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Reading Girls' Desire in
*Touching Earth Lightly*

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Representations of the intensity of girls' passions and desires for each other remain under-represented in contemporary Australian fiction for young adults. Although the genre recognises and engages with the strength of girls' friendships with each other, it nevertheless persists in a somewhat diluted account of a more specific desire between young female characters. Girls' relationships in mainstream fiction rely on a developmental framework, where intensities are represented as phases on a maturational journey toward a normative heterosexual resolution. Girl characters in fictional relationships dominate representations of closeness, bonds, secrets, jealousies and emotional connections, it seems, but a more specific, articulated feminine desire is overwhelmingly reserved for heterosexual resolutions.

Where representations of same-sex feminine desire do occur in contemporary texts, they mostly reside distinctly outside queer accounts of subjectivities. That is, they are situated within the limits of sexual identity politics that rely on humanist versions of a natural or essential sexual self. In terms of identity, the journey of personal discovery that is pervasive in young adult fiction reinforces this acceptance of the essential self, whether 'straight' or 'gay'. As celebratory as it is to voice diverse sexualities in fiction, however, these representations work to delegitimise girls' passionate relationships with each other. Such representations work by aligning desire with dominant definitions of what constitutes a sexual relationship. Girls' friendships and connections remain well down the hierarchic ladder of desire, in terms of authorising the intensities and passions that they produce.

Although recognising the textual silence regarding girls' desires, this paper argues that through alternative reading strategies it is possible to identify these more specific passions in mainstream fiction for young adults; and, further, that attending to girls' intense desires offers opportunities to privilege girls' connections with each other, and to re-read them as a theoretical foothold to explore how these same-sex desires challenge heterosexist patriarchal discourses. The fluidity in girls' relationships with each other, that such relationships resist articulation as either 'sexual' or 'non-sexual', or, more importantly, that these terms become irrelevant to girls' relationships, offers a critique of psycho-sexual models of development. Rather than seeing girls' desires
for each other as 'crushes' or 'phases', girls' passions may be privileged by a
deconstructive reading that refuses closure and simultaneously works to critique the
maturational (linear) model of subjectivity.

Margo Lanagan's *Touching Earth Lightly* (1996) offers such a reading. Although in
terms of narrative structure and plot the text privileges a version of a naturalised
developmental (mainly) heterosexual world, it can be re-read as a critique of its own
limits. To read the text in this way, is to draw attention to the text's representation of
desire.

When attention to desire informs a textual reading the contentions of both Jacques
Lacan and Gilles Deleuze (and his collaborative work with Felix Guattari) allow two
differing perspectives. This paper will articulate two contrasting readings of
Lanagan's novel. The first is grounded in Lacan's psychoanalytic 'explanation' of the
relationship between gendered subject formation and hegemonic culture in terms of
desire. The second, alternative reading uses Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy of
affirmation and connection. I conclude by demonstrating, through Deleuzian theory,
how girls' desires and passions for each other may become acknowledged. In this
way desire becomes disentangled from Lacanian lack which reinforces the
subordination of the feminine to a masculine-ordered culture.

Problematically, Lacan's theoretical objectification of girls' desire rests on the
grounding thesis that equates feminine desire with lack. This occurs through the
developmental framework that insists on maturational stages of separation and
alienation as instrumental to attaining subjectivity. Lacan frames development and
the realization of subjectivity in three phases. The Real is the pre-Oedipal register,
and as such represents the maternal and the feminine. The Imaginary is the
transitional phase for the proto-subject, and includes the necessary interruption of the
symbiotic relationship between mother and child through the paternal metaphor. This
is played out in Lacan's mirror stage (Lacan, 1946). This obligatory split from the
realm of plenitude embodied in the maternal necessitates a split, too, from the
possibility of any fulfillment of desire. Life becomes a series of sequential
disappointments, a continual but impossible quest to experience satisfaction. It
results in an incessant reinforcement of the idea that the drive to live is a negative
one, based always in lack. The subsequent realm, the Symbolic, is Lacan's realm of
law and order, structure and rationality. Language, or 'the name of the Father',
initiates and governs this territory. According to Lacan, in order for life to be
comprehensible at all, subjectivity must be ground in the 'law of the father' at the
expense of the feminine.

