
Starving Desire: New (Deleuzean) Readings of Anorexia in Australian Young Adult Fiction

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Anorexia nervosa is recognised as a particularly prevalent disorder among young adult women and much attention has been paid to its multifarious ‘causes’. Intense media scrutiny of the issue has spilled over into the fictional representations of the disorder in Young Adult novels. What is not discussed in current theoretical investigations, cultural or literary, however, are any intersections between anorexia and girl-girl desire. While questions pertaining to femininity and feminine sexuality have been investigated and scrutinised in regards to anorexia, current theoretical understandings do not engage with the very passionate connections between girls and how these are played out within the anorexic context. Given this gap in the current scholarship, not only are new approaches to the trope of anorexia important, so too are new readings of girls’ desires for each other. This paper subsequently looks to fiction to recast facets of anorexia as interrelated to the cultural insistence that girls move beyond intense and passionate desirous relationships with each other, into normative heterosexuality.

To this end, I read desire between girls in this paper in a specifically Deleuze and Guattarian sense. With the focus of this volume of *Papers* on ‘new’ readings and approaches to children’s literature, Deleuze and Guattari might offer a significantly new contribution; their rigorous critique of developmental and (hetero) normative cultural systems provides a challenge to one of the most prevalent ideologies operating within children’s and Young Adult fiction. This ideology concerns the role of children as subjects who must experience growth that instigates a more mature world view, and with that, a more stable and coherent sense of self; an individual identity in relation to the culture in which they reside. As Deleuze and Guattari argue, however, this specific and overriding concept of individuated identity is one formed in and through (Western) patriarchal, capitalist paradigms, and that this situated sense of identity serves to privilege lack over connection. They argue that desire itself, which is not aged, sexed or gendered, is an affirmative force and they insist on its disentanglement from lack. Thus, to think the ‘new’ in children’s and Young Adult fiction, and more specifically in the experiences of adolescent (anorexic) girls, an examination of the forces of connective desire

outside binarised adult/child terms might reveal directions hitherto relatively unexamined in this genre.

Deleuze and Guattari see desire as an affirmative mobile force that propels living things toward each other, and engenders connection. What is of particular importance, however, is that desire is so ambulatory that it travels through, and beyond sexual orientations and identities. That is, desire between girls, in the Deleuzean sense that informs this paper, is neither sexual, as expressed in ‘lesbian’ desire, nor non-sexual, qualified as friendship. Rather, it is *between* these dualisms, and it is in this privileged space of the between, the ‘intermezzo’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, p.277) that I read desire as potentially destabilizing the patriarchal order that attempts to define it.

The two Deleuze and Guattarian arguments that underpin this paper, then, are these. Firstly, that girls’ desire crosses right through the ‘dualism machine’ (1988, p.277) of a patriarchal culture that binarises and codes not only sexes, genders and sexual identities, but also desire itself. Secondly, that in reading for an affirmation of girls’ passionate desires for each other, these representations are exposed as inherently threatening, or at least destabilising, to this same culture. Deleuze argues that desire is ‘an immanent revolutionary process’ (1987, p.96), because ‘the smallest interval is always diabolical’ (1988, p.47). In terms of the texts analysed here, this smallest interval resides in that ‘between’ space where girls’ intensities and connections interrupt the framing patriarchal narratives of the novels.

To accept this alternative Deleuze and Guattarian view of desire as a starting point enables a shift in focus from the accepted ‘causes’ of anorexia to an altogether different view of the disorder; as an experience predicated on the flows and cuts of desire. A view of anorexia as experiential, while not dismissing its critical effects, functions to make girl-girl desire recognisable, legitimate and significant in girls’ experience. While theoretical understandings of anorexia ignore this aspect of its emergence, however, fiction provides representations of the much embedded, but nonetheless crucial relationship between girl-girl desire and anorexia. This paper investigates this interface in



Helen Barnes' *Killing Aurora* (1999) and Rebecca Burton's *Leaving Jetty Road* (2004).

