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# QUEER COMMUNITIES AS UTOPIAS OF POTENTIALITY IN THE GRAPHIC NOVELS OF KAY O'NEILL

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## Introduction

The graphic novel works by Kay O'Neill (they/them) present a diverse range of ethnicities and hybridities through the anthropomorphised animal and fantastical races that populate their fictional worlds. Additionally, they depict a range of physical abilities, identities, and orientations across their works. O'Neill's whimsical tales deal with brokenness, grief, loss, and finding one's place and purpose in and through the support of queer communities. Throughout their series, O'Neill presents worlds where individuals are not empowered through violence or power, but by their strength of character, kindness, ability to accept themselves, and the encouragement and acceptance of others. Their series repeatedly shows how inclusive communities can be possible through their presentation of deaf, genderqueer, homosexual, and disabled individuals all existing in provincial and urban Fantasy spaces. These spaces embrace rather than ostracise, presenting potentialities: worlds with loss and pain, but also support and healing. Applying José Esteban Muñoz's definition of a queer utopia, this article argues that O'Neill's graphic novels *Princess Princess Ever After* (2016, *PPEA*), *The Tea Dragon Society trilogy* (2017-2021, *TDS*), and *Aquicorn Cove* (2018, *AC*) present different ways queer community spaces are utopias-in-progress that shape individuals' ability to recover, accept themselves, and find purpose, presenting "blueprints of a world not quite here" to inspire readers and present a "realm of educated hope" (Muñoz 97; 3).

## Queer and Utopia

'Queer,' 'queering,' and 'queerness' have come to mean many things, but this article follows Sara Ahmed's and Jack Halberstam's understanding of these labels. In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006), Ahmed acknowledges queer's origins drawing from its etymology "from the Greek for cross, oblique, adverse" to first use it "as a way of describing what is 'oblique' or 'off-line'" apart or different from the norm (161). She goes on to then acknowledge its more contemporary use, to "refer to those who practise nonnormative sexualities which as we know involves a personal and social commitment to living in an oblique world, or in a world that has an oblique angle in relation to that which is given" (161). Similarly, in *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005), Halberstam defines queer as, "nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time" (6). Here we see how 'queer' describes that which is deemed as apart yet can describe people coming

together. At the core of queer is an understanding of what is 'normal,' a society's 'norms,' or what it deems as 'normative,' without which there can be no understanding of the queer.

O'Neill flips these understandings by presenting queerness as the norm within their narratives. Their worlds are populated by different beings all living together in accommodating communities made of disparate peoples who welcome new and old members with empathy and kindness. Yet, to most readers, these worlds are queer because they are both different but also like our own. Their ethnic, gender, and sexual diversity is akin to anglophone countries' populaces, yet the harmony of those communities and the normalcy of their relationships, interactions, and family groups are queer because, despite the diversity found naturally within our reality, our societies other individuals and groups rather than embracing a diverse populace. This establishes the lie that one group is 'normal' while others are not. What O'Neill shows their readers is a queer world that accommodates and empathises rather than seeking antagonism through othering. Through this, they present utopic spaces that show us potentialities: a world that could also be ours.

