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The Ordinary Trip: Heteronormativity and Homophobia in Young Adult Literature from 1969 to 2009

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THE ORDINARY TRIP:
HETERONORMATIVITY AND HOMOPHOBIA IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE
FROM 1969 TO 2009

by

Laurie Barth Walczak

A Dissertation Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
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May 2014

ABSTRACT
THE ORDINARY TRIP:
HETERONORMATIVITY AND HOMOPHOBIA IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE
FROM 1969 TO 2009

by

Laurie Barth Walczak

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2014
Under the Supervision of Professor Donna Pasternak

This dissertation examines books published for and marketed toward teen readers as cultural products and artifacts with the potential and the power to help shape young readers' ideas and understandings of the world, culture, and society around them in order to identify and investigate hegemonic forces or ideological apparatuses at play in young adult literature. From among the earliest young adult novels with characters who depict diverse gender and sexual identities, such as John Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth Trip.* in 1969, to the most contemporary, including Nick Burd's *The Vast Fields of Ordinary* in 2009, the genre of LGBTQIA young adult literature, or queer young adult literature, may be a particularly useful site for critical analysis of the binaries of heterosexuality vs. homosexuality, power vs. powerlessness, acceptance vs. rejection, and presence vs. absence. This dissertation utilizes queer theory to consider gender and sexuality as indeterminate and gender roles and sexual norms as mutable extends far beyond just homosexual men and lesbian women into all realms of identity politics to defamiliarize sex, gender, and sexuality and

to possibly question or challenge such forces and apparatuses in queer young adult literature.

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For Dale Edward Weber.

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Chapter One

Locating the American Social, Political, and Cultural Milieu of Sexual Identity

Since 2000, the United States has seen weighty advancements in the civil rights of American adults who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or other gender or sexual identities beyond heterosexual male and female. The arduous campaign for recognition of rights in medical care, adoption, insurance, employment and housing opportunities, and other arenas has proliferated public and political spheres, marking several milestones in gay rights movement, also known as the LGBT rights movement, and further reinforcing the embedding of conspicuous homosexuality in the American social and cultural landscape. Discussion and debate in politics, religion, education, and other major institutions have sustained and increased visibility, and questions and representations of gender and sexuality identity have extended deeper into the American consciousness. As it has for decades, the permeation of gender and sexual identity into institutions such as media persists in reaching into youth culture, making homosexuality at once popular and taboo in literature, film, television, advertisement, and various digital scenes aimed at a youth audience. Narratives of gender and sexual identity presented in these media are as complex and complicated as the political, public, cultural, and social realities surrounding gay rights in the United States since 2000. In the over ten years since the turn of the millennium, homosexuality and diversity in gender and sexual identities have remained contentious issues, as incendiary as questions of sexuality and reproductive rights have been since *Roe v. Wade* in 1973.

Homosexuality and gay rights, known by a spectrum of designations, initialisms,

and monikers, are now possibly more than ever a part of the mainstream American milieu, particularly in issues of same-sex relationships, marriage, and child-rearing set within a highly politicized framework of “family values.” Early in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the United States Supreme Court became embroiled in the legal status of the physical act of homosexuality when it overturned the Texas state criminalization of homosexual sex in the case of *Lawrence v. Texas* 539 US 558 (2003), holding that the Texas sodomy laws were unconstitutional under Amendment XIV of the U.S. Constitution (*Lawrence v. Texas*) and thus in turn invalidating similar laws in several other states; *Lawrence v. Texas* made same-sex sexual activity legal in all states and territories of the United States. The legalization of marriage between two members of the same sex remains in the political and social spotlight. Debate has raged throughout the last decade and includes variations in legality from Massachusetts becoming the first state to legalize same-sex marriage in 2004 to the *DeBoer vs. Snyder* No. 14-1341 ruling in March of 2014 that “struck down anti-marriage laws in Michigan” (Polaski). However, simultaneously, battles for same-sex marriage rights were lost in California, Arizona, and Florida as voters approved the passage of measures to ban same-sex marriage in 2009. Representative of the struggle, in May of 2009, the governor of Maine legalized same-sex marriage, but in November of the same year, voters overturned the law. Seen as a long time in coming, in 2011, New York legalized gay marriage in a vote of 33 to 29; moreover, after years of debate, with a vote of 65 to 31, the United States Senate officially overturned the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy that had required homosexual members of the military to hide their sexual identities for decades; and in the same year

President Barack Obama declared that his administration would no longer defend the “Defense of Marriage Act” (DOMA), which had long sought the legal ban of same-sex marriage. Now, in the landmark five-four decision in United States Supreme Court case, *United States v. Windsor*, 570 U.S. (2013) DOMA has been declared unconstitutional under the Fifth Amendment, a decision lauded by some and condemned by others. Currently, seventeen states and the District of Columbia recognize same-sex marriage (“Where State Law Stands”); however each victory for civil rights has been accompanied by backlash, often dehumanizing and re-criminalizing; public disapproval and protest can cast those fighting for same-sex marriage and similar rights as degenerate and destructive. Supporters of civil rights for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities, for example, are seen by objectors as destroying the social fabric of society and encouraging other unnatural or immoral acts.