The two novels approach the themes of anorexia, friendship, relationships, femininity and desire in polarized ways, and thus offer very differing accounts of the disorder and of the body. *Killing Aurora* works, as Michelle de Villiers (2000) notes, to pose the question of how girls might transgress dominant ideological paradigms without resulting in either annihilation or reinscribing these self-same ideologies. *Jetty Road*, in contrast, works to valorise feminine subjectivity only within traditional patriarchy, and attempts to ignore femininity and the body as a site of conflict, oppression, transgression and desire.

Jetty Road is set at a time when three friends, Nat, Lise (the anorexic character) and Soph, as students in year 12, are at the precipice of change. Nat, particularly, is set to move from a state of relative solipsism to a more 'mature' understanding of herself and her experience. Early in the text Nat states 'I don't *want* to talk about stuff, to think about it. I just want to *do* it. I want to *try* it, and see what happens' (p.17, original emphasis). This lack of self reflection and insight designates the need for her to mature and this is reinforced by her failure to recognise the beginnings of Lise's anorexia (and thus implicates her selfishness as exacerbating Lise's disorder). A significant part of attaining maturity for Nat is her shift away from prioritising her relationship with Lise, and her consequent move into a more mature relationship with a new, older boyfriend, Josh. Although the novel makes no overt connection between Nat's entrance into a 'mature' heterosexual relationship and the growing emotional chasm between her and Lise, it nevertheless covertly sets up proximity between normative heterosexuality and maturity. This serves to pathologise Lise both through anorexia, and, *through adolescence itself*. Lise must resolve her adolescence/anorexia through taking up a more mature position – a maturity defined by heteronormativity. Against its own agenda of celebrating Nat's impending maturity, however, the text aptly demonstrates how the flows of desire are cut off between girls by heteronormativity, and how the impact of this is a correlation between starvation of the body and starvation of desire.

Jetty Road attempts to evade recognising the central importance of desire to friendship and anorexia. Desire is, however, embedded in representations of the girls' relationships from the onset of the novel. The connection Nat and Lise have with each other is clearly intense, played out in their annual beach trip together. As Nat describes it:

Today, like every other year, we've spent the time swimming and snoozing, lying under the jetty between swims, staring up at the wooden beams and talking. When I say talking, I mean like – talking. Hopes and dreams; plans and fears; life, the universe and everything – you name it, Lise and I'll talk about it
(p.11).

This description embodies the intensity of the connection between the girls, one that is experienced in Nat's 'favourite summer place' (p.11). It involves both physical proximity (in their lying together) and emotional connection (in the openness and breadth of their discussions). However the description of their time on the beach, which invokes a sense of freedom and carelessness, is manifestly a time prior to them taking up adult responsibilities. It is, the text infers, a time that will necessarily and naturally change as the girls mature.

It is at precisely this point, just prior to the girls' departure from the beach, that they begin to disconnect, and this is initiated by Nat's conversation stating her wish to get a job, signalling her move into adult territory. With Nat's insistence on verbalising her ambitions, the girls shift from a position where 'they talk about everything' (p.11), to one where Lise 'goes kind of quiet' (p.12). Lise's silence illustrates Deleuze and Guattari's argument that it is the social codes (getting a job and a boyfriend) that 'seek to channel and block' the flows of desire' (1990, p.19). Lise resents this impending shift; she is comfortable in her close relationship with Nat and attempts to maintain her proximate position. As Nat tells Lise of her plans to take up a more adult role, she observes that '[Lise] ignores me and stares at the sand, tracing patterns in it with the sharp edge of a broken shell, her face completely obscured by her hair' (p.12). Significantly, Lise's moments of connection and joy (swimming and snoozing, lying with Nat under

the Jetty) and her desire to maintain the close relationship are not shared by Nat. Nat embraces a palpable shift away from girl-girl intensities, and her growing discomfort with Lise is matched only by her enthusiasm to enter the adult (hetero) world. This is evidenced in the decidedly changed sensations she experiences: 'Sand prickles my shoulder blades, and the towel creases damply, sticky beneath my back. The sky throbs, above us, late January blue' (p.12). This description harbours (hetero) sexual resonances, and as they leave the beach (the site of their intensities) for Lise's entry into anorexia and Nat's into hetero-romance, Nat marks the shift: 'Already, it feels like we never went swimming at all' (p.13).