In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2019), Muñoz explores the potentialities and meanings of a queer utopia with a hopeful optimism for the future akin to those in O'Neill's works. His text and arguments are greatly focused on the experiences of American, homosexual, predominantly cisgender men before the AIDS epidemic, while unfortunately ignoring the lived experiences and utopian ideals of the rest of the queer community. This perspective shapes his ideas around what makes a queer utopia and what such utopias should be and do for us now. The loss of consequence-free love and the grief that the AIDS epidemic brought to his community leads Muñoz to acknowledge the need for stories "of loss and despair," but also the need to be able to dream of a *better* and even *idealised* future (111). He wants the queer community to be able to actively dream of a future "where queer youths of color actually get to grow up" (96). This optimism, while uncritical of its origin and the idealism it calls for, nevertheless resonates with O'Neill's work which likewise presents hopeful tales of communities coming together reflecting the kind of utopia-in-progress that Muñoz calls for. For Muñoz, a queer utopia is "an ideal, something that should mobilize us, push us forward" he is not trying to be "prescriptive" but instead looking for "potential blueprints of a world not quite here, a horizon of possibility" (97). He finds "it is productive to think about utopia as flux, a temporal disorganization, as a moment when the here and the now is transcended by a then and a there that could be and indeed should be" (97). Thus, he is calling us to dream, and dream big, about a future that "is not here yet, [...] a could be, a *should be*" (99, my emphasis). Utopias are impossibly unachievable in their fully idealistic form; nevertheless, they can show us something better than the here and now and, as Muñoz states, this "should mobilize us, push us forward" to make those kinds of communities a reality (97). With this framework of queer utopia as a process, a goal that mobilises and something that is hoped for, this article examines the communities depicted in O'Neill's works and argues that they are examples of this "should be" that Muñoz asserts, just as optimistic but more critical of our reality through their normalising of queerness and the process, goals, and hopes that their queer communities go through, achieve, and realise (97).

### Diversity in Comics and Fantasy

There is a long history of minority figures being on the fringes of anglophone comics and the graphic novel industry, with censorship codes and book bannings playing a large part in keeping it that way.<sup>1</sup> Fantasy is meant to be a space where all things are possible. Thus, excluding certain people from that space rejects their viability as both potential fantasies and viable citizens of a Fantasy world. Yet, as Caitlin Herington notes, "The tendency for narratives in Fantasy fiction to preserve and reproduce traditional patterns of gender and cultural mores is high," speaking to a hegemonic presence within our media that perpetuates a 'norm' within spaces that should be open to all (55). As Pulitzer Prize-winning author Junot Diaz states "if you want to make a human being into a monster, deny them, at the cultural level, any reflection of themselves" (qtd. in Donohue, para. 5). Thus, within the fantastic, these "mirrors" (Donohue, para. 5) of presence or absence speaks as much to the continuation of "gender and cultural mores" as it does to who is deemed appropriate Fantasy figures for audiences (Herington 55). Yet, within this restricted and often hegemonic space, some instances defy the norm to present queer potentialities and those examples are growing in number.

One such space is within juvenile and young adult (YA) fiction where the harsher lines of genre are not enforced but sit side-by-side on the shelf as publishers and booksellers find the age grouping more relevant than the genre of the work. Such fiction abounds with rule-breaking and explorations of the fantastic because, as Anne Balay argues, "it is not taken seriously" (925). Additionally, the rise in graphic novels within these fictions has further increased the instances of diverse characters being *seen* as well as read, leaving no ambiguity about ethnic, racial, or physical appearances and capabilities. This format, as Kate Kedley and Jenna Spiering argue, "reveal[s] subtleties and nuances about gender and sexuality that without the interplay of text and image might otherwise be invisible" because they make readers see these characters leaving no room for mis-reading a characters' race or identity (55). By presenting a visualisation of diverse peoples, these works create mirrors for some and windows for others, through which these groups can be seen, accessed, and better understood rather than seeming absent, other, or incomprehensible. These stories, by writing for younger audiences, carry with them the hopefulness of youth, which can become jaded but can also be confident in the face of insurmountable odds. By telling their stories through the graphic medium and to a juvenile and YA audience, O'Neill's works break with convention, presenting playful tales of queer spaces while still dealing with heavy subjects of grief, harm, and finding one's purpose all while *showing* a world filled with diversity that is naturalised rather than othering.

