.

In *Feminist Discourse and Irish Literature: Gender and Power in Louise O'Neill's Young Adult Fiction*, I write in-depth about tensions at work in the contemporary cultural discourse around "rape culture" (17–24). I challenge *Asking For It's* position as an accepted and celebrated feminist text, finding that the book's depiction of "rape culture" as orthodoxy has not been criticised because of how bound up the topic is with the momentous social change that has taken place with regard to feminist issues in the last decade. Without disregarding the influence and achievement of O'Neill's work in emphasising the need for social and political change in Ireland concerning rape and sexual assault, I argue that the text presents sexist ideology too strongly as a wholly conditioning factor in adolescents lives. In *Feminist Discourse*, I analyse how *Asking For It* and *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces* differ significantly in their approach to depicting teenage girls burdened by societal pressures (116; 126–131; 151–152). I consider the effect that a lengthier evolution of critique and analysis of "rape culture" in American society has had on its literature dealing with the topic, and I find that Quintero engages with perceived "rape culture" more critically than O'Neill. The argument that I make in *Feminist Discourse* about the distorted nature of the reality generated by O'Neill's rendering of contemporary Ireland as a culture of rape in *Asking For It* is relevant to this chapter's examination of the author's treatment of realism as a genre and the controversies therein (94–98; 102–104). For context to this chapter's focus on the texts as realist works, I will provide a brief overview of how each novel engages with perceived "rape culture" to illustrate what the authors' different approaches to "rape culture" reveal about their approaches to realism.

4 Tackling the “Taboo”: “Rape Culture” in *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces* and *Asking For It*

In *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces*, Gabi’s friend Cindy tells her that when she started “making out” with German and he “started pulling up her dress,” she had been “all for it at first” but then “changed her mind” (229). German told Cindy that “she had already said yes, and that she couldn’t say no and that was that”; “he didn’t hit her or treat her badly, but he held her down and she cried the whole time” (229). Gabi understands that “German raped Cindy” after this conversation (228), but later in the text she wonders why a boy as “hot” as German would need to force Cindy into having sex with him. Gabi’s interaction with German when she publicly confronts him at school suggests that adolescent girls and boys can both be subject to misconceptions around rape. In a significant moment of nuance, when Gabi challenges German, he stammers his response “your stupid friend doesn’t know what she’s talking about” (260). Gabi thinks that because German “was nervous” maybe “he knew what he did was wrong” (260). German’s subsequent behaviour—opening “his arms as if showing off his body” and saying “Rape? Pfft. She wanted it. How could she not? All girls want this”—might suggest that German sees nothing wrong in what he has done. However, it also implies a façade of libidinous bravado, which suggests how young men might be affected by expectations to do with sexual behaviour and misconceptions about what constitutes rape in a similar way to young women. When German says that Cindy was “begging for it,” Gabi knees him “in the crotch,” pushes him “to the ground” and straddles him, keeping “him down” with her weight (261). Gabi’s aggressive reaction complicates problematic ideas about boys’ innate violence and girls’ passivity, which the “rape culture” rhetoric communicates by suggesting that rape is so pervasive as to be an inevitability.

Whereas Quintero offers a more complex interpretation of perceived “rape culture” by attending to the nuance of sexual relations, as I argue in *Feminist Discourse*, O’Neill provides generalised descriptions of men and boys that convey their assumed inherent violence which overemphasises the connection between sexism and latent violence (103). Ultimately, *Asking For It* misses the opportunity to fully develop the kind of critical conversation among young people that O’Neill’s Afterword attests to: “We need to talk about rape. We need to talk about consent” (344). These aspects of O’Neill’s novel make its position as an accepted and celebrated realist text controversial.

5 Controversies of Literary Realism

Richard Winter delineates between the romantic/realist aesthetic of “realist fictions” that saw authors “seek to create a vivid impression of actuality” and install “the creative writer (of fictional narrative) as another authority figure, imposing her/his vision of the world on its citizens,” and modernist approaches to realism in literature that highlight the illusion of objective reality by drawing attention to their constructed nature (149). Corrine Hirsch provides a similarly useful overview of the varied and contesting views about how realistic presentation in literature has been considered:

For the naturalists, realism of subject matter meant doing justice to life's unpleasantness; to a writer like [William Dean] Howells, it was necessary to include the pleasant side of life in a realistic portrait; some “realists,” more interested in metaphysical concerns, feel it necessary to focus on the ambiguities of the human condition. (11)

These overviews suggest the array of ways that literary realism can be written and interpreted and highlight a concern in realist fiction which becomes a central debate when it is aimed at young readers: “How real do we want literature for young people to be?” (Coats 318).