Situating the Popular and Youth Cultures of Sexual Identity

The fight for – and backlash against – equality in marriage and military service in such a divisive political and social climate has persisted in elevating the rights of diversity in gender and sexual identity as significant issues that garner tremendous attention, attention that quickly synthesizes within all spheres of media and youth culture. As debates surrounding issues such as same-sex marriage grew more rampant in the early 2000s, certain television show began featuring characters who identified as other than heterosexual. In particular, Joss Whedon’s popular television show, which developed an enduring cult following, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* featured Willow, a bisexual witch whose two prominent relationships were with a male werewolf and

another female witch. At the same time, other shows such as *Queer as Folk* on Showtime and *Will and Grace* on NBC likewise increased the presence of homosexual characters on television, and the film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), which starred recognized young actors Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal, called tremendous attention to such storylines when it was nominated for eight Academy Awards and won three. These shows and films helped expand the presence of same-sex relationships in the mainstream, making them more visible in popular culture and youth culture.

Perhaps the most prominent example of the diverse gender and sexual diversity in characters in widespread popular and youth culture is the television show *Glee*. In 2009, the show *Glee* premiered on Fox. Part high school melodrama and part musical, *Glee* follows a cast of misfit students joined together by their common love of show choir. Its official website describes the show as “a musical comedy about a group of eager and ambitious students who strive to outshine their singing competition to win Nationals while navigating the cruel halls of McKinley High.” *Glee* features Kurt Hummel, an effeminate teenaged boy, among other characters with a much wider spectrum of both gender and sexual identities than typically depicted in conventional television shows.

The cultural, political, and social significance of the show’s depictions of gender and sexual identities is that *Glee* reaches beyond a compartmentalized audience demographic; its viewers numbered over 9.75 million in its first year on the air and over 10.1 million in its second season, meaning the show continued to grow in popularity, although it has stagnated in ratings in its current fifth season as it has lost several of its stars and begun to bring its storyline to a close (“Glee”).

The unambiguous cynosure of gay, lesbian, and bisexual characters and plotlines for mainstream audiences in “Glee” won the accolades of organizations such as Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD). GLAAD, which tracks the presence of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender characters on scripted television shows, notes the growth of same-sex relationships in media representations. In 2013, “[o]ut of 796 primetime broadcast scripted series regulars, 26 will be LGBT this year, or 3.3%. This is down from 4.4% last year but still up from 2.9% at the beginning of the 2011-2012 season” (“Where We Are on TV”). Such statistics indicate a continually developing presence of lesbian and gay identities in established American media. This presence in the media in turn functions as a harbinger for further attention to real issues. Daniel Radcliffe, perhaps one of the most recognizable young actors in the western world thanks to his portrayal of Harry Potter in the phenomenally popular series of films, became a spokesperson for The Trevor Project, “the leading national organization providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth,” and the “only nationwide, around-the-clock crisis and suicide prevention helpline for LGBTQ youth,” according to the organization’s website (“The Trevor Project Launches”). Radcliffe became a major donor to The Trevor Project in 2009, and in 2010, Radcliffe was featured in a Trevor Project public service announcement with a “a touching message to youth, reminding them that there is always a safe place to turn, and encouraging those who are feeling lost or alone to call The Trevor Helpline. To conclude, Radcliffe says: ‘be proud of who you are,’ a vital

message for LGBTQ youth to hear” (“The Trevor Project Launches”). In 2011, Radcliffe was honored with the Trevor Hero Award, which “recognizes an individual who serves as an inspiration to sexual minority youth and increases visibility and understanding of the LGBTQ community,” for his work as an ally of LGBTQ youth (“Daniel Radcliffe to be Honored”). The unmistakably recognizable persona of Harry Potter makes for a powerful ally for LGBTQ youth indeed; this intersection of fictional character and real life makes for a compellingly pro-queer stance that again asks any Harry Potter fan to take on the position of their favorite character and the actor who plays him, and thus, encourages recognition, support, and appreciation for the queer community.

The expansion of representations of sexual identity in mainstream culture at the turn of the twenty-first century has been accompanied by a backlash of vocal opposition. While diverse gender and sexual identities emerge more in the media, simultaneously, other social, religious, and political factions seek to denounce, humiliate, and eliminate any traces of homosexuality from American culture. Increased visibility and expression are counteracted with the rhetoric of intolerance. A balance remains elusive; homosexuality, sexual identity, and same-sex relationships seem to be in a continual tug-of-war for equality, representation, and acceptance. This back-and-forth plays out in the media, to be sure, but it also plays out in the daily lives of real young people whose sexual or gender identities do not adhere to the standards such factions fight to keep in place. How homosexuality or sexual identity is portrayed in media and culture versus how it is experienced in society and day-to-day life may not always be congruent. The story the lesbian, gay, or bisexual teen encounters and experiences can be an unsettling

one. At once, the narrative is of increasing acceptance and presence but at the same time one of rejection and absence. This disconnect deserves critical examination, and popular and youth culture in general – from books to television to film to music – can be a site for such a critical investigation. The scope of this critical investigation will focus on the popular and youth culture of young adult literature.

Identifying Young Adult Literature

Definitions of young adult literature, also referred to as "YAL," "adolescent literature," "juvenile fiction," "teenage books," and "teen fiction," vary widely. While many professionals in this field have identified common characteristics, key issues, and important themes, all offer different descriptions of what types of texts the genre contains. In the ninth and newest edition of *Literature for Today's Adolescents*, a seminal text in the study of young adult literature for many years, Alleen Pace Nilsen, James Blasingame, Kenneth L. Donelson, and Don L.F. Nilsen explain that young adult literature is "anything that readers between the approximate ages of twelve and eighteen choose to read either for leisure reading or to fill school assignments" (9th ed. 3). While this explanation is easy to embrace in that it allows for an endless spectrum of texts, it does not necessarily help to determine what is and is not young adult literature. Such a distinction could potentially be based upon to whom the text is written and marketed, but Pace Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, and Nilsen would warn against utilizing such criteria. They point out that Robert Cormier, prolific author of many young adult novels considered "classics" of the genre, including award-winning novels such as *The Chocolate War* (1974) and *I Am the Cheese* (1977), did not think of himself "as a

writer for young people,” but an editor at Pantheon convinced Cormier that as good as his novel *The Chocolate War* was, “it would be simply one more in a catalogue of adult books. If it were published for teenagers, however, it might sell well, and it certainly would not be just one more in a long string of available adolescent novels” (9th ed. 57). Obviously, the editor's predictions were accurate, and Robert Cormier was awarded the Young Adult Library Services Association's Margaret A. Edwards Award for “providing an 'authentic voice that continues to illuminate [young adults'] experiences and emotions giving insight into their lives'” in 1991 (1991 Margaret).