If, as Ursula Le Guin asserts, "the use of imaginative fiction is to deepen your understanding of your world, and your fellow [humans], and your own feelings, and your destiny" (43), then denying people the "mirrors" that Diaz describes means a lack of understanding about our "fellow" humans, ourselves, and what we can become (qtd. in Donohue, para. 5). As Carolyn Cocca argues, "when an underrepresented group of people is repeatedly reduced to objects, when the narrative's point of view is consistently at that group instead of from that group, the objectified group's story is not being told" (5). This is why organisations like We Need Diverse Books and Disability in Kidlit exist

to help raise awareness of existing works while also challenging publishers and media producers to do better. Thus, representations, in all genres and narratives, are vital to our understanding of the world. O'Neill's works, and the range of representations and the queer communities they depict, are a key part of the change happening for the past decade within comics and graphic novels where more diverse and inclusive stories are being told. Within the recent boom of diversity within anglophone graphic media and narratives, O'Neill's utopias fall within the camp of works that use Fantasy to present how our world could be if we embrace queer communities, ethnic, racial, and mental diversity, and accessibility. Their queer settings lack the threat of our world's discriminating oppression, leaving their characters the freedom to grow into themselves through and with the support of others rather than in spite of them. O'Neill, a New Zealand illustrator and graphic novelist, presents diverse ethnicities and races through their characters' range of skin tones and appearances. Additionally, their world is co-populated by anthropomorphised animal and hybrid characters who are also equal members of these communities and in relationships with the humans of the world. O'Neill's characters present a range of sexual orientations, all of which are shown and reacted to as natural rather than abnormal or taboo. Finally, they include characters with physical and mental disabilities to create a queer utopic space where all are welcome and accommodated without seeming to be a burden or unwanted. These queer communities are not utopian in the sense of being conflict-free, but rather they present a queer utopia of possibilities that Muñoz describes as a force to mobilise us.

### O'Neill's Queer Utopian Communities

O'Neill uses their queer utopias-in-progress and adolescent characters to present how empathising and understanding people, especially individuals deemed as 'other,' is the best way to deal with conflict. This is seen in *PPEA*, a story where O'Neill deconstructs stereotypical princess and hero Fantasy tropes, when Prince Valdric and Princess Amira, both trying to be 'heroes,' argue how best to slay an ogre who is destroying a nearby town. While they are busy arguing, Princess Sadie just walks up to the ogre, says "Excuse me," and informs him that "You need to stop dancing, okay? You're a great dancer, but can't you see you're scaring everyone away?" (25, panels 1, 3). Amira starts to shout that the ogre is not dancing when the ogre replies, "Actually, I often wonder if my lack of creative fulfilment is because I never have an audience" (25, panel 7). Sadie's unique experience and sheltered life lead her to an innocent assumption whereas Amira's adventuring and the pressure Valdric is under to be a certain kind of prince lead both to assume violent intent. O'Neill subverts the tropes of a princess's rescue, heroic actions, and terrorising monsters, queering readers' expectations. This presents O'Neill's "nonnormative logics" of Fantasy, by queering Fantasy tropes to present non-violent methods of problem-solving that favour understanding and empathy over threats and harm (Halberstam 6). This emphasises the value of such queer, "nonnormative logics," and how a reorganisation around accommodation, understanding, and empathy helps a community become a utopia-in-progress (6). Alternatively, in the *TDS* series, O'Neill presents how, in *The Tea Dragon Festival (Festival, 2019)* and *The Tea Dragon Tapestry (Tapestry, 2020)* Rinn's village, Silverleaf, is willing and *wants* to learn and adapt for the sake of one member. When Aedhan, a guardian dragon awoken from an 80-year slumber, asks about Silverleaf's use of sign language Rinn replies, "A few of the older generation still aren't so confident at it. But after Lesa was born, I think

