

Nicole Sagal

Writing Deliverables

Thesis FA 2020-SPR 2021

Thesis Instructor: Martin French

Thesis Mentor: Jonathan Hill

Written Proposal

In a 10-15 page horror graphic novel, I will tell a story of ‘otherness’ specifically related to body dysphoria and sexual orientation. The story is a coming of age tale that follows two teenage boys as they struggle with their identities as a mad scientist's son and the boy that she reincarnated from the dead. I want to explore the loneliness, shame and confusion that being LGBTQ in a heteronormative society creates- and how that can be overcome by connecting with other people who share that same trauma. The goal of this project is to connect with a teenage LGBTQ audience and create meaningful representation that lets them feel seen, to help them better understand themselves.

I want this work to help normalize expanding LGBTQ themes and characters into other genres of work instead of forcing them to stay limited to just being ‘gay and lesbian fiction.’ I feel that the horror genre is relatively untouched with these aspects, unfortunately, despite being a space where they could be explored in many ways. Horror has a long history of using the ‘other,’ like LGBTQ people, disabled people, and other marginalized identities to scare audiences. If you look up queer horror, the results you find are not usually explicitly queer stories. Movies like *Rope*, *Silence of the Lambs*, *Sleepaway Camp*, and *Carrie* all code their villainous characters to be LGBTQ. These play on harmful stereotypes about gay and trans people being something to fear; people that are innately dangerous. Some are outright derogatory, like in the case of “Buffalo Bill” from *Silence of the Lambs*, but others invite sympathy for their villains by showing us what it’s like to be an outcast, like *Carrie*. It’s interesting how LGBTQ people tend to flock to the horror genre regardless of the problematic depictions, because they connect to the monstrous and the othered. Better “bad” representation

than none at all. I know that's the case for me, and my readings of horror films are richer when watching them with a critical eye through that lens.

In my work, I want to flip the narrative and spark fear from the structures that villainize others, rather than those outsiders themselves. Additionally, as someone who has struggled with dysphoria, I wanted to express my own thoughts and feelings about gender identity through a genre that I've always been drawn to. It will be a deeply personal work as I tie my own experiences into the narrative, but I hope it is accessible to not just LGBTQ audiences, but anyone who might be a fan of horror. My graphic novel will focus on the two main characters Theo and August. August has just recently died, but thanks to some strange events of fate and circumstance, his body is reanimated and he is brought back to life. Unfortunately, August is not happy about defying death. Being a living corpse brings a whole handful of problems. August struggles with being the only one of his kind, forced to figure out how to live again completely on his own. He is constantly under the watch of scientists and the public as a marvel of nature- unable to live just as a normal teenager again. Additionally, his body begins to betray him. The way he is revived is by implanting growths of a strain of algae into him that change the way he looks and how he interacts with the world. He's not quite an alien species, but not quite human anymore either. This disconnect and fracturing of identity is where I will draw most of the horror from- which acts as a metaphor for body and gender dysphoria. Theo, on the other hand, is the son of the lead scientist who brought August back to life. He is just coming to terms with his own sexual orientation, and is forced to keep himself in the closet to protect his mother's reputation. He leads a sheltered life, but is always under scrutiny by the media that clamor around her and her work. His mother additionally leaves him unnoticed, favoring her experiment and giving all her attention to August instead of her own son. This causes Theo to rebel and lash

out, and August quickly becomes the target of his ire. However, Theo realizes that he's quickly developing feelings for the other boy, and the two must overcome the restraints of their environment and their own selves to be together.

While I want the theme of my story to be dark, I don't want it necessarily to be gloomy. There are too many stories about LGBTQ people suffering, and I'd like to again bend the tropes of the genre and end on a hopeful note for my characters. I'm choosing to create a graphic novel because I feel it will be the most effective at conveying the narrative and the symbolism I wish to get into, while staying accessible. It allows for a connection between characters and audience as they can see the characters grow and change over time. It allows for a bit more engagement with the audience as a narrative instead of a set of illustrations. My goal is to allow anyone who picks my story up to be able to understand what I'm trying to get across, even if they might not have studied queer theory or have experienced body dysphoria. My target audience is primarily young LGBTQ adults who want to see themselves represented in fiction, and then outside of that, anyone else who is a horror or comics fan.