The maturational discourses that underpin Nat's shift away from Lise are further evidenced in Lise's continuing 'problems' which the text parallels with Nat's 'normal' life. The singular source of these is Lise's lack of maturity, which is constructed as pathological itself, because it instigates her anorexia. Lise comments that 'Things are changing. More and more I look around me at moments like this and I realise that everyone in my life is changing, moving on' (p.78) Lise's inability to change, to grow up, however, is not as contained as the text argues, because it is directly linked to her reluctance to forsake her (immature) desire for Nat and enter into heteronormative adulthood. The underlying agenda of the text, then, posits Lise's lack of heterosexuality (her girl-girl desire) as her illness, and constructs anorexia as a manifestation of non-normative sexuality, in Lise's reluctance to forgo her desire for Nat.

Lise's position is specified early in the text through Nat's narration: 'When I say Lise is shy – I mean *shy*...it's even worse when she's with guys' (p.16). Moreover, as Nat observes, Lise has never attracted a boy. Lise re-articulates this anomaly: 'Boys don't like me. Instinctively they don't like me, I mean' (p.89). While the text attempts to vaguely argue Lise's self depreciation as a source of this sexed dislike contributing to anorexia, it inadvertently suggests that Lise's abnormality is, rather, her non-heterosexual practices. So while Nat and Soph, the 'healthy' characters have boyfriends, Lise again articulates her 'unhealthy' disinterest: 'I felt ashamed of my lack of experience, my lack of *feeling*' (about boys) (p.81, original italics). While Nat matures, moving from immature crushes on boys to

a more sustained hetero-relationship, she notes 'But Lise hasn't moved on – not at all' (p.21).

The conflation of anorexia with lack of maturity coded through non-heterosexuality is entirely problematic. It posits Lise's girl-girl desire for Nat as unnatural and delegitimate, marking it as a 'phase' she must progress through. Although this treatment of adolescent feminine desire is a common strategy in fiction, to use girl-girl relationships as a precursor to, and background for girls' developmental (and normalised) shift into heterosexuality serves to denigrate girls' desires for each other by binarising them into mature/immature, sexual/non-sexual (power-laden) categorisations.

Killing Aurora proposes an entirely different view of the relationship between girl-girl desire and anorexia. While *Jetty Road* is content to pathologise Lise for her desire for her friend, *Killing Aurora* suggests that the enforced move into heteronormativity in a patriarchal culture exacerbates the disorder, and that rather than girls' closeness being a cause of the problem, it is the prohibition of desire that is causal instead. The text goes further by arguing that girls' transgression is itself desirable, and that it is possible for girls to make themselves well and strong through 'feeding' the connections they have with each other. This is primarily set up through the relationship between Aurora and a girl who later saves her life, Web.

The relationship constructed between Web and Aurora is evocative of Deleuzian desire that is affirmative, and resists artificial coding through sexuality. The text makes much of Web's feelings for Aurora, but rather than over-code these desires as lesbian sexuality, it instead opens them out to value girl-girl desire that evades these binarised categories. This is evidenced in Web's first meeting with Aurora:

Web raises her head then and sees Aurora for the first time. Aurora shows her teeth, nervously. Aurora's smile under pressure is startling. Web sees pink plump lips chewed almost to shreds, she sees round grey eyes, like forever, and her own scruffy reflection in them. She sees soft brown hair in waves that curl around Aurora's neck. Web's not sure what to make of all this information...

(pp.13-14).