Because Lacan's model argues that the unconscious is shaped through language, or
the child's ability to distinguish the 'I', and because, as he argues, language is shifting
and there is always a slippage between signified and signifier (Lacan, 1977, p.153),
Lacan's thesis could be seen to celebrate shifting and fluid desire. However, the limits
of this model are that these unfixed desires are anchored to polarised gendered and
sexed terms. The territory of the masculine, with the phallus as 'privileged signifier', is what orders existence (Lacan, 1977, p.287). As such, woman/girl must remain in her assigned place, compliant with the Symbolic order.

This Lacanian analysis will center itself on pivotal Oedipalised points in the narrative. It will equate the theoretical developmental positionality of the characters in Touching Earth Lightly with parallel metaphorical positions. In this way, a Lacanian analysis could provide a very neat reading of Touching Earth Lightly. The text considers the intense and passionate relationship between two eighteen-year-old girls, Janey and Chloe. These girls share everything in their lives, particularly their innermost feelings and thoughts. However, Chloe's world bears no resemblance to Janey's. Whereas Chloe lives in a world of order and security, Janey's home is one of abuse and incest. Janey's chaos and disorder are symbolized in her disregard for conventional rules of mature sexual behavior, that is, her promiscuity. This sexual transgression eventually instigates her death; she is beaten and murdered when she is on her own at night in a car wrecking yard, the same place she played out her sexual licentiousness. This is also the place, however, that Chloe and Janey would have previously gone together – a space that symbolised their emotional proximity. The narrative centres itself around this episode in order to discuss how Chloe comes to terms with the loss of her best friend.

In Lacanian terms the characters could be read as playing out the formation of their subjectivity. Through Chloe and Janey's relationship the narrative initiates a picture of the feminine pre-Oedipal realm of plenitude. This prefigures an Oedipal split, and then a successful entry, for Chloe at least, into the Symbolic realm. A Lacanian reading also affords an opportunity to recognise how Chloe and Janey are representative of hegemonically legitimate subject positions for the feminine. More specifically, it is Chloe, the character who represents and eventually embraces order, who embodies the only sanctioned subject position in a Lacanian model, represented through a resolution which privileges the heterosexual relationship through which she copes with her lack (Janey's death). This is set up early in the text in the initial description of Chloe's father, who serves as a metonymic description of her ordered, privileged world: he was freshly showered, his silver-streaked dark beard was trimmed and he was eating a virtuous breakfast of muesli and acidophilus yoghurt (Lanagan, 1996, p.15). This description articulates the 'health' of structured existence through the patriarchal Symbolic order, particularly as it is binarised with Janey's disorder, coded in her own incestuous family life. The text's conflation of disorder with incest also works metaphorically: disorder characterises the Real realm of absolute and unmitigated connection between mother and child, an incestuous union that must be resolved through Oedipal separation. The text's construction of disorder works to privilege Lacan's Symbolic realm as what is always desirable and necessary for normative subjectivity. Furthermore, as representative of the pre-Oedipal realm of disorder and its refusal to be structured, Janey is punished in the narrative with death.
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The narrative teases the distance between heterosex and desire apart by placing the characters in such a desirous and intense proximity that, prior to Chloe's acceptance of the Symbolic order, the girls need to play out the Lacanian split that forms the subject. Both characters must separate and disconnect from each other to initiate entry into the Symbolic. The text initially positions the characters, however, in the realm of the Imaginary, aligning with the text's assignation of a mothering role to Chloe. She provides everything possible for Janey — food, shelter and emotional support. Chloe even procures sexual partners for Janey in order to satisfy her sexual appetite, so that Janey wants for nothing. Where this dyad exists there is an exclusive two-person emotional relationship in terms of the girls' priorities. Janey and Chloe are part of each other. Janey notes that 'together they make up one, gifted gorgeous person' (p.139). This pre-Oedipal phase is treated sympathetically. The text recognises a specific and particular closeness. Simultaneously, however, the impending impossibility of the girls' relationship is established. Janey knew that she was unable to negotiate her life as individuated and alienated from Chloe: 'I just don't want a place that depresses me as soon as I walk in. Like when I'm on my own' (p.29).