everyone wanted to learn. I grew up with it" (*Festival 72*, panel 2). This accommodation reflects Muñoz's idea of utopia as an ongoing process. O'Neill shows "a moment when the here and the now" a society that, like ours did not broadly speak sign language, "is transcended by a *then* and *there* that could be and indeed should be," shown through the community's willingness to learn and accommodate just one of its members (Muñoz 97, original emphasis). In *Tapestry* Silverleaf is mentioned as altering its route into the village and some of its buildings so that Erik, who is in a wheelchair at this point, can visit and access his home. That the entire village is not only willing but *wants* to accommodate individuals with accessibility needs presents a queer utopia-in-progress where the majority are happy to learn and act to ensure the inclusivity of its spaces and society. This level of both acceptance and accommodation presents spaces where individuals are valued and loved for who they are, not whether they are perceived as contributing members of society. Through Silverleaf's accommodations, all its members can flourish rather than being discounted or excluded because they lack certain abilities. Thus, O'Neill "nourish[es] our sense of potentiality [...] by presenting] a critical modality of hope" through a queer society that changes for its members presenting the utopia-in-progress Muñoz sees as a necessity for queer visual culture (Muñoz 111).

O'Neill's stories show how people can thrive if given the chance and the correct tools to do so. In the *TDS* series, Minette also is a neurodiverse individual because she suffers from short-term and long-term memory loss. Considered a seer with great power, Minette felt pressured to always push herself to see more until she went too far and it backfired, filling her mind with too much foreknowledge. In response her mind erased everything, leaving her with memory loss and struggling with information retention. Throughout the first and third books in the series, Greta and Minette's relationship grows with Greta promising to look out for Minette and it is her acceptance of Minette the way she is and the support of Hesekiel, Erik, and the rest of the community that helps Minette feel like she can begin to find a way of living with her condition. Through examples like Erik and Minette, O'Neill presents some of Diaz's "mirrors," characters who are often absent from Fantasy spaces, but furthers this through their inclusive, accommodating worlds that change to help the few because the many *want* to ensure they have equitable access and opportunities (qtd. In Donohue, para. 5). By telling these stories *from* the perspective of these underrepresented groups, not just *at* them, these narratives exemplify the change that Cocca calls for, and empowers these characters by making them the subjects of their story instead of objects within it (5). This presents the kinds of queer "potentiality [...] and] critical modality of hope" Muñoz calls for in queer stories and is on the rise within graphic novels (111).

The age of O'Neill's characters presents the innocence of youth and suggests that adolescents' goodness, instilled in them through the queer communities that raise them, allows them to seek solutions through empathy and understanding rather than threat or violence. These intergenerational communities present "the realm of educated hope," a space full of possibility that should inspire our communities (Muñoz 3). While O'Neill's works are fantasies, the communities they present show how it is not magic that makes a better world, but the people's choices to accommodate, welcome, and grow with each other, that creates a utopia-in-progress. Significantly, O'Neill's characters are raised by queer communities that reflect these sentiments and speak to a

potential utopia where this kind of rearing results in caring youths who seek to understand others rather than viewing them as threats first. In the *TDS* series, Rinn's accommodating village and the community that is fostered in the city through the members of the Tea Dragon Society all create and present spaces with supportive, diverse partnerships that, in turn, support the other members of the community. For example, Greta's parents are a human-looking man who is lean, bookish, and dark-skinned and a goblin-blooded mother who is a head taller than her husband and much more muscular as a result of that lineage and her blacksmith trade, in addition to her bull-like horns, tail, and bottom canines which are prominent like tusks. Hesekiel is an animal-like humanoid who is lean, grey fur-covered, and scholarly. His partner Erik is the brawn of their bounty-hunting duo and retains that upper-body strength through his wheelchair use and occasional sword practice while his lower body is shown with atrophic musculature. In *Festival* Rinn and Aya are shown living with their Gramman and the village accommodates not only Lesa in her sign language, and Erik with his wheelchair, but also Rinn in their gender fluidity which is never explicitly stated and only hinted at in *Festival* then confirmed in *Tapestry* when they and Aedhan visit Erik and Hesekiel and are referred to with they/them pronouns. All of these examples challenge the graphic novel industry, the Fantasy genre, and juvenile fiction to similarly present this kind of natural diversity in their fantastical spaces. O'Neill exemplifies Muñoz's "modality of hope" by showing the kinds of accommodating and inclusive communities that "indeed should be," but which are queer to us because of their normal, naturalised, inclusive diversity (97). While there is a need to tell stories that depict the reality of discrimination, racism, and the too-often violent acts that groups suffer, O'Neill's works present a simple hopeful message that we need to learn from those stories of hurt and work towards a utopia-in-progress where accommodation, acceptance, and support become a reality as we rewrite our future to be one of hope and possibility where diversity will seem natural and normal rather than a point of tension and reason for discrimination.

