"Feeling and Perspective-taking: Narrative Empathy and Queer Young Adult Fiction"

As the narratologist Suzanne Keen (2015) puts it, "narrative empathy involves 'the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition'" (124). Queer young adult fiction is an opportune site to explore the relationships between narrative empathy, social justice, and representations of LGBTQ+ characters and themes. The genre has been concerned with empathy since its beginnings in 1969 and its coincidental evolution alongside the "problem novel" of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Whereas Christine Jenkins and Michael Cart (2018) find that these early works of fiction are didactic, formulaic, and plot-driven, they argue that the genre today has improved greatly in terms of character development and thematic complexity. What is the genre's relationship to empathetic narratives now?

My paper presentation will explore narrative strategies used in award-winning, contemporary queer YA fiction like Benjamin Alire Sáenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secret of the Universe* (2012), David Levithan's *Two Boys Kissing* (2013), and Jandy Nelson's *I'll Give You the Sun* (2014). All these novels are distinguished by their unique styles of narration. Sáenz utilizes a first-person character narrator. Levithan, a third-person (and sometimes first-) non-character narrator. And Nelson—different still—uses two first-person character narrators who switch off. These narrators lean into and away from the "experiencing characters," creating (and then closing) affective and cognitive distances, which invites various empathetic responses from readers. My paper will focus on close-readings of feeling and perspective-taking in these novels and will discuss narrative distance and empathy in the context of social justice and representation. Furthermore, these concepts can help researchers, practitioners, and even readers themselves better understand *how* people respond to literature—and *why*.