Discussing the evolution of realistic fiction for young readers in the late twentieth century, Lucy Pearson and Kimberley Reynolds note how the “rise of television and new media contributed to a perception” that young people were “already exposed to ‘adult’ concerns” and how, consequently, literature for young people was “increasingly pressed into service to contextualise and interpret such material” (68–69). Today, newer and more varied media—especially social media—increasingly confronts young people with what their elders might deem too “adult” concerns. Both Quintero’s and O’Neill’s novels examine how messaging in such media can jeopardise young people’s sexual expression and safety by potentially normalising the objectification or assault of women.

When dealing with challenging or taboo issues, authors of literary realism often take a particularly bleak approach to their topic in an attempt to make the fictional world comparable with the harsh truths (as they see them) of the real world. Pádraic Whyte argues, for example, that the approach that many authors take to representing gay characters experiencing negative responses to revealing their sexuality “may be an attempt to produce a sense of realism” but such narratives “also suggest that homophobic responses are natural—and to a certain extent understandable and acceptable—rather than constructed”

(9). Karen Coats suggests that when reading realistic literature for young people, critics ought to ask: “is it really representative of the world, or is it a picture motivated by the author’s ideologically charged view of what the world is, should be, or shouldn’t be like?” (327). In writing about homophobia, sexism or sexual violence authors likely wish to draw attention to what the world “shouldn’t be like,” but, as Whyte points out, in doing so they might counterproductively affirm aspects of the world that they take issue with as inevitable realities.

If realism (broadly) endeavours to accurately interpret and represent reality, by its nature, it also ought to allow for ambiguity—a necessity that seems particularly important for texts like *Asking For It* and *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces* that were written during the “MeToo” era, which brought attention to the necessity for increased critical conversation around issues of rape and sexual assault. O’Neill and Quintero’s works of realism follow the tradition of the YA realist genre by exploring taboo subjects. Because their particular subject matter deals so much with the complexities and controversies around notions of “truth”—particularly tensions between individual experiences and collective “truths”—we ought to be particularly attentive to how their texts interpret and represent contemporary social realities. Furthermore, it is worth considering how these texts reveal broader controversies about YA realism’s capacity to either operate as conventional moral guidance or fulfil its more radical potential and tackle previously unexplored ethical territory.

5.1 *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces and Asking For It as Realism*

Authors of literary realism use dialogue that seems like everyday speech and create convincing descriptions of characters and settings to invite the reader to feel that the fictional world is reliably comparable with real life. Quintero and O’Neill employ narrative methods that are characteristic of literary realism’s conventions to give their novels a realistic feel that is specific to adolescents. These include adolescent protagonists, realistic contemporary settings, and narration from the adolescent’s point of view (Sheldrick Ross 174). Although *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces* is more obviously written in the epistolary style than *Asking For It*, both novels employ aspects of this particular narrative form to produce a convincing protagonist voice.

Asking For It is split into two halves, “Last Year”—detailing the time before Emma is sexually assaulted—and “This Year” narrating what happens afterwards. Although not directly identifiable as a diary form, each chapter is titled with the day of the week, with some days including timed “entries,” such as 8:51 a.m. and 8:57 a.m. These details add an immediacy to the way that the story is told and convey Emma’s agitation and sleeplessness after the assault. The

novel is narrated from Emma's perspective with third-person accounts aligning with her viewpoint. During conversations with other characters, the reader can access Emma's inner thoughts included in bracketed phrases. One example of this happens when Emma's mother and father discuss the likelihood of Emma's sexual history being brought up if the boys accused of sexually assaulting her are brought to court. Emma's mother says "we don't need to worry about that, Emmie is a good girl, we raised her to know better than that" (224). Emma thinks,

(How many boys?)
 (What were you wearing?)
 (How much did you have to drink?). (224)

Gabi, a Girl in Pieces is written in the first person—primarily through diary entries. Gabi's diary entries can be lengthy or sometimes very short, mimicking real-life diary writing:

July 28
 What the fuck just happened?
 Long day. Have to sleep. (10)

As well as using the epistolary form to establish an immediacy of connection between the reader and the novel's protagonists, O'Neill and Quintero add authenticity to their protagonist's adolescent voices through their use of language. The novels are narrated in casual language and are full of contractions and swear or slang words. Phrases authentic to Irish vernacular, such as "what's the craic?" (meaning "any news?"), and Irish language phrases, such as "bi ciuin!" (meaning "be quiet!") appear in *Asking For It* (125). *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces* is written primarily in English and includes Americanisms, such as "totally overrated" (275). Spanish phrases and slang are used regularly (and translated) throughout. These linguistic choices make the protagonists all the more convincing as contemporary teenagers situated in their particular social settings.

