HOMOSEXUAL THEMES IN CURRENT YOUTH LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT
In this text, we take a look at four literary titles aimed at teenagers, published since 1999 and written by Brazilian authors who already have had a trajectory of production for the segment: Sempre por Perto; Eu é um Outro; Do Jeito que a Gente é; and Sofia e Mônica. The four works, each in a different way and with different fictional features, address the “discovery” of homosexuality in adolescence. We analyse the texts, paratexts and illustrations together, taking Cultural Studies in conjunction with Literary Studies and Gender and Sexuality Studies as theoretical perspectives.

KEYWORDS
Youth Literature; Differences; Homosexual Themes; Cultural Studies; Education.

Introduction
In Brazil, the theme of differences has acquired great visibility in the broader educational and social sphere in the last twenty years (SILVEIRA et. al., 2012.) - mainly due to a number of cultural, political and legal changes (and which are still ongoing) promoted by various sectors, groups and social actors in trends similar to those seen in other Western countries. One reflection of such changes can be identified in the criteria that were established for the selection of works in government programmes. Thus, textbooks, periodicals and works of youth literature enrolled in government programme edicts such as the National Textbook Programme [Programa Nacional do Livro Didático], the National School Library Programme [Programa Nacional Biblioteca da Escola] and the National School Library Programme – Themes [Programa Nacional Biblioteca da Escola – Temático] have been analysed according to the criteria which advocate not only the quality of the works (in conceptual terms, literary terms, aesthetic terms, etc.), their potential for stimulating reading practices, but also the lack of prejudice and stereotypical representations (on what it is to be black, Amerindian, female, gay, fat etc.), enabling the promotion (and respect for) differences in ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, bodily features, age etc. One of the by-products of such trends and measures - in law and in more general education - has been the proliferation, particularly in the last fifteen years, of youth literature works deliberately produced to meet the demand for approaching such differences. The titles on difference in general have multiplied (and the enrichment that living with differences would bring), about Afro-descendants, about the “disabled”, about the elderly, about prejudice against “fat” people, about the questioning of

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gender roles, but - and this is a statement about the Brazilian scene - it was considerably more timid about publishing titles, aimed at the youth segment, addressing the issue of homosexuality.

A quick survey of three studies that sought to map out and analyse some books for children and young people with this theme seems to confirm to this first impression. Thus, focusing on the Portuguese context, Ramos (2009) states that “sexuality, and in particular sexuality which is dissonant from the heteronormative paradigm, remains an almost untouchable world, a target of recreations as sporadic as it is distant, at least as far as Portuguese publishing is concerned” (pg. 296). She points out that the “literary transposition of a theme with deep sociological implications beyond the atavistic moral and religious constraints, will explain the relative silence about the matter that has been downcast, symptomatic of a more general discomfort, especially when it comes to unequal axiological dialogue between adults and children” (RAMOS, 2009, pg. 296). In any case, Ramos (op. cit.) shows that there are some books that generate an approach to the subject in the Portuguese market - especially those translated from other languages.

Sefton (2011), more interested in the Brazilian context, after a brief overview of the children’s book publications on the subject and their circulation in various countries (emphasising a greater presence of works on the subject in the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Spain), has already focused on four fairly widely disseminated titles which address the theme, in a more or less superficial manner. The author presents the well-known Babette Cole book, Mummy Never Told Me which identifies a number of questions from children, introduced by the refrain “Mummy never told me,” among which emerges the question of the lack of explanation from “Mummy” about falling in love and love between women and between men (neither question, remember, is answered in the book). In addition to two books originally in English - And Tango Makes Three and The Sissy Duckling, without translation into Portuguese and circulation in Brazil, Sefton analyses one of the first (or the first) books aimed at Brazilian youth about the theme: O menino que brincava de ser (The boy who played at being) by Georgina Martins, who selects a poetic and sometimes evasive theme about the will expressed by a boy to adopt practices traditionally attributed to females, such as dressing up, wearing a dress, etc.

In an article published in 2013, Silveira and Kaercher return to the theme, but specifically focusing on the representation of same-sex parenting families, in seven books aimed at children and published in Brazil (five of them) and Portugal (two) after 2007. The authors note that, disregarding the remarkable inequality of aesthetic quality and construction of the plots vs. a narrow pedagogism found in different works, their most recurrent tendency was to characterise the love between men or women in a manner that is similar to the ways that heterosexual relationships are traditionally represented - focusing on the appeal of romantic love. Also in the “new families”, some of the common themes are family happiness and related discussions about raising children and the allocation of home care. Thus, inevitable crossover is observed between the emergence of a new theme (which is difficult to approach) and the permanence and maintenance of some stereotypes.