The finished project will be a 10-15 page graphic novel. It will be created digitally, using Photoshop and Indesign. Ideally I would have liked to have gotten the book printed physically, but I think instead it will be finished as a PDF and/or placed on a website online. A website I'm looking into for publishing the final result is tapas.io. For my oral defense, a PDF of my work will be shared with everyone, so that regardless if they have an account online or not, they can still read it.

My creative influences include Emily Carroll, Junji Ito, and Guillermo Del Toro. These are artists that I'm inspired by for their mastery of narrative and technical skill. All of them work in the horror genre, and I've been studying how they work with suspense, themes, and

composition. For my conceptual influences, I'm looking to works written by Melody Hope Cooper, Harry Benshoff, Judith Halberstam, and Susan Stryker. Cooper and Benshoff have written about LGBTQ representation in horror media, while Halberstam writes more exclusively about queer theory and how it relates to time. Lastly, Susan Stryker is a seminal trans theorist who has spoken about the connection between the monstrous and her transgender identity. Other medias that have influenced me in my journey so far have been NBC's *Hannibal* for its aesthetic and artistic gore, Kazuo Ishiguro's book "*Never Let Me Go*" for its atmosphere and tone, and Anthony Minghella's "The Talented Mr. Ripley" film for its compelling portrayal of psychological horror, homosexuality and identity.

I have only recently, as of last year, begun creating comics. In my graphic novel class, I began the process of adapting small short stories (original and otherwise) into comic formats. I also have created a picture book adapting a myth into my own art style, and a zine of illustrations fitting a central theme. This year I am again working on a comic, a longer-form story of my own creation in my advanced graphic novel class. I feel like this is a natural progression for me to tackle. It will challenge me technically and conceptually as I am working to not only present a competent work of art, but one that is more abstract intellectually as well. The themes I'm trying to tackle are the most ambitious aspect. Also, figuring out how to self publish original content is the next hurdle for my practice that will help me get myself on my feet in the comics world. I've always relied on fanart to inspire me, but original work is a field I really haven't explored much outside of school. I think that pushing myself to find the stories I want to tell- instead of someone else's'- will be so valuable in figuring out what my own voice is.

I love horror, but it is a glaringly problematic genre. It uses marginalized bodies for cheap scares, villainizing those who are most vulnerable in our society. I am tired of seeing the

same story told over and over again, where I have to watch the characters I most relate to suffer horrible fates simply because they are different. It's a shame, because the genre is rich with possibilities to explore the human condition. I want to follow in the footsteps of other creators who are trying to reclaim, in a way, the genre into one that represents all experiences without demonizing them. I want to give readers a chance to read LGBTQ stories without it being limited to *only* being a LGBTQ story. I hope to break down the barriers between the two genres and share a story that represents people in a nuanced, interesting, and different way. I want to show that heteronormativity is the real thing to be afraid of, without causing undue suffering or trauma in an already traumatized audience. I want to bring a fresh voice to a stagnating genre and inspire hope in readers that are just like me.

Bibliography

Anderson-Lopez, Jonina. "Hiding Under the Covers: Representations of Diversity in Horror Fictions." Union Institute and University, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2019.

Emphasizes lack of diversity in the horror fiction genre. Points out these shortcomings and references the author's own work as a means to fix these problems.

Benshoff, H. M. (1998). *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film*. Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press.

Discusses the role of LGBTQ people in horror and how they've been depicted throughout cinematic history. Analyzes the socio-historical climates these films have been made from and the implications of these narratives.

Cooper, Melody Hope, "Some-ness in No-When: Queer Temporalities in the Horror Genre" (2018). Theses, Dissertations and Capstones. 1168.

<https://mds.marshall.edu/etd/1168>

Proposes a thesis about ‘queer time’ and how the construction of time is deeply rooted in hetero/patriarchal values. Creatures and characters breaking the norms of what we understand as time acting as a more subtle horror.