According to Sheldrick Ross, "in addition to having a characteristic narrative method, works of YA realism create for the narratee or implied reader a particular sort of reading role" (174). Like most works of YA realism, the reading role created by these novels invites the reader to share in the author's social criticism, which in these texts focuses on critiquing social conditions and structures that negatively affect women and girls. Both authors use the conventions of the genre similarly—in that they utilise realism to provoke social change—

thereby following in the tradition of social realists whose writing reflected the political concerns of the era. Nevertheless, their approaches to form and use of rhetorical strategies differ and alter how the works might be read as realism.

6 Form and Rhetorical Strategies

Most obviously, *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces*'s epistolary form foregrounds Gabi's narrative voice and highlights how the act of writing is central to her character. It calls attention to the connection between the act of writing and power: in becoming an author, Gabi gains authority and the ability to question traditional modes of thinking. For example, to deal with the biased attitudes she encounters when the news that her friend Cindy is pregnant reaches school, and "eight different stories" from "eight different people" circulate, Gabi writes and illustrates poetry. In one of the stories Gabi hears, both she and Cindy "had had sex with German" (28). Gabi also hears "the word SLUTS! thrown at" her and Cindy "a few times" (29). Overall, the stories reveal sexist double standards, whereby expectations for teenage girls' and boys' sexual behaviour differ greatly: Cindy is derogated as promiscuous and to blame for her pregnancy, while "poor innocent" German should be pitied (28). The unfairness of these judgments becomes heightened later in the novel, after Cindy has the baby, when Gabi finds out that "German raped Cindy" (228). Gabi's mother responds similarly to the news of Cindy's pregnancy, saying that Cindy "was always wearing those short shorts [...] offering her goodies to everyone [...] parecia una hoochie" (34).

Gabi sees her mother's viewpoint that "sex is bad" (for Gabi) reflected in so many other people's attitudes that she feels that there are certain societal rules that differ for teenage boys and girls (148). For instance, after kissing Eric, Gabi thinks "things were out of order—I was supposed to wait for him" and understands that she feels this way because of the "unspoken set of girl/boy rules" (56). Despite feeling shameful about her desire, Gabi realises that these rules are not really "written anywhere" (57). Quintero consistently undermines the weight of "unspoken" gendered rules throughout the novel by reframing them as questions. When Gabi writes, "where is it written that girls have to wait for boys to kiss them?", she re-writes this "rule" showing that she can see the duplicity at work in regressive attitudes (loc. 567). Significantly, Gabi acts on this questioning by kissing Eric first. The sheer volume of questions that Gabi asks highlights the importance of critical thinking over passive acceptance in *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces*. For instance, one of Gabi's poems is a list of thirty questions that she would "like to ask" her mother, including "why do you tell me that

sex is bad, but tell my brother to use a condom?" (148). The number of questions concentrated in this section of the text calls attention to how Quintero's repetitive use of questioning acts as a rhetorical strategy that reveals the arbitrary nature of societal "rules" to the reader.

In *Asking For It*, social rules are pronounced, not questioned. Emma repeatedly phrases gendered social expectations as statements, creating a different rhetorical affect. Emma contorts herself—physically and mentally—to conform to the societal expectation of a "good girl" and repeats phrases like "smile and be nice"; "look normal"; "look like a good girl" in an uncomfortable performance that extends from the beginning of the novel right to its closing. When Emma's friend Jamie "fidgets nervously with her dress" and asks Emma if her dress is "too short" Emma tells her "don't be stupid ... with your legs" (51). Although Emma's attitude to clothing here suggests confidence and a desire to demonstrate her sexuality through what she wears, she is also often uncomfortable in what she wears. For example, when Emma's father's friend Ciarán looks her "up and down," Emma worries that she "shouldn't have worn such a low cut top" (51).