In this short journey, it was possible to observe a slow but steady increase of fictional literary titles for children and adolescents which incorporate the theme of homosexuality generally consisting (even) as the central conflict of the story. In the article presented here,
we seek a new thematic focus: we take a look at four literary titles aimed at adolescents, published from 1999 and written by Brazilian authors who already have a history of production for the segment. The four works, each in a different way and with different fictional features, address the “discovery” of homosexuality in adolescence. They are *Sempre por Perto* by Anna Claudia Ramos; *Eu é um Outro* by Hermes Bernardi Jr.; *Do Jeito que a Gente é* by Marcia Leite; and *Sofia e Mônica* by Leonardo Brasiliense. Within these texts, we analyse the texts, paratexts and illustrations together, taking Cultural Studies in conjunction with Literary Studies and Gender and Sexuality Studies as theoretical perspectives.

**Presenting the books**

*Eu é um Outro* by Hermes Bernardi Jr. (BOOK 1), written in the first person, focuses on the teenage character Edu and on his thoughts, feelings, memories, actions and digressions. We follow the character on his first trip to therapy, led by the father; later, we see the boy’s internal dialogue in the waiting room of the therapist’s office. Edu likes another boy, Manon, but his father says there is a treatment for “this different taste” (pg. 19). In the dialogue, in which the boundaries between what is actually said and what is only thought are imprecise, given below, the character tries to draw the line between what is “normal” and what is “strange” about this taste of his - even making use of some stereotypical representations of gender and sexuality: “Those who don’t know, imagine. I don’t know if it’s the way I talk, my sensitive way of saying thank you, please or excuse me. What I know is that I’m happy when I talk, when I’m around this boy, you know? I like to go on bike rides with him, to go for walks with him, to talk about football. And about poetry” (BOOK 1, pg. 18). Throughout the narrative, with its comings and goings, its flashbacks of different times in Edu’s life that must be put together like a puzzle for the reader, it is discovered that Manon has a girlfriend and that Edu had suffered violence (including sexual) in a bathroom of a football stadium. The protagonist spends two months in the hospital, but the violence he suffered remains in the background (and sometimes does not seem to be important): what matters to the character is the fact that his friend has drifted away from him, throughout his recovery, and has plans to travel and live with Clara in another country. In the end, Manon gives up the trip, recognises the feelings he has for Edu and goes to meet him when he is discharged from the hospital. They exchange hugs and looks in front of Edu’s family and leave together to go around the world, sharing the same bike.

*Sofia e Mônica* (BOOK 2) is authored by Leonardo Brasiliense, a writer who won an Açorianos Prize (regional award for Brazilian Literature) and a Jabuti Prize (top prize in Brazilian literature) with a previous book and, in an interview specifically on the writing of this book, said he spent “months reading copies of Capricho magazine to incorporate the language of

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4 On 06 November 2014, the first three authors participated in a Conversational Circle at the Porto Alegre Book Fair in Brazil, relating some personal experiences on the publication of these particular titles. In one way or another, they mentioned the difficulty encountered in getting publishers to publish titles with this theme. Márcia Leite reported that, in the case of “Do Jeito que a Gente é”, acceptance (after five years of talks with the publisher) came with the condition that the heterosexual character not be the protagonist. The two authors commented that, although they are invited to go to schools to discuss books with students, they were never to talk about the books mentioned here.

5 The concept of “stereotype” is used in this article from Hall (1997).
teenagers. I think it worked. On the website, readers say they identify with the stories” (DIÁRIO DE SANTA MARIA, 2014). The work has a particularly ingenious compositional organisation, in the way that the text and graphic design are articulated. It is composed by the intercalation of what would be pages of a diary or inner monologues of one protagonist or another, who often bring different views on the same issue, have flashbacks and elaborate brief reflections.