Grant, B. K. (2017). *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Dissects how gender is portrayed in the horror genre. Reveals attitudes between audience and creators about gender roles in the heterosexual patriarchy.

Hudson, S. (2018). A Queer Aesthetic: Identity in Kurosawa Kiyoshi's Horror Films”. *Film-Philosophy*, 22(3). Edinburgh University Press.

Illustrates how ‘queering’ boundaries can be- and is- explored in a few horror films. Particularly explores how the boundaries between the human and non-living are dissolved in ghost films.

Morgan, Elizabeth M. “Contemporary Issues in Sexual Orientation and Identity Development in Emerging Adulthood.” *Emerging Adulthood* 1, no. 1 (March 2013): 52–66. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696812469187>.

Study about sexual orientation and how it’s been classified and understood in scientific terms. Discusses stages of sexuality, and focuses mainly on young adults grappling with (sexual) identity.

Screened. “How Guillermo Del Toro Uses Violence.” Youtube video, 8:44. Nov 29, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=69p-YzVCcus>

Thematic analysis of three of Del Toro's films. Useful for understanding and conveying metaphor/symbolism in visual works.

Somerton, James. "Deep Cuts: Society and Queer Horror." Youtube video, 1:24:45.

Oct 4, 2020.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M8Z1NjpdH1M>

Video essay delving into the horrors of society, and how they affect the queer population.

----- . "Monsters in the Closet: A History of LGBT Representation in Horror Cinema." Youtube video, 56:34. Oct 21, 2018.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4zPCM14-SCQ&t=10s>

Video essay exploring LGBT representation in horror films. Breaks down individual, iconic contemporary films and interprets them through a queer lens.

Stryker, Susan. "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage." *GLQ* 1 June 1994, 237–254.

<https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-1-3-237>

An essay connecting the author (a trans woman)'s relationship with her gender to the monstered other. Argues about reclaiming and using language to find comfort in the trans identity.

Creative Brief

My name is Nicole Sagal, and for my thesis project I plan to create a 10-15 page horror graphic novel, focusing on 'otherness' specifically related to body dysphoria and sexual orientation, entitled "Growing Pains." "Growing Pains" follows two teenage boys as they struggle with their identities as a mad scientist's son and the boy that she reincarnated from the dead. I want to explore the loneliness, shame and confusion that being LGBTQ in a heteronormative society creates- and how that can be overcome by connecting with other people who share that same trauma.

As someone who has struggled with dysphoria, I wanted to express my own thoughts and feelings about gender identity through a genre that I've always been drawn to. I hope it will be accessible to LGBTQ audiences, fans of horror, or anyone that has felt uncomfortable in their own skin. The goal of my project is to connect with young LGBTQ adults, and since the subject matter might be a little heavy, I'm thinking people 15 and older. That age is where you really start to form your identity, so I hope that my comic will create meaningful representation for my audience that helps them understand themselves.

"Growing Pains" will be made completely digitally, using Paint Tool Sai and Photoshop. I will also be posting it online, and trying to submit it as part of a pitch packet to different publishers.

There isn't a large mainstream market of LGBT horror comics. However, Emily Carroll is perhaps the most well known- and a huge influence on my own work. Her stories from "Through the Woods" have a creepy, tense atmosphere that I'd love to emulate. More thematically related, I tend to think of my comic as a mix between "Frankenstein" and "Stand By

Me”- a coming of age tale with body horror elements and a focus on identity, solitude, and otherness. One of the main reasons why I feel so compelled to make this comic is because the horror genre is notoriously problematic in its depictions of marginalized groups and queer coding, yet LGBTQ people still enjoy it and flock to the genre. Additionally, I see mainstream publishing hasn’t really explored LGBTQ stories that fall outside of the “high school romcom drama” format and I, as a queer person, am tired of it. And I think that other LGBTQ people are too.

My thesis is going to serve as a pitch packet that I can immediately send to publishers. I’m creating my 10-15 pages of comics, but I will also have the script, plot overview/synopsis, and visual development as well. In the case that it isn’t picked up, I have my story written and so I can work on it and publish it online myself. I want to get hired with this story-but no matter what happens, it’s amazing practice to get used to the comic industry and what that looks like as a career.