In *Asking For It*, what girls wear is frequently remarked upon as directly relating to their sexual availability. On the night that Emma is sexually assaulted, she wears a black dress that is "cut down to the navel, and very, very short" (64). Members of the public comment on her clothing choice as evidence that she was "asking" to be raped. A woman caller on a radio talk show describes Emma and girls like her as:

walking around town [...] half naked [...] and they're all drinking too much and falling over in the streets, they're practically asking to be attacked, and then when it happens, they start bawling crying over it [...] what do they expect? (186)

A tweet after Emma's assault that says "ok girls, just get drunk and slutty, and then shout rape the next day" is described as having been "favourited 136 times" suggesting the popularity of the opinion that Emma was "asking for it," because of what she was wearing, in her community (191).

By the end of the novel Emma's identity becomes so warped by the pressure that she feels to conform that she is no longer Emma, she is "the girl in the mirror" (339). The novel's concluding words are phrased as a statement: "it's important that I look like a good girl" (340). Ending the novel with this statement suggests the extent to which Emma has internalised regressive attitudes. However, it also presents gendered "rules" as realities that are both authentic to girls' experience and inexorable. *Asking For It* suggests that the "unspo-

ken set of girl/boy rules” that Gabi describes are powerfully communicated across all aspects of society. As a linguistic choice, the prevalence of stating societal gendered rules again and again in *Asking For It* results in counterproductively reinforcing rather than weakening such rules as forms of domination.¹

Gabi copes with the injustices and absurdities of the messaging that she receives by rephrasing the rules that she hears as rhetorical questions and thus humorously ridiculing them. Despite being self-conscious about anxieties about her weight and sexually inhibited by social stigmas about what constitutes a “bad girl” and a “good girl,” Gabi appears empowered enough to embrace the way that she disrupts societal expectations. Physically, Gabi does not conform to ideals of “Mexicanness” (35). Her weight means that she does not conform to Western beauty ideals to do with thinness. Unlike her friend Sandra, who is “perfectly dark-skinned” with “long brown hair, dark eyes,” and whom people see as “exotic” and “perfectly Mexican,” Gabi has white skin that does not make her “Mexican enough” (35). When Gabi thinks about how she ought to dress, she muses sarcastically “dresses and I don’t get along. The way I see it, a dress is restricting. It’s a trap” (23). Although this statement might suggest that dresses operate as subjugating sources of patriarchal power—as *Asking For It* implies—Gabi’s reasons for “hating dresses” are light-hearted and practical: jumping a fence in a dress once left her “bare-assed and sweaty” and laughing until her “side hurt” (25). Even though Gabi does not want to wear the “pink sparkly dress” that her mother has picked out for her senior picture so “she will look pretty,” Gabi concedes to wearing it because “otherwise it would hurt her [mother’s] feelings” (26). Gabi’s sense of humour and her empathy for her mother undermine the powerful sway of the societal expectations to do with how girls ought to look and behave that she feels pressured to adhere to.

Gabi repeatedly re-states societal expectations as rhetorical questions laden with sarcasm and thus refutes objective truths about gender relations that monolithically communicate “the way things are.” She asks “a good woman? A good girl? I have no clue” (276). Quintero uses sarcasm and humour to undermine “good girl”/“bad girl” “truths” as meaningfully authentic to Gabi’s lived reality as a young woman and, in turn, to the real lives of her readers.

1 For more detail on gender and social construction in O’Neill’s *Asking For It* and other works see Mooney 136–137; for more detail on the connections and disparities between feminist theory and O’Neill’s articulation of feminist issues in her works see Mooney 56–65.

7 Controversies of Author Experience and Realism

Aspects of these narratives are reflective of their authors' experiences as teenagers. Authors' application of personal experiences as adolescents to their fictional rendering of teenagers is, of course, not unusual to YA fiction—indeed, it is not unusual for any fiction wherein whatever is presented as “real” is subjective to the author's and the reader's experience of reality. However, in this instance, where both novels are authored by writers who are also activists, the addition of the personal is particularly relevant as it works as an additional rhetorical strategy that affects the text's reception as works of realism that operate as vehicles for social change. In an interview in 2017, Quintero says “my writing is my activism,” adding that she has “always talked about the power of writing and how it could change things” because it “changed” her life (qtd. in Rhodes). Like Quintero, O'Neill describes herself as an activist, albeit an accidental one: “It's tricky because, I'm an author, and I wanted to write books, and all of a sudden you're an activist” (qtd. in Hynes). In the same interview O'Neill says that “art, whether that is a book or a play or a film” has a “way of facilitating what are often very hard conversations,” adding that *Asking For It* was published at the right time to be a “conduit” to conversations about “the prevalence of sexual violence and the way in which it's so often diminished within our culture.” Reviewing Ted Hughes's *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose* (1994), Blake Morrison describes how, for Hughes, “works of imaginative literature are ‘a set of dials’ on the front of society, where we can read off the concealed energies” (*The Independent*, 1994). Quintero and O'Neill are authors who are particularly alive to the “concealed energies” at work in society; their works analysed here demonstrate their ability to use literature to turn these dials.