Although *Literature for Today's Young Adults* subscribe to a very broad categorization of young adult literature that spans both the adult and juvenile book markets, the textbook does identify several characteristics for the genre. The first is that “A prerequisite to attracting young readers is to write through the eyes of a young person, and one of the ways to do this is to write in first person” (9th ed. 28). The second characteristic is that parents are often absent in young adult literature, either literally or metaphorically so that “the young person is free to take credit for his or her own accomplishments” (9th ed. 30). Third, according to young adult editor Stephen Roxburgh, the young adult novel protagonist “starts out as unreliable and then by the end of the book evolves into a reliable narrator, which means that he or she has truly learned something” (9th ed. 31). More, young adult literature is “fast-paced, containing narrative hooks, secrecy, surprise, and tension” (9th ed. 32) in a “variety of genres, subjects, and levels of sophistication” (9th ed. 34). Pace Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, and Nilsen explain that young adult literature embraces “many different ethnic and cultural groups

not often found in the literary canon," "characters whose stories had not been told before" (35). Finally, Pace Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, and Nilsen note that series have become and continue to be more and more important to young adult literature (9th ed. 37).

John H. Bushman and Kay Parks Haas, authors of *Using Young Adult Literature in the English Classroom*, offer several criteria for young adult literature that mirror the characteristics listed in *Literature for Today's Young Adults*. Bushman and Haas's definition of the genre includes: conflicts that are "consistent with the young adult's experience," themes "of interest to young people," protagonists and characters who are young adults themselves, and language that "parallels that of young people" (2). Similarly, in "Of Risk and Revelation: The Current State of Young Adult Literature," Michael Cart suggests that young adult literature is "written for and about young adults and the unique problems that plague and perplex them" (159). While Cart attends to the age of the audience, he more generally characterizes young adult literature as having a "unique capacity to educate not only the mind but the heart and spirit as well" (159). Roberta Seelinger Trites, author of *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* also identifies several "recurring patterns" in young adult novels, including, "rites of passage and initiations, patterns of growth, conflicts, Oedipal crises, confessional first-person narrators, and identity crises," as well as "a direct message about what the narrator has learned," "lots of sex," "dreadful parents," and others (ix).

All of these descriptions demonstrate that perhaps one of the most universal definitions of young adult literature is texts that deal with issues of identity formation.

In "Young Adult Literature in the Classroom—Or Is It?," John Bushman suggests that young adult literature "speaks to the issues facing our students: problems in their physical, intellectual, moral, and reading development" (35). Bushman relates all of these problems to Erik Erikson's tenet that "the major task of adolescence is the formulation, or reformulation, of personal identity" (35). Adolescents and adolescent characters in young adult literature are often deeply embroiled in the process of shaping and reshaping who they are. Trites suggests that the recurring patterns she identifies all relate to one common and very important theme: power. Issues of identity formation and power are intimately intertwined in adolescent literature. According to Trites,

Although the primary purpose of the adolescent novel may appear to be a depiction of growth, growth in this genre is inevitably represented as being linked to what the adolescent has learned about power. Without experiencing gradations between power and powerlessness, the adolescent cannot grow.

Thus, power is even more fundamental to adolescent literature than growth. (x)

Trites goes on to explain that in young adult texts, protagonists and other characters begin to develop an awareness of the social and cultural forces that shape their lives and influence who they are and what they will become (x-xi). Young adult literature protagonists deal with conflicting social and cultural norms, expectations, and judgments that often come into play as they experience their adolescence and transition from childhood into adulthood.

Perhaps the most enlightening definition of adolescent literature is Peter Hollindale's. Hollindale suggests that young adult literature "addresses a multitude of

themes from the everyday-realistic to the abstract, theoretical, and conjectural," "uses a range of modes from parochial urban naturalism to cosmic fantasy," and "enlists narrative procedures from simple linear story to complex multivoiced, multitemporal, intertextual strategies" (84). While these characteristics are certainly wide-ranging and thus do not necessarily help to narrow the definition, Hollindale's approach to young adult literature recognizes its ability to encompass a multitude of subjects, modes, themes, and voices. Hollindale advocates for an "'adolescent novel of ideas,'" meaning literature that "'grows the mind a size larger,'" in the terms of children's literature scholar Betsy Hearne, former Director of The Center for Children's Books at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, former editor of *Booklist*, and author of many articles and books on children's and young adult literature (86). Hollindale envisions young adult literature as a genre that requires "not less but more intelligence in its young readers than previous generations would have expected" (88). This vision encourages a rich, literary experience of young adult literature where the texts resonate with the readers, challenge the readers, and engage the readers.