Significantly, O'Neill's worlds and communities are utopias-in-progress, the "potentiality or concrete possibility" Muñoz calls for (1). This process is presented within each work through a central problem that must be overcome, with the resolution of each issue exemplifying a fostering community that moves them towards being a utopia-in-progress. For example, the harmonious connection between nature and human spaces comes under brief moments of threat in the *TDS* series when creatures grow hungry and attack. This is seen first in *The Tea Dragon Society* (*Society*, 2017) when Greta is walking home from the market and sees some black wolf shapes cornering Jasmine, Hesekiel's tea dragon. The panels, using some of the darkest pallets in the book, show the wolves' lean forms and drooling mouths which emphasise their threat (11, panels 1-2). The next panel shows Greta at first angry at their aggressive actions, then, in the same panel, her dawning realisation (11, panel 3). Rather than acting violently or threateningly towards them, Greta empathises and understands why they are acting aggressively noting that their leanness and drooling mean "they're starving," and O'Neill has Greta's speech bubble over the image of the wolves now from a different perspective to reflect Greta's understanding (11, panel 4). Rather than scaring them away or getting help, Greta pulls out the meat cuts she has in her bag and leaves them for the wolf shapes to eat, smiling as the wolves perk up and seem more like eager dogs at dinner time than the threatening wolves previously shown (11, panel 5-8). By having this moment early in the story, O'Neill sets

the tone for their series, showing how understanding others is the solution to conflict rather than responding with threats or escalations. However, the *Tea Dragon* world is not without threats that cannot be reasoned with, as seen in *Festival* when a raptor-bat creature attacks Rinn and Aya while out in the open field outside of Silverleaf. Aedhan fights the creature to keep the two children safe but is wounded in the process. Nevertheless, neither combatant is killed: the creature is only scared off from the field, while Aedhan, in his human form, is next seen being tended to by Rinn. This sequence juxtaposes with a later moment in the book when Hesekeiel and Erik, adventuring bounty hunters, seek out the creature that has been putting people, and Aedhan, to sleep. When they finally meet it rather than kill it, as with Greta in *Society*, they empathise and understand that it puts people to sleep so they can dream of its forest as it once was, wanting only to share its memory. They explain to it that a few hours are more than sufficient rather than the eighty years that Aedhan was under (*Festival* 96, panels 3-4). Thus, O'Neill shows these violent adventurers also practising empathy and reasoning with creatures where they can, reflecting Muñoz's "realm of educated hope" through a community where understanding is valued above and used before violence and threats (3).