The narrated facts can be summarised as follows: two girls, Sofia and Mônica, are so friendly (from 10 and 11 years old respectively) that they decide to do a ritual in the bathroom of Mônica’s bedroom (with the right needle and a bandage on the finger) to become “blood sisters”. One is the “mirror of the other,” but, according to Sofia, the sororal friendship between them is “something else” (“Since we met, Mônica was this for me: a mirror. If I had a twin sister, I think I would hate her. I’m sure. But with Mônica, I’m talking about something else. I can’t tell. It’s something else” - BOOK 2, pg. 9). The narrative revolves around the day-to-day lives of the (thus far) inseparable 14-year-old protagonists (at school, in Mônica’s bedroom, in the kitchen at Mônica’s house) until Pedro, a young delivery boy (first of gas and then of pizza) enters the scene. Sofia is enchanted by the boy and Mônica is clearly upset and jealous (“Sofia overdid it. What a clueless girl. Offered. Ridiculous. (...). Women do not throw themselves like that. Women are difficult. They have to be conquered. What am I talking about? She is 14 years old. Why did the damn gas company not send the old bald and paunchy man they usually do?” - BOOK 2, pg. 19). Both end up liking Pedro and the outcome is several disagreements or new encounters, by inserting a third character, Amanda (who gets the attention of Sofia, arousing Mônica’s jealousy, but getting with Pedro in the end) and the drifting apart and even “estrangement” of the two protagonists. Unlike Book 1, in which the problematic issue of homosexuality in its subjective and social dimensions, is focused upon openly, Sofia e Mônica leaves only clues, allusions and mention of small details that invite the reader to make a suggestive reading of a homosexual friendship between two teenagers, without however peremptorily stating such an interpretation.

Do Jeito que a Gente é (BOOK 3) by Márcia Leite alternately shows the points of view of the two protagonists whose lives intersect when their parents get married for the second time. Beá, 14 years old, is narrated as a “frightened scarecrow” (blonde, green-eyed, tall and thin, “highly valued ingredients in the female market”, but with very curly hair, “a small manufacturing defect” pg. 14), clumsy, ugly, ungainly, “with no chest or ass” (pg. 16), shy, insecure, with low self-esteem and suffering a series of humiliations in school and at home (by her mother and her brother). Chico, a 17-year-old teenager, through already having faced problems when he confessed to being gay to his friend Johnny (who distances himself, rejecting him and feeling “betrayed”), ends up not having the courage to come out to his father. The two half-siblings begin to live together, and in five months together in the same house, Beá falls for Chico - who is then forced to confess that he is gay to not hurt her. Beá accepts it (“I love you, Chico. I like you for who you are. And you are what you are, that’s it” - BOOK 3, pg. 144), the two get closer as siblings and end up becoming inseparable. The epilogue shows their lives a year later, completely transformed: Maria Beatriz “changed school, hairstyle, glasses, clothes, style and peers. She had her braces removed and overcame her self-pity”

(pg. 174) and Chico Dornelles “finally managed to kick open the closet door and come out to his father”. Again, in this work the issue of homosexuality and its assumption and revelation by teenagers is at the core of the novel.

Lastly, *Sempre por Perto* (BOOK 4), a novel written by Anna Claudia Ramos, renders, through an omniscient narrator, Clara, an adult protagonist, visiting the home of her grandmother who recently died and remembering several passages of her childhood and adolescence (as well as many of the feelings linked to such times): the cold and distant relationship with her father; the banter and genuine love for her brother, Beto; the apparent “disengagement” between the behaviours that are socially considered to be “for girls” and her wishes and desires (“- Beto, why was I not born a boy like you and Dad? - Stop bullshitting, Clara. You are a pretty girl. - Ah! Being a girl’s not fun. Grandma is saying I have to *behave appropriately*, walk *properly*, sit like a little lady. You can go out alone and I can’t. It’s dangerous for a girl to walk alone on the street. Mother keeps talking about it.” - BOOK 4, pg. 11). Clara remembers the familiar charges in relation to her legs (always injured and bandaged), due to the fact that they were playing football and how she thought it was ridiculous that “those little girls dressed all starchy like a wedding cake” - BOOK 4, pg. 13. The character also remembers the separation of her parents and the changes in her life and in the life of her brother; her teenage adventures in the Carnival dance; her early homosexual experiences; her forbidden love for Luna (the discovery of desire, heartbreak and the subsequent rediscovery of love with another girl). When the evocation of memories is over, Clara’s father appears and there is a moment of reconciliation between them - this moment apparently “incomplete” because Clara, at 35 years of age, still hides her homosexual experiences from her father. In this work, from the earliest publication among all of those now analysed, the use and explanation of several gender stereotypes is observed, as well as its questioning by the narrator him/herself which weakens the literary project as a whole.