The text then sets up the necessary Lacanian split that forms individuated subjectivities. Chloe's split from Janey is a result of Chloe's own recognition that she needs a separate and independent life from Janey. Rather than be subsumed by Janey's emotional chaos representative of the pre-Oedipal, Chloe chooses to affirm her own responsibilities and the ordered existence of her work that could not include Janey. She consequently separates from Janey, alienating her, and alienating her own desire. In Lacanian terms, this is a necessary prefiguring of Chloe's own attainment of subjectivity.

The separation occurs in the plot when Janey comes to Chloe after being sexually abused by her brother. Rather than remain with Janey, Chloe puts her in a taxi and sends her to a rape crisis center. This separation is pivotal in terms of Lacanian subjectivity, because it centres on language, symbolised through the institutionalised world of care at the centre. Janey's resistance to counseling (her refusal to negotiate separation), is countered by Chloe's insistence on the 'talking cure' to instigate normative subjectivity for Janey. Janey's reluctance to separate and her refusal to enter a 'normative' stage, instigated through language, is articulated this way: 'To go through all that talking again, explaining, watching their faces change...' (p.83). In Janey's refusal to enter into this world of language, she effectively refuses her own subjectivity. Her death is necessary, however, because Chloe cannot negotiate her own subjectivity without the 'lack' that is reliant on separation from Janey.

When Chloe experiences this lack, then, she is able to negotiate a subject position within Lacan's 'law of the Father'. This is represented in the text by a newly formed heterosexual relationship with Isaac. She must forgo her desire for Janey, which is merely a yearning for what she once had, and accept, instead, her desire for Isaac as
her pre-ordained future. Prior to Chloe's own acceptance of the necessity to re-channel her 'immature' passions into a mature heterosexual resolution, the text clearly specifies that Isaac, rather than Janey, affords Chloe healthy psychosexual resolution. When the text offers the imagery of 'The twin twists of life [Isaac] and death [Janey] in the air' (p.149), and couples it with Chloe's desire to be normal stated on the same page, it clearly demonstrates that her future is with the masculine, in Lacan's Symbolic order. Janey is death; she is absence and lack. It is only Isaac who can provide normalcy and thus life for Chloe.

Chloe's incumbent maturation is articulated in the narrative: 'Chloe's been stomping and scowling around in Blundstones and fairy dresses and dirt for years' (p.200). This image of emotion-driven, pre-Oedipal immaturity is contrasted with the emergence of an adult surety of self, when the narrative continues: 'When she turns back Isaac is right there; they hug in silence, tighter and closer. Chloe feels something like a sigh of relief, the easing of an enormous tension. She feels like laughing; she holds on and on' (p.205, emphasis mine). This resolution reinforces the normative maturational model that prioritises heterosexual relations over the intensity of girls' desires and passions for each other.

There is, then, only one available subject position for girls in a Lacanian reading. The pre-Oedipal plenitude of a fulfilling relationship between Janey and Chloe must be disrupted through a split from each other, in order for the designated normative character to gain subjectivity. This split instigates entry into the patriarchal Symbolic order through birthing a hetero-normative desire. The characters must take up a position where they accept the patriarchal order, which Chloe learns to do by re-channeling her desire from Janey to Isaac. In Lacanian terms, through the character of Janey, the text sets up recognition of the feminine as lack and impossible desire, and feminine desire as lack and impossible. This is resolved through a process of maturation that prioritises sexual difference in a heterosexual patriarchal order.