This trend of empathetic understanding also occurs within their other series. In *AC* the conflict of the story comes from an Australian fishing village finding a balance between the village's dependency on the ocean and the damage that overfishing and pollution have on the reef and ecosystem. It is Lana, a young girl who is visiting the village with her father, who mends the rift between the reef and the village. Both spaces are represented in the figures of Aure and Mae. Aure is a magical being from the sea who looks after the reef and the Aquicorns who live in it and keep it healthy. While Mae, Lana's aunt, still grieves the death of her sister, Lana's mother, at sea and is determined to keep the village alive despite how their plastic nets have resulted in overfishing the reef. Both women are firm in their determination to preserve the spaces they represent, despite their love for each other, and it takes Lana going to Aure and Mae going to find her, to finally allow the rift between sea and land to be healed. O'Neill uses this queer pairing to show the need for compromise and communication within and between communities. Mae, worried because another storm is racking the village, protests that one village's actions can do little to stem the tide of pollution and overfishing, Lana counters by saying: "I know our village is small, and we can only do small things to help the sea. But I still think we should do them. [... because] if the reef dies, I think our village will die too" (75, panels 5, 7). Here O'Neill uses Lana to be a voice of empathy and understanding to bridge the gaps of resentment and hurt to call for responsibility and action even in the face of problems that are much bigger than just one village. All of O'Neill's series show young women stepping forward proposing empathy rather than selfishness and further misunderstandings in the face of conflict. This breaks with the norm of fantastical narratives where the 'other,' monsters, and violent creatures, are defeated through destruction or ostracising. Instead of othering these creatures, O'Neill presents them as parts of nature, showing a queer understanding of them as beings with equal rights to existence. These queer voices, actions, and spaces present the kinds of utopias-in-progress, the "realm of educated hope" that can come to be if empathy and understanding are the main recourse to problem-solving, rather than erroneous presuppositions, proud stubbornness, and threatening reactions (Muñoz 3).



### Healing and Wholeness through Community

O'Neill's communities are not without their misunderstandings, but these conflicts are solved through cooperation and solidarity rather than isolation or blame. O'Neill's Fantasy spaces are communities of connection and support, queer utopias-in-progress, that show how fostering and supporting individuals allows them to discover themselves and understand what it means to be who they want to be. For example, in the *TDS* series, the main characters are presented at liminal moments where they are deciding what their trade will be and O'Neill uses this as a metaphor for each character's journey and sense of identity and self. In *Festival*, Rinn is discovering their trade, beginning the story wanting to be a cook, but is frustrated by their lack of ability. Through their time with Aedhan, and the support of the Silverleaf villagers, they realise that they do not want to be a cook. While foraging with Aedhan, he comments, "You know, you're extremely skilled at gathering food from the earth," to which they reply, "It's nothing special—it's easy" (82, panel 2). Aedhan replies, "Just **because** something comes easily to you, does not mean it has no value. You find it effortless because you love it, and that is why it is your gift" (82, panel 3, emphasis in original). Here O'Neill shows how queer communities allow for new perspectives, see individuals, and what they can do, and supports and values those traits and individuals for it and by extension comments on the prevalence of normative ideas around modes of production and acceptable careers within our reality. O'Neill uses this arc to present how a queer community can support and encourage young people to explore their abilities and find a trade that makes them happy rather than pressuring them into 'acceptable' careers.

The *TDS* series also shows how queer communities are places of healing. Erik and Hesekeiel appear in all three works showing readers how the couple lived before and after Erik is paralysed from the waist down. The couple's meeting, adventuring, adversity, and starting a new life in the tea shop are presented in *Society* through Jasmine's and Rooibos' (their tea dragons) tea leaves. Hesekeiel and Erik trust Greta enough and want to share their story with her and so brew the tea and share that intimate part of themselves with her. Through that sharing the audience sees how they met, grew to love one another, and how after Erik's injury he felt like he was holding Hesekeiel back saying, "This isn't what you signed up for. [...] You shouldn't have to give up exploring and adventuring because of me. You loved that" (45, panel 6, 8). Rather than Hesekeiel leaving Erik now he is in a wheelchair and needs care, Hesekeiel tells him, "I signed up to fight by your side. To treat your wounds, to never abandon you. [...] It was never the adventure that I loved" (45, panel 7, 10). When she returns to the present, Greta sees Hesekeiel and Erik looking lovingly at one another (46, panel 2) and Erik comments, "running the tea house turned into an adventure of its own" reflecting how he is not bitter at his new lot in life and the contentment that they share exists because they stayed together and were able to find a new purpose and way of living (46, panel 4). Here O'Neill again deconstructs the stereotypes around heroes, as seen in *PPEA*, only now showing an alternative to the thrill of action and violence to instead show the quiet domesticity and community of the tea shop as something that is challenging and satisfying. This is confirmed in *Tapestry* when they are shown tending their garden and Erik comments, "I never stuck around in one place long enough to find [out that he has a green thumb], 'til we lived here" and while he misses his family from Silverleaf he feels that they "found a lovely [new family] out here" (51 panel 1; 52 panel 4). This statement