**Some analyses**

The theme of the “search for answers” (or even through a definition in relation to sexuality) is recurrent in three of the four books analysed. The protagonists of these works search for answers (justifications or rational explanations for what they feel) which would presumably exist “within themselves”. Such a search, always conflictual and tortuous, is undertaken by the characters either autonomously (for example, the character Clara, Book 4), with the complicity of the mother (in the case of Chico - Book 3 - and of Clara, Book 4) or with the aid of professionals (as is the case with Edu’s therapist in Book 1). Moreover, the presence of therapists in both Book 1 and in Book 4 helps to strengthen the contemporary representation of adolescence as a phase of questioning and conflicts - and which would therefore require resolutions: in a paratext of Book 1, the Publishers confirm that in the office, the protagonist Eduardo “unleashes his thoughts in abundance, in disjointed order, a whirlwind, very common at this stage of life, when questions seek answers and some natural doubts wish to take shape of personality” (BOOK 1, right flap). But interestingly, the therapist in Book 4 (remembered through a *flashback*), upon telling the teenage Clara that she does not need “to experience whatever your fancy tells you” (BOOK 4, pg. 20) and that the desire for her friend is not real, is labelled “prejudiced” by the adolescent. Upon affirming that she needs to under-
stand, Clara retorts: “Understand? I don’t want to understand. Enough of understanding, I need to live. (...) I have just resolved not to come back here anymore. I don’t want to hear you talk about my fantasies any longer. I want to be happy” (BOOK 4, pg. 21).

In at least two books, the “search for answers” is equivalent to a “statement of truth about themselves” and necessarily involves the practice of confession. Fischer (1996), when analysing some media productions from the 1990s aimed at teenage audiences, shows that this practice of exposure of intimacy, of something so private and of “the most hidden truths of sexual and loving experience” (pg. 134) has been taught, recurrently, as “necessary” and “vital”. So similarly, such “need for exposure” is seen in the works analysed. On the back cover of Book 3, for example, a review is presented that seeks, in a direct way, to synthetically and bluntly expose the central facts of the plot, making an appeal to the teen reader, in one of the dimensions that most often catches attention - “truth” and “authenticity”:

Exposing the truth about yourself requires a courage that few people have. Lying often seems more comfortable than facing what we are. Chico wants to change that. For this, he will have to face up to his homosexuality to the people closest to him. This is more difficult after the reaction of his best friend who, when he learned, turned away from him immediately. Beá also wants to have more courage. Wondering how to improve the relationship with her mother, who only detonates; she no longer wants to swallow the insults of her schoolmates; she wants to like who she likes more in her own way. No more channelling. The stories of Chico and Beá intersect. Together, they will help each other to live more truthfully and less afraid to show themselves. In full (BOOK 3. back cover, emphasis of the Publisher).

A key moment in three of the four books analysed is undoubtedly “confessing to being gay” - except for Sofia e Mônica, the protagonists of which are only young girls, have no other friends and seem to share the domesticity of daily life in a way that is relatively distant from adult life. In addition to this, the protagonists write down their questions and deepest desires (Sofia in the notebook, Mônica in the jotter) and thus the “confessions” are made very differently: Sofia writes on the computer and suddenly sees that Mônica began a friendship with Pedro on Facebook. Her doubts (as well as her certainty about what she feels for her friend) echo in her writings: “Why did the SOB find Mônica before me?” (BOOK 2, pg. 27).

In Book 1, Edu confesses to Márcia, his best friend, that he is gay. When she doesn’t treat it like a big deal (and suggests that “she already knew”), Edu appears to be quite hurt by the apparent indifference of Márcia (“you seem more sensitive, affectionate, but it doesn’t show, if that is your concern. And if it is?”- pg. 41). When he wanted to confess to Manon that he felt physically attracted to other boys, he just held back and was feeling weak, cowardly and repentant: “But it hurt not being able to say to anyone that I liked guys, that at school I felt attracted to them when they trained in physical education. That’s what I wanted to say Doctor, but I didn’t. I lacked courage. I lack a little warrior spirit in that other self who lives in a realm of fear and of conditional conjunctions. If, if, if” (BOOK 1, pg. 40).