This neat Lacanian reading resides in reading the text in developmental terms. Consequently, it limits the scope of accessing any alternative underlying drive in the narrative. To appropriate Lacan's words (entirely out of context) this reading contains 'Glares of omissions, a remarkable oversight' (Lacan, 1982, p.111). The absence of attention to the positivity of girls' desires for each other arguably mutes the alternative discourse of the text by over investing in its linear plot. An alternative reading of desire based on the theories of Deleuze and Guattari, however, unfolds the implications of the text through using the figure of the rhizome as a reading strategy.

Deleuze and Guattari offer the concept of the de-centred rhizome as an alternative to privileging individuated existence. An example of rhizomic life is couchgrass that spreads out in all directions through lines that attach connective points (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.7). Against this, but also interlinked with it, is the figure of the tree – an arboreal structure that is firmly grounded and grows linearly, from depth to height where its branches spread out, but remain part of the solid structure. These
figures represent alternative ways of thinking, as well as re-imaging feminine desire. While rhizomic thinking spreads, connects and affirms, arboreal thinking remains ground in the roots of white western heterosexual male systems of power. Psychoanalytic thought, arguably, is arboreal, positising subjectivity as the result of the paternally induced Oedipal drama that develops in a linear fashion.

Rhizomic thought begins not from an origin, or ground, but relies on points of encounters with problems. It produces a network of ideas that resist resolutions. It requires the breakup of binary logic and entails risky affirmations, particularly in terms of imaging and articulating desire. A rhizomic approach to thinking also engenders reading strategies that work to surface and then affirm desires and tensions within linear narratives. Linear and developmental narratives can then be disorganised to privilege alternative discourses and discussions in fiction. To involve oneself in an alternative reading of desire relies on the reader being prepared to 'scramble the codes, to cause flows to circulate...' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1977, pp.132-133).

This activity entails recognition of points of connection and intensity in the text, and a refusal of the conventional linear reading that prioritises closure. As John Stephens argues, closure has its own 'socialising, didactic purposes'. Further, notions that readers require closure as a 'certainty' is an 'ideological assumption' (Stephens, 1992, pp.41-43). The strategy of attending to particular intense points in the text, rather than accepting linearity and closure, allows for a reading which renders the book 'all the more total for being fragmented' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.6); all the more total because to distinguish the pervasive, yet tacit desire between girls allows the text to undermine a normative heterosexual conclusion that works surreptitiously to reinstate patriarchy at every arboreal point.

A rhizomic reading of *Touching Earth Lightly* offers an alternative image of girls' desires. In a rejection of Lacan's closed feminine = lack equation, rhizomic reading affords a celebration of girl's desires outside maturational terms, so that they are affirmed independently of normative and maturational discourses. Rather than seeing girls' passions and intensities for each other as a temporary phase in a narrative that resolves itself in a heteronormative conclusion, girls' desires can, instead, be seen as a powerful and affirmative means to legitimising connections that resist heteronormative conclusions. To prioritise points of intense connection rather than linear maturation, closure and resolution, then, works to undermine accepted representations of normative desire for girls in fiction, and substantiates a place for their affirmative, positive desire for each other.

As noted, Chloe and Janey are constructed within an arboreal culture, defined by mutually reinforcing codes of masculinity and order. Although Janey's abusive parents are seemingly polarised from Chloe's 'progressive' ones, however, the structure of familial relations have rhizomic points in common. The control of Janey in terms of her father and brother's sexual abuse is polarised with, but remains
rhizomically connected to, the control of Chloe by her male family members. Outside the inquest into Janey's death, for example, Chloe's brother Nick leads her away. He then hands her to Dane, her father, as if, Chloe notes, it is 'some kind of progressive dance'. Isaac then takes her, hugs her and again returns her to her father. He 'gives her back to Dane' (p.180). This naturalisation of patriarchal and masculine control works through representations that silence the power relations inherent in language; that one partner 'leads' in a dance, and one 'follows' metaphorically comments on Chloe's powerlessness in her relationships that work under a rhetoric of care and support.