Sheldrick Ross says that “‘reality’ in literature can be represented only within the conventions of literary structure” (189). However, in O'Neill's case, the assumptions about certainties of teenage girls' reality and experiences in contemporary youth culture that are communicated in *Asking For It* are lent an extra authenticity. The subjective viewpoint that the text expresses is shaped by surrounding elements which persuade the reader of its validity. These include O'Neill's account of the prevalence of rape and sexual assault in Ireland at the time of writing the novel and her having spoken publicly about her personal experience of sexual assault. Speaking in an interview about her experience of sexual assault, O'Neill says “I had an experience of more serious sexual violence when I was 19 ... but if you ask me how many times between the ages of 12 and 19 I had unwarranted touching, or people shouting comments at me, I genuinely could not tell you” (qtd. in Hynes). O'Neill's personal experience is bound up with the novel's reception. More significantly, O'Neill communicates

the idea that boys' sexuality is threatening and something to be fearful of in the commentary that she includes in the text itself. In her Afterword to *Asking For It* O'Neill says, "sexual assault (from unwanted touching to rape) is so common that we almost see it as an inevitability" (342). She adds that when she sees "young girls playing" in her local park she "feels so very afraid for them, for the culture that they're growing up in" (343). Attention to occurrences that relate to Emma's experience in *Asking For It* surrounds O'Neill's novel in various other ways: it provided the basis for an RTE documentary, presented by O'Neill, about "rape culture" in Ireland, for example. These additions—both inside of and outside of the text—work as an added conceit to make the novel feel more real. They also make the novel work more as moral guidance than a fictional narrative without these additions might.²

Like O'Neill, Quintero has spoken publicly about her motivation for writing *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces*. In an interview, she talks about how "there were barely any women writers taught" in her English or history classes, "and definitely less non-white folks"—resulting in what she describes as "oppression by omission" operating in her school (qtd. in Rhodes). Although Quintero's personal experience relates to her fictional character Gabi's, nothing in the text itself conveys this comparison between fiction and biography. Whereas aspects of O'Neill's novel, such as the author's Afterword, position it as an authoritative representation of reality, Quintero deliberately draws attention to her narrative as a fictional version of reality. Her adaptation of the conventional epistolary style is central to conveying the constructed nature of her novel, and to reminding the reader that what they are reading is a work of fiction.

8 Re-Imagining Conventional Realism: *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces*

The act of writing is foregrounded in *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces* as central to Gabi's empowerment and it situates the novel as a work of realism. More broadly, Quintero's re-working of the conventional epistolary form emphasises the power of writing beyond how it pertains to Gabi alone. Writing is set up as an emancipatory tool underscoring the text's suggestion that rules can be re-written, and by extension, that reality itself is constructed and not necessarily entirely fixed. The way that the novel itself is put together exemplifies this by calling

² For more detail on the blurred boundaries between inside the text and outside the text (including the author) in O'Neill's works and in YA literature more broadly see Mooney 165–167.

attention to Quintero's re-visioning of the epistolary form. Her use of the epistolary form recalls traditional epistolary novels in which letter-writing was a space where women could express their personal sentiments away from the constraints of public expectation and without breaking social norms. Quintero maintains feminist themes associated with this literary tradition, but adapts the traditional format. As well as diary entries and letters, which are traditionally associated with a novel written in the epistolary style, *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces* contains lists, dialogue and poems. Some poems are written and illustrated by Gabi herself. Gabi's zine "The Female Body" interrupts the novel and spreads over eight pages. Giving Gabi's zine this much space in the novel emphasizes Gabi's authority as a writer and her self-identification as a poet. Others are authored by real poets; canonical English poet Sylvia Plath is set alongside contemporary Mexican-American poets who write in Spanish and English:

This is my favourite part from "Lady Lazarus" by Sylvia Plath because she sounds so ballsy—she tells God and Satan to beware! What the hell! *Ugh*, So good.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer

Beware

Beware (60).