Identifying Queer Young Adult Literature

Understanding that one of young adult literature's defining characteristics is the fictionalization of identity development, the next question to be explored is how are young people whose identities are in some way marginalized or considered beyond traditional social and cultural limits represented and what stories of their lives are told? Specifically, what narratives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, intersex, and asexual/ally (LGBTQIA) identity formation are published for, marketed to, and read

by the perceived teenaged audience of young adult literature? The often-used acronym "LGBTQIA" is intended to be inclusive of a variety of gender and sexual identities, and such acronyms are utilized in the absence of any "single modifier to represent the various orientations of people identified as sexual minorities," according to Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins in *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004*. Cart and Jenkins themselves use "GLBTQ" "to reflect the fact that the human rights movement on behalf of GLBTQ people that began with the 1969 Stonewall Riots was originally referred to as the gay rights or gay liberation movement" (xv). While their choice places the "G" before the "L" to be more "historical," it excludes the "A," leaving out those who may identify themselves as heterosexual but are strongly allied or aligned with other gender and sexual identities. This omission could be counterproductive, particularly in the realm of young adults and young adult literature where Gay Straight Alliances, formal or even informal organizations that challenge homophobia and promote gender and sexual individuality in schools and communities, can be vitally important. "Allied" young people often play important supportive roles in the lives of people whose gender or sexual identity is considered strange, abnormal, unnatural, unacceptable, or any other number of descriptors often applied to LGBTQIA teens.

Such considerations of acronyms and the letters these abbreviations include and exclude demonstrate that any kind of labeling surrounding "sexual minorities" is problematic. Ritch C. Savin-Williams, author of *The New Gay Teenager* explains that initials are "handy," but "who can agree on which initials should be included, or in what

order?" Savin-Williams suggests that many existing markers fail to reflect contemporary teenagers' growing sense of non-heterosexual identity. He writes, "in creating their own identity" teens often create and use "multiple terms as a way to respect both their gender and their sexuality"; he cites examples like "Boidyke," "Queerboi," "Polygendered," "Omnisexual," and "Multisexual" (7). The meaning of terms like "Boidyke" or "Queerboi" is made by the individuals who assert their own agency by creating, defining, and applying these words to themselves, not by outside forces or others who would categorize or compartmentalize in a way that makes sense to the "labelers," despite what the "labeled" might think or feel.

Although such active, creative, and distinctive self-labeling is laudable, the need for a term to describe the broader category of gender and sexual variances remains. While Savin-Williams rejects the term "queer," for the purposes of this dissertation, I should like to embrace it. According to Savin-Williams, "queer" "describes sexuality less than it suggests one's philosophical, political agenda or lifestyle" and points out that "heterosexuals can be queer" (8). He dismisses "queer" as an identity that "never caught on"; he writes, "It flashed in the 1990s and then burned out" (8). However, in 1995, Alexander Doty prizes the word "queer" as "a term that would describe a wide range of impulses and cultural expressions, including space for describing and expressing bisexual, transsexual, and straight queerness," (2), and ten years later in 2005, Sharon Marcus defends the use of the term as "a compact alternative to *lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender*" because it "emphasizes affinity and solidarity over identity" (196). Exactly because "queer" applies to more than just sexuality and because heterosexuals may

identify as "queer," this word can apply to a wide range of topics, issues, and audiences in young adult literature, and I appreciate that it can also recognize the "A" for "Allied."

In Michelle Ann Abate and Kenneth Kidd's *Over the Rainbow: Queer Children's and Young Adult Literature* offers, Abate and Kidd concur that "queer" has been "reclaimed or resignified as a term of personal and collective pride," reflecting its iteration as a word meaning "eccentric and singular" and as a term that "calls forth and performs a nonheteronormative sexual and cultural identity" (4). Abate and Kidd state that "queer" is "the antidote to definition in any easy or clear sense" so that the word "at once fortifies and dismantles the notions of a stable or knowable self, in relation to gender and sexuality specifically but not exclusively" (4). Furthermore, "queer" can act as a verb, as an action one takes. In *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, Nikki Sullivan recommends, "it may be more productive to think of queer as a verb (a set of actions), rather than a noun (an identity, or even a nameable positionality formed in and through the practice of particular actions" (50). "Queering" children's and young adult literature equals querying or questioning the texts, examining the gender and sexuality concepts and roles they offers, and opening dialogue about identity, boundaries, and resistance to limitations. In Sullivan's words, the verb "queer" is a "radical questioning of social and cultural norms, notions of gender, reproductive sexuality and the family" (43). Sullivan challenges readers "to queer—to make strange, to frustrate, to counteract, to delegitimize, to camp up—heteronormative knowledges and institutions, and the subjectivities and socialities that are (in)formed by them and that (in)form them" (vi). Finally, "queer" is easier to pronounce than "LGBTQIA" in spoken communications and is

easier to read than the unwieldy abbreviation "LGBTQIA YAL" in written communications. Thus, for the purposes of this dissertation, the term "queer young adult literature" or the shortened "queer YAL" or "QYAL" will be utilized to refer to books that appeal to or are read by young people, generally between the ages of about twelve and eighteen, and that feature some kind of queer, or LGBTQIA, content, meaning themes, conflicts, or characters that deal with gender or sexual identity, individuality, or expression.