reflects the common trend within queer communities to have chosen families, a group of people who come together as friends and form a closer bond as a family they have chosen rather than being born into. Here O’Neill shows us how queerness can “be about a desire for another way of being in both the world and time, a desire that resist[s] mandates to accept that which is not enough” (Muñoz 96). While Erik’s family has not rejected him (often the reason a chosen family is formed) his new chosen family is still a product of disparate people coming together to support one another, again reflecting how O’Neill’s queer communities do not form in opposition, but out of a desire to have a space to call home and feel like they belong. The magic of the tea dragon leaves allows him to be able to share his story with Greta but also means that Rinn can bring him leaves from the Silverleaf tea dragons so that he can catch up with his family there. Showing how the communities *want* to stay connected with their members even when they have moved to a new home and have created a new community. Again, O’Neill’s utopic queer community is built on accommodation and connection, acting as a template for us to follow.

The healing that an accepting and accommodating community can provide is shown by Minette’s character, who begins as an outsider with her neurodivergent memory loss making her feel broken and a burden to others so that she self-isolates. However, through her interactions with the Tea Dragon Society members, she feels accepted, supported, and able to heal her mind, though not completely. O’Neill uses Minette’s development as the climax of *Tapestry* as Minette begins to have dreams of her ancestors and Ancestor god which culminates in it telling her, “Everything that happens is part of your wholeness. The sadness the loss, the hurt, as well as the joy, the love, the friendship—it is all part of your tapestry. [...] Minette... remember that you are already whole” (100, panels 1, 3–4). This message of wholeness is poignant within this series as all of O’Neill’s characters are shown beginning in liminal positions where they need to make decisions that will shape the rest of their lives or adapt to circumstances that are beyond their control. Through the *TDS* series, O’Neill shows how it is through a community’s acceptance, accommodation, and empathy towards its members and outsiders that enables it to become a kind of utopia, and how we need only choose to live that way to make it a reality.

O’Neill’s queer communities extend beyond the *TDS* series and repeatedly present how a supportive social structure enables individuals to discover themselves and heal. In *AC* O’Neill presents how communities heal individuals through the support they give. After Lana’s mother died at sea, her father moved them to the city. Lana tells the reader:

Dad was busy trying to start our new life, and he was hurting too. I needed help, but I didn’t know how to ask. I didn’t know how to explain I needed help with the small things. The things I never noticed before, until suddenly they took effort. Sometimes I feel like I just want to go to sleep for a while, and wake up when I’m stronger or things are different somehow.  
(33)

O'Neill shows how grief affects people differently and how hard it can be for both parent and child when a spouse is lost. Lana likes staying with Mae in the village because she "takes care of me. I want to feel like a kid, like a little fish in a rock pool. I want Mom" (35). In the city, she feels alone and unable to ask for help, whereas in the village Mae is there looking after her without being asked due to her looking after everyone in the village. As the story progresses and Lana learns about the Aquicorns, the damage to the reef, and Aure's request that the village stops overfishing, she sees that her aunt Mae also needs help, that there are others who, like her, need help but cannot ask for it. She becomes the voice for the reef, calling her aunt to change and when she leaves, she states: It's not like I'm excited to go home, but I feel like I can face it now. Seeing how strong Mae and Aure are, how they fight for their ways of life...makes me think about what I want to protect as well. I think it's time to learn how to be a guardian to myself, and my feelings. Gentle and strong—like Mom. Coming to the village let me feel safe and protected for a while. Now I have strength to face the harder things. (86–87, panels 5-6, 1–2)