Michelle Serros (who is still alive AND from California!) and Sandra Cisneros (she's still alive too but not from California). Before we read their poetry, I didn't even know you could use two languages in a poem. I thought they had to be in either Spanish or English. Turns out I was wrong. (67)

Positioning these poets in this way calls attention to how the epistolary form was historically associated with elite white women and emphasises the significance of Quintero's re-imagining of its conventions. It also works as a literary technique to establish the novel's political stance. By foregrounding poets who write in Spanish as well as English, Quintero confronts elitist traditions associated with whose voices have traditionally been foregrounded as writers and whose have been overlooked.

The constructed form of Quintero's novel also emphasises how she is more concerned with questioning reality than with attempting to convey teenage reality *as it is*. Arguably, this makes Quintero's text a more authentic interpretation of adolescent experience. Jerry Griswold's characterisation of adolescents suggests their affinity with challenging conventional modes of authority. He

says, “adolescents lack worldly power and are, in some sense, an underclass subordinated to the old” (Griswold 38). This assumption is significant with regard to what Susan Eloise Hinton says about her teenage experience which led her to write *The Outsiders* as a fifteen-year-old: “it drove me nuts that people would set up social rules and social games and never ask where these rules came from or who was saying they *have* to do this or that” (qtd. in Commire 98; emphasis in original.) Gabi’s frustration with social rules permeates Quintero’s novel and, as such, recalls Hinton’s foundational, and exceptionally authentic, work of YA realism, which set a standard for representing teenagers as politically aware reformists rather than passive consumers of culture.

9 Controversies of “Growth” in *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces* and *Asking For It*

As I mentioned in the introduction, according to Catherine Sheldrick Ross “the change of status that comes with new knowledge” is “at the heart” of YA realism as a genre (174). It could be argued that the notion that change or growth is at the heart of YA realism has more to do with idealised adult perceptions of adolescence as a time of sequential development. Indeed, questions of growth as they pertain to children’s and young adult literature have been widely debated and contested by many critics. In *Disturbing the Universe*, Roberta Seelinger Trites asks, “what children’s book *isn’t* about growth?” and describes how characters are understood to have grown or matured once they have negotiated their position within dominant chains of power (10; emphasis in original). In *At Arm’s Length*, Mike Cadden builds on Trites’s discussion about the conventions and expectations to do with growth in contemporary children’s and YA fiction. Cadden argues that growth ought to be recognised as an authorial rhetorical manipulation to satisfy both reader and convention. Differentiating between change and growth, Cadden says, “it might be more accurate to say that all children’s stories involve character change; growth is a conclusion we come to about that change” (40). According to Cadden, “the ‘growth’ of [a] character is an expectation of genre as well as reader, and it’s achieved through modulation of sympathy and approval rather than through any set of values being lauded” (41).

In YA realism, character growth as an expectation is often disrupted by accounts deemed representational to a realistic outcome, wherein growth is denied, whether or not the protagonist had the capacity for a “change of status” or not because of the systems of domination that they are unable to overcome. *Asking For It’s* ending sees the majority of characters unchanged and its protagonist, Emma, wholly diminished by the sexual assault and the circumstances of

her treatment following it. Jeff Giles, writing for *The New York Times*, describes *Asking For It* as “riveting and essential,” adding that “teenagers will recognise its difficult truth and devour it” (“YA crossover”). The novel’s ending may well be part of why critics like Giles have received the text as particularly truthful. Nonetheless, there is something distinctly unauthentic in denying, if not growth, then *any* change to characters in a work of realism as O’Neill does in *Asking For It*.

As I outlined earlier, Emma plays a societal role at the outset of the novel and at the ending she continues to perform it. Emma’s father looks at her “for the first time in months” only when she agrees not to take her case to court; her mother makes it clear that she does not believe Emma was raped: “apparently lots of people who *claim* to be raped can be strangely calm at the beginning” (326, 327; my emphasis). Parents and adult characters conform to and perpetuate regressive attitudes in Quintero’s text, too, and both novels critique the role that grown-ups play in helping young adults form values and behaviours.