A search for a definition of "queer young adult literature" in some of the same sources utilized above to define "young adult literature" may prove fruitless. In earlier editions of the book, the words "gay," "lesbian," "bisexual," "transgender," "homosexuality," and "sexual orientation" were not even included in the subject index of the first edition of Donelson and Nilsen's *Literature for Today's Young Adults* (450), and the only treatment of such topics in following editions of this widely utilized textbook is as follows: "In the first edition of this textbook, we wrote that three sexual issues treated in problem novels were rape, pregnancy, and homosexuality. We stand corrected by a reader who recently wrote to us and made the persuasive point that the problem is *homophobia*, rather than *homosexuality*" (7th ed. 130). Thus ended their discussion of homosexuality in young adult literature. In earlier editions, in a section on "Stories of Friendship and Love," Donelson and Nilsen assumed that a "good love story" has a "believable" "boy and girl" or "man and woman," giving no consideration to same-sex couples or transgender couples (7th ed. 138). Additionally, in earlier editions, their list of twelve recommended books on "Love and Friendship" included only one title that

could be considered queer, *My Heartbeat* by Garret Freymann-Weyr, and this pick is in itself questionable in that a gay male character rejects his partner seemingly because his partner is not open about their relationship but then enters a sexual relationship with his partner's younger sister. Other young adult books offer much stronger depictions of love and friendship between two queer characters. Donelson and Nilsen's initial oversight to include good love stories between believable queer characters seems regrettable.

In the 2012 ninth edition of *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, now authored by Alleen Pace Nilsen, James Blasingame, Kenneth L. Donelson, and Don L. F. Nilsen, "Gays and lesbians" and "Homosexuality" are in the subject index (9th ed. 460), and homosexuality appears in the chapter on nonfiction, treated in terms of "the prevention of bullying, especially in relation to GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered) issues" (9th ed. 307). In this chapter, queer young adult literature is addressed only in terms of its potential usefulness in the classroom and library. In their focus on identifying "well-planned and well-written books" that "can present information about different viewpoints" the authors conclude that schools and libraries should embrace queer young adult literature; however, "[f]amily values must be respected" while making books with "honest, accurate information" available to those who seek it (9th ed. 313). Moreover, in this updated edition, *My Heartbeat* by Garret Freymann-Weyr remains the only potentially queer title on the list of books on "Love and Friendship" (9th ed. 109). That unfortunate oversight continues.

Fortunately, a substantial body of scholarship has developed alongside the genre

of queer young adult literature in the past five decades. One of the most current scholarly texts about queer young adult literature is the aforementioned *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004* by Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins, published in 2006. Jenkins maintains a frequently updated website, which includes an exhaustive bibliography of texts published after 2004. Additionally, Abate and Kidd's book provides a wide selection of articles by scholars in the field. The same titles and types of texts that Cart and Jenkins and Abate and Kidd recognize as "queer young adult literature" will be discussed in this dissertation.

Queering Young Adult Literature

In a 2007 issue of *ALAN Review*, Jeffrey S. Kaplan outlined "three predominant strands of study" in contemporary young adult literature research. The second strand is "Sexual Orientation and Young Adult Literature" (55). Kaplan cites "the power of young adult literature to reveal the hidden and often confusing lives of young adults, particularly in today's world for those whose sexual orientation differs from the acceptable norm" (53). He considers what it means "to read (or maybe, not read) about yourself when your self-identity is not considered the norm" (53). In discussing this strand of current research in young adult literature, as well as the strand of "the preponderance of the use of young adult literature to inspire, and perhaps, change the lives of young people" (53) and the strand of young adult literature's "changing face" and how "its reflective nature mirrors societal norms and expectations" (53), Kaplan concludes that young adult literature has "the ability to inspire, challenge, and reflect

the social customs and mores of our changing world" and has the potential "to shape and influence the lives of young adults" (59). This hopeful assessment of young adult literature certainly attempts to inspire confidence in contemporary writers' and readers' abilities to examine the windows and mirrors of queerness; however, close, thorough, thoughtful examination remains necessary to assess and address the power portrayed in and wielded by the young adult literature industry in terms of queerness and representations of queer teens. Such an examination must begin with a clear definition of young adult literature in general and queer young adult literature specifically and must trace queer young adult literature's roots back to the first young adult novels with queer themes published for a teen readership.

Just as the "queer" in "queer young adult literature," the "queer" in "queer theory" challenges the naturalization or normalization of traditional understandings of heterosexual male and female gender roles. While this one word represents innumerable definitions, connotations, and implications, in general, "queer" in its every sense resists "whatever constitutes the normal" (Jagose 99). In *Tendencies*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls attention to "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning where the constituent elements of anyone's gender or anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically" (8). The constituents and contents of this mesh are "queer," and the means and methods of its examination are "queer theory."

The term "queer theory" is usually credited to Teresa deLauretis, who in the early 1990s utilized the term "queer" to problematize hegemonic definitions of

"homosexual" as anything not heterosexual. By defining one word in terms of the other, homosexual was "merely transgressive or deviant via-a-vis a proper, natural sexuality" (deLauretis iii). In a system where heterosexuality remains the central, natural incarnation of biological sex, cultural expressions of gender, and sexuality, all things non-heterosexual – from homosexual to bisexual to transgender to asexual – are marginalized and pathologized. Lesbian or gay identities – or any other kind of gender or sexual identity outside of the heterosexual male/female hegemony – are unnatural, abnormal, unstable so-called lifestyles, not "social and cultural forms in their own right" (deLauretis iii). Without claim or right to its own social and cultural existence, queerness remains disempowered and ignored. Queer theory attempts to empower queerness with visibility and discourse, giving recognition and voice to whatever form of sex, gender, or sexual identities individuals themselves might adopt, assert, or assign.

Queer theory was born out of the larger field of lesbian and gay studies, which gained prominence in American academics with the development of the contemporary lesbian and gay civil rights movement that often marks its nascence with events like the Stonewall Riots in Greenwich Village, New York in 1969. Indeed, in his 2013 second presidential inauguration speech, President Barack Obama alluded to Stonewall alongside Seneca Falls and Selma as the birthplaces of the heretofore most important civil rights movements in American history, including women's rights and the civil rights of African-Americana. The queer theory paradigm began to take shape in the 1970s and 1980s, although its presence as a discipline in American colleges and universities, scholarly journals, and academic presses was not strongly established until the early

1990s. Queer studies and queer theory can often be found partnered with women's studies and feminist theory under the larger blanket-term "Gender Studies," such as in Ryan and Rivkin's *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. However, queer theory's relationship to feminist theory has been at times tumultuous.