In the books analysed, the body of the teenage characters is constructed from a psychological and biological perspective - so we see bodies and minds eminently “divided”, “con-
fused”, “doubtful”, “changing” or even “going through changes.” In Book 1, for example, Edu’s desire for Manon is explicit - “I have already masturbated thinking about boys, father” (BOOK 1, pg. 35-36) and represented in a naturalised way from the biological point of view: so, there are many references to the bodily changes which are characteristic of adolescence (“facial hair, pubic hair”, “waking up with a hard cock, or all wet”) caused - and explained - by “hormones” and by the action of “testosterone” in the body.

Another interesting aspect is the fact that the young protagonists in three of the four books under review are also characterised by extreme clarity with regard to conflicts and sexual and romantic relationships as well as the social repercussions of escaping from stereotypes and heteronormativity - in a way that is similar to that identified in work by Silveira, Bonin and Ripoll (2013), when they analysed ten children’s literature books that feature an illness manifested in the body of the old as the main plot focus. In that work, the authors argue that several child characters are depicted as overly rational and incredibly mature to become aware of the physical and mental decay that is a result of the diseases of their grandparents. In this sense, the character Beá, for example, seems somewhat resigned to the bad relationship with her mother: “My mother used to say that a bad thing is not fattening. The bad thing is me”, BOOK 3, pg. 16; the character Edu, talking to himself, seems to be perfectly able to distinguish between desire and love - “Desire. Desire and love are not the same thing, Eduardo” - BOOK 1, pg. 35-36; Clara knows that her love for Luna is “forbidden” - in her own words - but ends up confessing it to her mother as follows: “- Oh, Mama! It’s so difficult to start. But if you want to know, come on. (...) I’m in love with Luna, mother. We kissed the other day and it was very powerful” - BOOK 4, pg. 26. Apart from the apparent lucidity, some characters demonstrate great seriousness and learning in facing teenage life: Edu, for example, reads works from Caio Fernando Abreu (a known Brazilian author who publicly stated his homosexuality in the 1980s) to Plato (“I am a young man getting serious, doctor”, BOOK 1, pg. 45).

It is noted that two of the books analysed - Book 1 and Book 2 - exhibit a compositional sophistication and the use of literary devices that make them far from trivial in the literary world of works written for teenagers, as can be seen by the non-linear use of the time narrative, by the mix of inner monologue and dialogue reproduction, by the use of various narrative voices which suggest the representation, by their authors, of an attentive and sensitive adolescent reader. In the case of Book 2 - Sofia and Mônica - the homosexual theme is not worked directly and problematically, but appears as a possible interpretation from the clues within the text itself: could the relationship between the two teenagers be just a typical friendship of this stage of life or could it have a homoerotic character? It is noted that several reviews from ordinary readers, placed on online “reading” websites, make no mention of the second interpretation. Book 1, Eu é um Outro, specifically focuses on the issue of “self-discovery”, despite resorting to some stereotypes, drawing on metaphors (including wing design which is already printed on the cover) and a deliberate plunge into the complexity of feelings, indecision and doubts of the teenager Edu, in a non-linear and non-manicheistic narrative which allows the adolescent reader to be involved in an intricate game of representations and meanings. It is observed that the care with no simplification of the theme extends to the paratexts: the back cover reproduces only one paragraph of the book which talks metaphorically about “internal tattoos”; the flaps, written by the publishers and by a university professor of interpretation, merely points out the approach of the “process of con-
stitution of the identity” of the protagonist, more full of questions than answers (1st flap) or characterising the book as “a consistent and deep story” of “Eduardo’s whirlwind of thoughts” (2nd flap). In the case of these two works, in addition to the bold novelty of the approach - open or just suggested - of the theme of homosexuality in adolescence, it is necessary to emphasise the quality of the story and editing, allowing the teen reader a rich and complex interpretation which moves towards the undertone of help and/or clarification about the “difficult” truths of life.

In concluding this brief journey through four works dealing with the theme of homosexuality in childhood and in adolescence, we want to draw attention once again to the markedly pedagogical nature of two of these productions (Books 3 and 4), teaching that it is necessary “to reveal yourself”, “to discover yourself”, “to confess to yourself”, “to decide for yourself”, “to show yourself fully” and also “to have the courage to face who one is” (as if sexuality was a defining - and definitive - part of what one supposedly is). If it is positive that such productions broaden the visibility of homosexual themes, it is also negative that some of these books have a “tone” (and a claim) of self-help.

References


Books reviewed