However, in Quintero’s text, adults as well as adolescents are capable of change. Older background characters are provided with a level of complexity and nuance that works to counteract the regressive attitude of more central characters, like Gabi’s mother. For example, Gabi’s boyfriend tells her that his father “hates all that macho *boys will be boys* bullshit,” and that he “says that it’s an excuse for men to act like animals” (255; emphasis in original). There is a clear distinction between conventional, traditional attitudes held by adults and the more liberal attitudes of teenagers in the *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces*. Adults are depicted as having prejudiced and sometimes cruel attitudes to teenage expressions of sexuality, especially if these do not conform to heterosexual norms or to gendered expectations. However, adults have the capacity for change; they can develop and are not depicted as static or stereotypically conventional. Quintero shows how Gabi’s generation have the capacity for prejudice too. Their attitudes about sex can also be influenced by dominant conventions or misinformation. Gabi’s response to finding out that Cindy was raped by German shows this. Adults and teenagers (including Gabi) are depicted as often greatly prejudiced but not static, and Gabi, especially, navigates cultural obstacles and develops.

Although Gabi does not ask her mother the questions on her list mentioned earlier, the rhetorical device of questioning facilitates both their development. The act of writing the questions down—which is clarified by framing the questions as a list poem—is more concretely defiant than just thinking the questions. At the end of the novel, Gabi has a conversation with her mother during which her mother expresses her fears for Gabi as questions: “What if you get pregnant? What if they offer you drugs?” (279). Gabi answers her mother

frankly, telling her that if she wants to have sex, she could do it in their house and that she has “already been offered drugs” and “said no” (279). Despite their differences, confronted with Gabi wanting to move out, her mother tells her “Pues, esta siempre es tu casa” (279). Her mother’s response—that their house will always be Gabi’s home—is significantly left untranslated for the reader but Gabi’s response, that this is all she “needed to hear,” explains it (279).

In *Asking For It*, even the questions Emma asks herself mentioned earlier—when she thinks, (How many boys?), (What were you wearing?), (How much did you have to drink?)—are re-statements of the questions that Emma knows will be asked of her (224). Emma does not interrogate why she should be asked such things. At the end of the novel, Emma thinks about her disappointment in her parents’ lack of support:

You were supposed to protect me, I want to say to her.
 You were supposed to be on my side ...
 Do you believe me? (Believe what? I can’t remember.) Did you ever
 believe that this wasn’t my fault? (332)

Emma asks this most significant of questions, “Do you believe me?”, only inside her head and adds: “I don’t ask them that. I will never ask” (332).

10 Conclusion

Discussing the controversial 1971 YA novel, *Go Ask Alice*, which was shelved in bookshops and libraries as non-fiction even though it was a fictional novel, Antero Garcia says, “the conceit of making the book’s contents feel *real* is one we’ve seen carried into today’s fiction” (85; emphasis in original). Garcia notes how *Go Ask Alice* used a “veil of realism” to communicate its “clear moral calculus” which warns its readers about the dangers of drug taking (85). O’Neill’s *Asking For It* follows in the tradition of *Go Ask Alice* and other “shock-and-tell” YA realist novels by reflecting societal issues, but also by enlarging them, at the expense of accuracy, in line with adult anxieties (Garcia 86). Whereas problem-novel-style realist novels, like O’Neill’s *Asking For It*, often present a singular reality as emblematic of a larger “truth” of adolescent experience (as perceived by adults), experimental works of realism, like Quintero’s *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces* separate young adults from adult anxieties and offer a more objective representation of reality, wherein multiple realities and “truths” can co-exist. In the context of recent cultural reckoning concerning sexual assault and rape, wherein some efforts to make complex issues overly clear-cut rely on absolutes

and disregard the possibility for ambiguity, such a perspective on reality is particularly valuable in realist YA works dealing with these issues.

My reading of these two very different texts within the same genre suggests that there is both tradition and innovation within contemporary YA literary realism. However, the genre still faces many of the same controversies that were evident decades ago, particularly the continued prevalence of ideology and “moralistic pressures” in realistic fiction. As Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner state, “ideologies appear natural, they seem to be common sense, and thus are often invisible and elude criticism” (6). In YA works written in the realist narrative mode, where characters are often “assumed to be mimetic simply by being in a text with a realistic setting,” ideologies can be especially invisible (Cadden 20). In 1980 Corinne Hirsch said that a need remained for “careful studies of representative” fiction for the young that is “generally considered realistic” (13). This chapter has shown that over 40 years later, that need remains.

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