In the 1980s, several American lesbian scholars, including Adrienne Rich, claimed that feminism failed to fully represent lesbian identity and issues. These scholars sought to more closely examine heterosexuality as an "institution" of male dominance (Rich 141); however they located gay men not in marginalized spaces and discourses with women and lesbians, but rather in the center and source of the oppression with heterosexual men (Marcus 194). Early works in queer studies established difference between homosexual men and homosexual women. Yet, according to Marcus, with the growth of liberalist tenet that difference must be respected to promote "equality and autonomy" for all, feminism and lesbian and gay studies scholars in the 1980s and 1990s changed directions. Instead of focusing on gender as an irreconcilable site of difference and oppression, feminist theory took on gender as a "set of relations" (Marcus 195). Lesbian and gay studies transferred its concentration from identity "based on object choice" to sexuality as relational to terms of sexual norms (Marcus 195). Both feminism and lesbian and gay studies, or queer studies, took on the analysis of gender and sexuality as social and cultural constructs defined by and against normative ideologies.

Queer studies and queer theory investigate the complex nature of sex, gender, and sexuality, recognizing that "homosexuality and heterosexuality mutually define each other" (Marcus 197). An example of such definition can be found in Sedgwick's work on

homosociality: Sedgwick demonstrated that heterosexual males form homosocial bonds with one another via the exchange of women. Sedgwick, in essence, "redefined heterosexuality as a fear of male homosexuality that motivates men to route their desire for one another through women" (Marcus 198). As such, heterosexuality and homosexuality determine one another, and queer theory vastly broadens the meanings of gender and sexuality by investigating new ranges of gendered and ungendered bodies, of objects of desire outside of the binary yet interdependent realms of heterosexuality and homosexuality.

Queer theory asserts that gender and sexuality are indeterminate and that gender roles and sexual norms are unstable. Moreover, its reach extends far beyond just homosexual men and lesbian women into all realms of identity politics. For example, although cross-dressing, androgyny, and hermaphroditism may have little or nothing to do with homosexuality, such topics are often deconstructed with queer theory.

Annamarie Jagose, author of *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, explains, "Queer theory's debunking of stable sexes, genders and sexualities develops out of a specifically lesbian and gay reworking of the post-structuralist figuring of identity as a constellation of multiple and unstable positions" (3). Queer theory is not just "gay" or "lesbian"; it is reimagination and redefinition of gender and sexual identities and insurrection of hegemonic systems that disallow self-determination and self-identification.

In attempting to dismantle the dichotomous relationship of male-female or heterosexual-homosexual, queer theory works against the conditioning Audre Lorde points out in "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference": "Much of

western European history conditions us to see human differences in simplistic opposition to each other: dominant/subordinate, good/bad, up/down, superior/inferior" (854). By severing paired sexes—male and female—and sexualities—heterosexual and homosexual—from one another, the "systemized oppression" Lorde describes may be recognized and addressed. Lorde calls for the examination of the "distortions" of racism, sexism, ageism, elitism, classism, and heterosexism in American society and culture so as to "develop tools for using human difference as a springboard for creative change," change that attempts to dismantle the "institutionalized rejection of difference" (854-55).

Finally, queer theory examines erasures of homosexuality. For example, queer studies in history investigate the "privacy, secrecy, shame, and fear that inhibit people from leaving detailed records of their sexual lives" (Marcus 201). Queer theory also attempts to expose "rhetorical strategies" and "irrational assumptions" that normalize heterosexuality and pathologize homosexuality (Marcus 202). Queer theory's work in challenging ideological systems of identification and in providing space and discourse for limitless variations of gender and sexual identity applies to young adult literature in that it may illuminate new possibilities for readers to consider and perhaps to connect with. Queer theory also helps open young adult literature to characters and content that may otherwise go invisible or unnoticed. Closely examining what gender and sexual identities are expressed, repressed, and oppressed in the genre of young adult literature can reveal what gender and sex roles are represented as normal or as pathological to the genre's audiences.

Intersecting Queer Theory, Young Adult Literature, and Identity Formation

Queer theory works to deconstruct sex, gender, and sexuality formulations and to recognize that gender and sexual identity are inherently unstable. While cultural and social constructions unceasingly attempt to maintain strict definitions of femininity, masculinity, and sexuality, queer theory gives discourse to the multiple possibilities for other identities. Queer theory's focus on the fluidity of identity makes it an extremely helpful tool for examining the genre of young adult literature; making, finding, changing, and questioning one's identity are at the core of young adult texts, as adolescents are often heavily engaged in identity exploration throughout their teen and young adult years. While of course identity remains malleable throughout one's lifetime, the teen years are usually considered the first major encounter with such developments. Pace Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson and Nilsen suggest "achieving an identity" is "*the* task of adolescence," which in their opinion is reflected "in practically any piece of teenage fiction" (emphasis original, 9th ed 38). Moreover, adolescence can also mark the beginnings of one's experimentation with gender and sexual expression; in the teen years, the foundation for one's willingness to participate in or to unsubscribe from dominant ideologies of heterosexual male or heterosexual female may be laid. Thus, with questions regarding gender and sexual identity already brimming in teen and young adult realms, queer theory can facilitate a closer examination of artefacts meant to be "windows and mirrors" in the lives of adolescents, including young adult literature.

