Gender Queer in the Era of “Don’t Say Gay”

Lecture for “Queering Comics”

By Jess Whatcott

**Background info:**

Author Maia Kobabe uses gender-neutral pronouns e, em and eir

First published in 2019 by Oni Press

Award-winning: 2020 American Library Association Stonewall Honor and Alex Award

**Opening discussion questions:**

* What is this memoir about?
* Did anything surprise you while reading it?

**Warning:** The next slides contain images of nudity and Sex

**Nudity! Sex! Oh…my?**

*Image:* a page from *Gender Queer.* In the panels, the main character Maia is shown undressing and putting on a white gown next to a bed in a medical examination room.

In the panels on the right, there is no text to accompany the images. What are the visual cues that let us know how the character is feeling?

What do we learn about the character from this passage, and how does it tie into their overall story arc?

*Possible answers:* The nudity depicts Kobabe’s body dysphoria, such as when e has a period, or has to get a pap smear at the doctor. Kobabe’s visuals highlight the trauma of these experiences.

**Nudity! Sex! Oh…my? (continued)**

Image: a page from *Gender Queer.* In the panels, the main character Maia is shown looking down at Z who has a dildo in their mouth. Maia asks Z if they can try something else.

*Discussion question:* What visual similarities are there in this panel and the one on the previous slide? What are the differences?

Similarly, most of the discussions of sex reflect Kobabe’s body dysphoria and eir experience of these situations as uncomfortable or even traumatic. There are three pages that have depicts of sex, one is a fantasy that Kobabe has while masturbating, one is on a poster, and one is a sex act with a partner

These panels are the most controversial for being “sexually explicit.”

Kobabe argues that in order to talk about eir gender identity, e needed to also discuss eir relationship to sex and sexuality.

**Discussion questions:**

What is the reasoning behind this claim?

How would not having sex or sexuality in the book have impacted the story?

Do you think e could have told the story without the sexual images?

**“One of the most banned books in the US”**

*Gender Queer* was the number 1 most challenged book of 2021, according to the American Library Association Office for Intellectual Freedom, which tracks requests to remove books from libraries, schools, and universities.

According to the ALA, reasons for requesting removal include that it contains LGBTQIA+ content, and because it was considered to have sexually explicit images

What happened?

In late 2021, at a school board meeting in Fairfax County, Virginia, a parent raised concerns about the illustrations of LGBTQ sexual experiences. The parent equated the book with pornography, saying that it was “offensive to common decency.” At the meeting, the school board decided to pull the book from the school’s libraries.

The month after, the book was pulled from school districts in Florida, New Jersey, North Carolina.

In November South Carolina Governor Henry McMaster called on his state’s Department of Education to remove the book from all schools in the state – he reiterated the claim that the book was “obscene and pornographic.” He also demanded that similar books be removed from school shelves.

**Discussion questions:**

* Those who oppose pulling *Gender Queer* from library shelves argue that these challenges are not about books.  What then are the challenges about?
* Do you think the books’ portrayal of a non-binary/trans character contributed to descriptions of the book as “offensive”? How might heteronormativity and the association of queer and trans people as “perverse” and “immoral” influence this current backlash?
* How might the graphic medium, rather than just the text itself, have contributed to the backlash? How might the historical association of comics with juvenile delinquency influence this current backlash?

The censorship of *Gender Queer* represents an overall trend of challenging books with LGBTQ characters and explorations of LGBTQ identity.

According to the director of the ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom, books with LGBTQ characters, especially trans characters, make up the majority of books that have been challenged and pulled from schools and libraries. Although this goes back to the 1990s, there has been an increase in the past several years, coinciding with broader political attacks on queer and trans youth and adults.

Context:

Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” bill

Bans on trans youth participating in sports

Often these attacks are conducted in the name of protecting children from danger.

This justification hides that LGBTQ+ youth and families are harmed by these policies.

**Discussion questions:**

* What is the impact of on youth who identify as LGBTQ+ when graphic narratives with LGBTQ+ characters and conversations are censored?
* How does such censorship affect all youth, whether they identify as LGBTQ+ or not?
* In the larger scheme of things, does it matter if *Gender Queer* is pulled from shelves? How? If not, why not?

Maia Kobabe’s response:

In an essay published on NPR by Maia Kobabe in January 2023, e described how e was warned that there might be backlash against the book. Kobabe braced eirself but for almost two years the reception was very positive. Kobabe writes:

“The first print run (just 5,000 copies) sold out the week the book was released. As I toured six states and numerous bookstores in 2019, I received only positive, often heartwarming and deeply moving, feedback. People told me they related to Gender Queer more than any other book they'd ever read. They told me it made them feel less alone. They told me they had shared the book with a parent, or a partner, or a friend, and it had opened up conversations they'd never been able to have before.”

This type of reception is one answer to the question about why it matters if *Gender Queer* is censored from libraries.