Significant in this representation is that, unlike the other characters in the novel, Web's gaze is directed toward Aurora's face rather than her body. Because the novel critiques the cultural conflation of sexual attractiveness with designated body parts, Web's initial attraction to Aurora's face cannot be termed entirely sexual in terms of dominant expressions of desire. Concurrently, however, the description carries with it a poignant intimacy that questions the limits of Web's feelings. This is the 'between space' of desire, where it traverses any definitive boundaries. Web is instinctively aware of this between space, and yet she is situated within a culture that unconsciously recognises the threat of these intimacies and controls this threat through maturational heteronormative discourses. It is, then, unsurprising that she doesn't *know* what to make of her feelings.

Initially Aurora rejects the intimacy of this friendship; it was threatening to her, as the text specifies here: 'If she gets too close to Web, though, to her infectious carelessness, she might forget herself. She might let herself go' (p.128). This quotation speaks not only of Aurora's anorexia, but also of her anorexic desire. In this sense, Aurora also recognises that close connections may destabilise prescribed patriarchal relations between girls. What Aurora must do to transgress (and what she eventually does) is precisely what she initially fears: Aurora must 'forget herself', that is, forget her own identity as defined by patriarchy. She must 'let herself go' on what Deleuze and Guattari term 'a line of flight' which instigates what they term a 'becoming'.

This 'becoming' is a journey of transgression because a line of flight is a movement away from the stasis of a contained and knowable identity, in this case as an anorexic. And as Deleuze and Guattari point out, to forego any identity is fraught with risks because there is no knowable destination, no foreseeable end result of what might ensue when desire is mobilised. The text insists on an alternative position for Aurora, both as a feminine subject and as subjected to anorexia; she must feed her desire and connect with Web, rather than acquiesce to dominant ideologies that prescribe how she must *be* rather than what she might *become*. Aurora instigates a marked shift from starving herself and her desire, into establishing connections with Web.

The conclusion of the novel sees Web's becoming conjointly. Web re-fashions her earlier expressions of resistance, which were articulated in her actions as a violent car bomber. Instead, she subverts patriarchal messages through making graffiti in public spaces; a creative act, but not a passive one.

That this occurs through affirmative desire between girls instigates an entirely new subjectivity for Aurora outside patriarchal terms. Aurora becomes other to a subject constructed and defined by patriarchal discourse. Web explains: 'This is not merely a healthy, augmented version of sick Aurora, which is what she expected. This is someone else, sprung fully formed from Aurora's sick bones. Web doesn't know this new girl at all' (p.221). This new Aurora, a plump Goth with dirty fingernails, is, in Web's words, 'a perpetrator' not a victim. Through Aurora's newly mobilised desire to connect with Web, she discovers her desire to live, and she feeds this desire as she feeds her body, which in turn feeds and nourishes her girl-girl relationship. The text concludes 'They walk to the station together, Web as close as she can be to this strange, new girl of hers whose breath smells like chocolate' (p.229). In this text, then, it is the closeness and connectivity of girl-girl desire that proves to be an authentic threat to hetero-normative patriarchy.

Killing Aurora and *Leaving Jetty Road* present polarised views on Young Adult femininity, identity and maturation. However they both serve to illustrate that the experience of anorexia is inter-related to desire between girls; a desire that is potentially powerful, nourishing and legitimate. While *Jetty Road* insists on a maturational shift from girl-girl desire into heteronormativity, it nonetheless, (albeit against its own agenda) recognises the impact of this shift for Lise. *Killing Aurora* not only recognises the significance of girl-girl desire, but posits it as the very stuff of a healthy life. Aurora and Web conclude their story by vandalising images of skinny girls on billboards and bus stops. These are the very images that vandalised them, in terms of prescribing how to play out femininity and desire in negative and alienated ways. By this act of creative transgression *Killing Aurora* illustrates that girl-girl desire is not only recuperative, but, as Deleuze points out, very literally, revolutionary (1990, p.19).

If exploring new directions in children's literature, perhaps even revolutionary ones, through attention to desire; new readings of it that affirm its intense and connective potential outside binarised codifications, one may 'leave' *Jetty Road*'s reductive and limiting ideologies regarding subjectivity, femininity and desire. Instead, one might take a journey toward appreciating the complex, tempting, satisfying character of chocolate girls, like Aurora.



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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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