Young adult literature with characters who depict diverse gender and sexual identities may be a particularly useful site for exploration of binaries of acceptance vs.

rejection and presence vs. absence, of queer identity achievement, of stories` that may perform as both windows and mirrors in the lives of readers, with the genre's at once revolutionary and conventionalized narratives that span over fifty years. Almost non-existent before 1969, the wider genre of young adult literature and the more specific designation of LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, questioning, intersexual, asexual and ally) – or “queer” – young adult literature has evolved in the last fifty years into a sub-genre of literature generally written for teenaged readers. The stories of queer young adult literature range from painfully didactic to beautifully literary and often teeter on a fine line between art that serves a social or educational purpose and art for art's sake. As most young adult literature does, queer young adult literature sometimes perches in a precarious position between entertainment and enjoyment on one side and identity formation and ideology on the other; young adult literature in general and the sub-genre of queer young adult literature specifically can be recognized as the voice of a heretofore invisible minority or can be criticized as an ostensibly liberatory force that actually imprisons queer teens within the confines of stereotype and generalization. In a society where television shows for teen audiences featuring openly queer teen characters can be followed by news reports on protests against same-sex marriage; in a series of years when the American Library Association reports that *And Tango Makes Three*, a picture book about the true story of two male penguins successfully hatching and raising an egg, is among the most challenged and banned book of the year; in a culture where individuality, self-governance, personal freedom, individual rights, and free will are cherished, yet the repeal of “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” is considered by some as

unpatriotic and dangerous; in an environment where “That’s so gay!” can be uttered with no regard for its offensiveness, young adults who self-identify as any of the numerous labels that might fall under the umbrella term “queer,” who question their gender or sexual identity, or who support the rights of others to express their sexuality or gender in any way they wish can be bombarded by confusing and contradictory mixed messages. Queer young adult literature may likewise communicate such mixed messages.

While rendering visible an otherwise under-recognized group by depicting openly queer teenagers, queer young adult novels seem to have remained limiting in their story and scope. Although visibility of queer characters in young adult literature has expanded, openness seems to often be accompanied by stereotyping, ridicule, violence, socially and culturally constructed limits on personal freedom, and diminished expectations for safety and happiness in adolescence or young adulthood. Such stereotypes, violence, limits, and low expectations seem to be utilized to establish a sense of “realism” and “authenticity” in the stories, rendering them as somehow normal and expected, unpreventable and inescapable.

Identifying Violence and Victimization as Authentic and Realistic in Young Adult Literature

Young adult literature and its queer sub-genre occupy an awkward space; these books have the potential to play a complicated role in the lives of readers, especially teenaged ones. At once these stories are pleasure reading, but they may also be presented as a chance in the spotlight, a support system, an opportunity for bibliotherapy, a safe space, a means of social justice, or a pedagogical tool. As throughout the history of children’s

and young adult literature, even the most light-hearted stories, including ones about gender and sexual diversity, can be regarded as carrying a weight of responsibility toward its audience.

Regardless of whether or not the writer intended any kind of psychological, educational or political expression – regardless of whether or not readers seek any sort of wisdom or answer from the stories – these books have been used as the instrumentations of identity politics and gender and sexuality roles. In a country where civil rights for LGBTQIA citizens remains one of its most divisive issues, these books, whether intended to be or not, can be considered cultural tools. With the potential for so much importance and influence, the presence of homophobia and heterosexism in this sub-genre deserves critical analysis, especially in its use as a means of legitimating an authentic experience or a realistic story.

Analysis of queer young adult literature from 1969 forward prevents blind appreciation for the sub-genre as a liberatory force that gives voice to the silenced; analysis allows for investigation of potentially problematic reinforcement of heterosexist rules, roles, expectations, and restrictions and of homophobic violence and victimization. If this limitation and this victimization exist, then identifying and analyzing them within the realm of queer young adult literature can demonstrate that this sub-genre does not necessarily consistently empower readers but rather may continue to imprison them, either deliberately or not, within limited identities and spaces. Whereas adolescence is socially and culturally constructed to be a tumultuous time in any person's life, despite their gender and sexual identity, for a queer young person, these

years are often depicted as more tortuous and dangerous. There seems to be in popular and youth culture some sort of assumption that violence and victimization are simply facts of life for queer young people. As what appears to be proof of authenticity in a story, violence and victimization are used not only in the smaller sub-genre of queer young adult literature but in the wider, more general categorization of young adult literature as well. For both queer and non-queer audiences, the presence of violence and victimization in stories seems to suggest that “in the real world,” the queer teenager must accept this fate in their adolescence, must accept that “It Gets Better,” as Dan Savage, a popular author and podcaster, suggests, but usually only in college and beyond into adulthood, rarely in junior high or high school. Deconstruction of the possibility of reinforcement of stereotypical violence and victimization begins with the identification of any persistent use of homophobia as a means of “realism” and “authenticity” in young adult literature, which in turn can contribute to the normalization of homophobic violence, reinforcement of stereotypes of the bullied queer teen who must undergo attack as a part of coming of age, and maintenance of the master narrative of a miserable adolescence for queer teens whose only hope is that life somehow gets better in adulthood. To identify, analyze, and expose such narratives allows for the re-envisioning of queer young adulthood – allows for new stories for queer teens.