Through Lana's character, O'Neill shows how a community's support and empathy allow individuals to heal and be strengthened to face changes, figure out who they want to be, and process grief. However, this community must also be willing to change when necessary for the sake of others, even just a single member, simply because it is the right thing to do. O'Neill again shows their readers a queer utopia that "should mobilize us [and] push us forward" through their accommodating and adaptive communities (Muñoz 97). These communities are places where wrongs are forgiven rather than dwelt on, just as Aure forgives Mae her stubbornness to change. They must be places that are willing to make changes, in this case, to restructure their economy for the sake of the natural reef that protects them. Through this forgiveness and compromise, Lana sees how strong people can be, but also how vulnerable and dependent they are on one another. O'Neill's worlds are queer utopias-in-progress, where humans, nature, and the magical all intermix harmoniously because the communities within them are willing to accommodate one another and the needs of the few, who in turn enrich the community through their unique abilities.

## Conclusion

O'Neill's graphic novels tell simple stories in idyllic spaces, with young protagonists who are finding their way to adulthood responsibility through the kindness and acceptance of the communities around them. These communities support and want to adapt to accommodate individuals' needs and by doing so present queer utopias-in-progress where everyone is looked after, supported, and thrives, enriching the community in turn. O'Neill's worlds show how these queer spaces of healing and acceptance allow people to find their purpose and the strength they need to face the challenges of their lives. Telling these whimsical stories presents the "critical modality of hope" that Muñoz calls for and "renders potential blueprints of a world not quite here" but one "that could be and indeed should be" (111; 97). We need to encourage individuals to find what they are passionate about and encourage them in those pursuits, not just to follow expectations but to allow them to question the why of their industries and find answers to reveal the purpose behind their labour. O'Neill's characters create a diverse range of "mirrors" for their readers to see themselves in, challenging

the Fantasy genre to include the full range of the human experience and to have spaces that do not discriminate based on who one's partner is, how they look, or what perceived disability they might have (qtd. in Donohue, para. 5). Instead, they want communities to look for ways to encourage, accommodate, and educate so that they grow and learn rather than stagnate, or remain restrictive and oppositional towards their members and others who might seek to (re)join it.

O'Neill's stories are aimed at a younger audience as they hope that perhaps these readers might, like Lana, be the voices for those who cannot ask for help or are not heard when they do. O'Neill's adult characters likewise call their readers to be better than many of us are, to be welcoming to those in need, forgiving to those who have abandoned or hurt us, and to know that when we love it should not be limited by our partner's physical ability or health. O'Neill's utopias are fantasies, but ones which we could make a reality by working at it, much like Mae and her village must work to find a better way to maintain their livelihood without harming the reef that keeps them safe. While there is still very much a need for stories that speak to the realities that so many queer individuals experience, there is also an urgency to tell fantastical stories that show us a better way from what is or has been; a utopian goal to reach for, beyond the hate and hurt that we are so often surrounded by. O'Neill's simple stories are all the more powerful for their idyllic spaces and communities because they seem effortless to attain. Their queer communities present a systemic template that could be followed so that we too might have accessible, inclusive, and thriving spaces for all members of our communities.

## NOTES

1. As of 2017 the Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin–Madison's, "statistics indicate that the overwhelming numbers of graphic novels targeted toward young readers do not feature—nor are they produced by—people of color" (Medina 346-347). Additionally, in 2021 *Gender Queer* (2019) was the most banned book in the United States of America due to its depiction of nude characters, sexual acts, and menstruation as it tells the autobiographical story of a young, genderqueer individual coming to understand their identity (Harris and Alter). Even as these works are on the rise, this increase and acceptance is still very tentative and recent.

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#### BIONOTE

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