Dane's view of the events that led to Janey's death is highly pragmatic, in contrast to the reactions of the female characters. Chloe, and her mother, Joy, consider that living offers its own 'lines of flight' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, passim) rather than a fated conclusion, and they seemingly regret the unmitigated split that the Symbolic order forces on the feminine. They recognise that connection and proximity can potentially reorder a world where individuation and alienation limits connective experience for the feminine. Joy begins the dialogue regarding Janey's murder:

'...where was the gap, where was the moment, where we should have said...I don't know, more, or done ...whatever it took, you know? To avert it.' [Janey's death]

'There wasn't one', says Dane firmly. 'D'you hear me, Joy? There was no gap. We did whatever we thought was best, at whatever time - you too Clo. I've watched you two helping Janey cope with life for years. I won't let you go guilt tripping over this! There was only so much we could do, and we did it....We're not the ones that did it'[the murder].

'Well, you see, I don't know -- I'm not so sure!'

'Joy,' warns Dane... 'That's ridiculous'

(p.181).

Dane's control as articulated in this dialogue is constructed through language. He speaks from a privileged male position of knowledge and surety, and he silences the feminine when he renders Joy's comments ridiculous. Chloe and Joy do retreat into silence, doubting his surety, but recognising the 'law of the father' as an effectual way to order sanity and thus normality. Chloe resents this order, and reflects on her feelings 'She thought she knew what to expect; she thought she had everything under control. She knew nothing, and now she is frightened' (p.183). As Chloe reverts to her pre-designated position in the Symbolic order she disengages with the intensity of her emotional proximity to Janey. The act of questioning the authority of the patriarchal Symbolic order is shown to be 'frightening'. Concurrently, however, this same order cannot explain girls' intensities, however much control it may seem to exert.

This idea is further evidenced in the novel because the desire and passion between Chloe and Janey continues to resurface. The force of the rhizome, the unpredictable and untidy force of desire that threatens ordered, arboreal thinking is explained in Chloe's narrative regarding her feelings for Janey: '...it isn't something she thinks about any more than a magnet thinks about snapping onto the fridge -- it's not a matter of
discussion or agreement that keeps them together, but an unquestioning force' (p.48).

The force of Chloe and Janey's relationship is both celebratory and threatening. Most significantly, though, Chloe's unquestioning acceptance of the force of Janey's physical appetite for heterosex disables the full force of her own desire for Janey. When Janey attempts a sexual encounter with Chloe's brother, Nick, who did not comply, the narrative tells us that Chloe '...is deeply relieved. If Nick had taken Janey on, Janey might not have needed Chloe any more; Nick is, sort of, a right-sexed Chloe' (p.130). Chloe's observation about the 'rightness' of Nick's masculinity articulates the arboreal blockages to the rhizome that attempt to prohibit the flow of desire between girls. The roots of arboreal, heterosexist binary distinctions attempt to smother the rhizomic connections between the girls. As Deleuze and Guattari point out

It's all over, no desire stirrs for it is always by rhizome that desire moves and produces. Whenever desire climbs a tree, internal repercussions rip it up and it falls to its death; the rhizome, on the other hand, acts on desire by external, productive outgrowths

(1888, p.14)

External productive outgrowths, in this text, are minor, barely perceptible articulations: the wind exposing 'wondering lines of white scalp' on Janey's head, the 'Janey air' that came from her breast and shoulders, like 'hot metal' (p.7), the enchantment on Janey's face (p.22), the glow of her (p.22) and 'the naked eyes beneath her paint, and the brush and twitch of her lashes' (p.34). Janey is all these connected and affirmative things to Chloe, summed up in Chloe's reflection that 'whole lobes of [her] brain, whole cell-scapes in her eyes are being stirred awake' (p.115), by Janey.

In a reading that prioritises closure or resolution, Chloe's gradual acceptance of Janey's death, and her own Symbolic lack, situates her desires and passion for proximity with Janey as merely a transitory phase in her life. Deleuze and Guattari's image of the rhizome, however, entails beginning with the 'in-between' of the text, and prioritising points of connection. Using this strategy to read girls' passionate desires for each other sanctions a recognition of how young adult girls' relationships also inhabit the territory of 'between... the dualism machines they cross right through' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.277); that they interrogate the boundaries between the sexual and non-sexual, the child and the adult and the legitimate or the transgressive.

What resides in the text, then, works two ways. Firstly, it articulates a critique of an arboreal culture that devalues the feminine where too much proximity and connection between girls threatens the dominant masculinist structure, and must be eliminated so as to keep order. Secondly, the text offers a fractured image, perhaps virtual, but also knowable, of the positivity and possibilities of girls' desires for each other. The processes of affirming and accepting these potentialities initiates what Deleuze and Guattari term 'becoming', which is fundamentally 'the process of desire' (1988, p.272).
Becoming is not becoming something, becoming an individuated subject in Lacanian terms. It is, rather, a way of connecting to life and its forces. These forces of becoming flow despite the dominant patriarchal and heteronormative order: they signal a process without definitive conclusion, a state of living far more conducive to alternative and less culturally inscribed models of sexuality. Becoming is producing a desire that flows, rather than a desire that is contained in any hierarchical body that privileges the phallus and all it represents.

For Chloe, 'becoming' requires that she see differently, which is represented in her attention to the photos that Janey has taken of her own feet.

...the feet look like white fins or flowers or fans of coral, wet sea-foam blues past them, sand cruts them, sword-grass stripes them with shadows. Indigo rock; dewy ferns, a mat of fine leaves, dove-grey and rose, curved almost into circles – the colours and the textures, colours and textures Chloe didn't see, all come alive around those neatly side-by-side city girl's feet. (p.115)

Becoming, for Chloe, seeing differently, is affirming her desire for Janey and prioritising affirmative connections over alienation, and positivity over lack. The disorientation it entails (in terms of confusing hegemonic understandings of subjectivity as individuated) also works to contest the inadequate paradigms of expression in terms of girls' desires for each other. Girls' desires may be seen, instead, to express multiplicity, and inhabit 'a continuous self-vibrating region of intensities whose development avoids any orientation towards a culmination point or external end' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.21). To read *Touching Earth Lightly* this way, to read it rhizomically is to accept Deleuze's proposition that

A book is a little cog in a much more complicated external machinery...this intensive way of reading, in contact with what's outside the book, as a flow meeting other flows, one machine among others, as a series of experiments for each reader in the midst of events that have nothing to do with books, as tearing the book into pieces, getting it to interact with other things, absolutely anything...reading with love. (1995, pp.7-9).

What is significant in the text, then, is not closure, where the power of the Symbolic order blocks the rhizomic desire of the characters, but the points of connection and desire between the girls. Arboreal reading privileges a conclusion that reinforces dominant discourses of heterosexual maturation. It works to block rhizomic points in the text that validate and celebrate girls' desires for each other. The becoming of this text is in the proximity of the girls, and their textual potential for disrupting, intermittently, hegemonic ways of seeing and thinking. Imaging girls' desires requires thinking that 'dances' over the earth, 'touching it lightly' (Deleuze, 1990, p.107), rather than grounding representations of girls' desires in dominant arboreal images. It is in this way, in allowing a leak from mainstream representations of girls' desire for each other that 'a tiny rivulet of new intensity suddenly start[a] to flow' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.34).
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References


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