Chapter Two

The Creation of the Troubled Teen

While the conception of adolescence as a stage between childhood and adulthood can be traced to even the most ancient civilizations, the genesis of the troubled teen can be located in post-World War II American society in which young people had to be removed from the workplace to open jobs for returning soldiers (Hine 4). Instead of entering the adult world of work, people in their teens remained in school, suspended between childhood and maturity. As this distinction between childhood and adulthood became more pronounced via an extended adolescence, the social and cultural construction of the troubled teenager was articulated; in contemporary American social and cultural constructions, "adolescence" is synonymous with "crisis." This equation of "teen" to "trouble" manifests itself in the rhetoric of dilemma and disorder that seems to surround all youth, including queer youth. Young adult literature has helped to communicate a metanarrative of crisis for teens; however this genre is only one of the many forms of socialization via media and pop culture that may reinforce the stereotypes of coming of age as traumatic -- and coming out as tragic.

At around the same time that young people were called "teen-ager" for the first time by the popular press (Hine 4), the field of adolescent psychology likewise popularized another term that would come to characterize adolescents. "Identity crisis," according to Erik Erikson, was first used in the Mt. Zion Veteran's Rehabilitation Clinic during World War II to describe soldiers that "had through the exigencies of war lost a sense of personal sameness and historical continuity" and thus were "impaired in that

central control over themselves" (17). Erikson goes on to assign a similar kind of loss and impairment to adolescents, who experience "'identity confusion'" due to "a war within themselves" (17). While Erikson considers an "identity crisis" to be "normative" in the age of adolescence and young adulthood, he relents that the use of the term quickly became "faddish" (18). However, instead of suggesting that perhaps the proliferation of identity crises indicated a misdiagnosis or over-diagnosis by the field of psychology, he blames adolescents themselves: "Would some of our youth act so openly confused and confusing if they did not *know they were supposed to* have an identity crisis?" (18-19). He laments that adolescents "echo our very terms and flamboyantly display a conflict which we once regarded as silent, inner, and unconscious" (19). Erikson's work has helped inform modern perceptions of and assumptions about adolescence; teens are supposed to undergo a crisis of identity, and then when they do, they are criticized and disciplined for their flamboyance and their disregard and disrespect for adult authority. Erikson's claims were originally made and frequently repeated with perhaps surprising little criticism or challenge.

Jennifer A. Vadeboncoeur, author of "Naturalised, Restricted, Packaged, and Sold: Reifying the Fictions of 'Adolescent' and 'Adolescence,'" points out that thanks to the all-pervading conclusions of "'father of adolescence'" G. Stanley Hall, adolescents have been constructed as "'unfinished'" since before Erikson's diagnosis, stretching back to the turn of the twentieth century, and Vadeboncoeur notes that this discourse has since been used to "control young people, covertly and overtly restricting their bodies, relationships, affiliations, and opportunities and ultimately, limiting their possible life

pathways" (2). Hall's definition of adolescence consistently remained popular in the age of Erikson and beyond because, according to Vadeboncoeur, "it aligns and buttresses a theory of adolescence that is based upon the discourses of individuality and natural development that were, and still are, at the forefront of social beliefs" (7). The field of developmental psychology, built upon Hall's work and continued by Erikson, in essence naturalizes adolescence as a "difficult stage" instead of recognizing that the teen years are an experience negotiated within "particular social relations and contexts" and in doing so, Vaneboncouer argues, adults "come to expect them, and through them, produce the 'stage' itself," just as Erikson feared (8-9). If both adult and adolescent adhere to their assigned roles, then the self-perpetuating assumption that the stage of adolescence is tumultuous can continue to appear as truth; thus the self-fulfilling prophecy is created and maintained.

Robert Hine, author of *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager* explains that modern understanding of adolescence as a time of crisis between childhood and adulthood contributes to a phenomenon he labels "The Teenage Mystique." Hine explains, "We love the idea of youth, but are prone to panic about the young. The very qualities that adults find exciting and attractive about teenagers are entangled with those we find terrifying" (11). The teenage mystique, according to Hine, "encourages adults to see teenagers (and young people to see themselves) not as individuals but as potential problems" (11). Young people move from the innocence of childhood to the problem of adolescence, and if they can withstand the trauma, they may become adults. In *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, Jacqueline Rose

suggests that adults imagine childhood as free from difficulties and contradictions (8). Such a conception of childhood suggests a position of privilege, a middle class and above existence where parents are caretakers in every way and children are not required to work in or out of the home. While childhood acts as a social construction of privilege, purity, and innocence, adolescence becomes a dumping ground for a variety of cultural, social, and personal wrongs. Hine explains, "The teenager is a symbol of America's rising aspirations, the repository of hopes, the one who will realize the American dream. And inevitably, the teenager is a disappointment, whose combination of adult capacities and juvenile irresponsibility sows personal heartbreak and social chaos" (8). The adolescent identity crisis, then, serves as an ideological construction that can disempower or marginalize young people who may or may not be struggling to reach adulthood.

Marginalization of the Troubled Teen

This potential disempowerment and marginalization may be a means of a sort of colonization, according to Nancy Lesko, author of *Act Your Age!: A Cultural Construction of Adolescence*. Lesko views adolescence through the lens of postcolonialism, an intriguing examination. The teen is the colonized, the subaltern, existing in a world, language, and narrative structure dominated by adults. Indeed, some of Homi K. Bhabha's terminology of colonialism in *The Location of Culture* seems applicable to adolescence. Bhabha examines "the ideological construction of otherness" with his definition of "stereotype": "a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place,' already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated" (66). In Bhabha's definition, the "stereotype" of the adolescent as troubled, in

crisis, or at risk can potentially keep the adolescent in the position of powerlessness. Bhabha also identifies “*ambivalence*” as the “force” that gives stereotypes their power; according to Bhabha, “ambivalence” works to ensure a stereotype’s “repeatability in changing historical and discursive conjunctures; informs its strategies of individuation and marginalization; produces that effect of probabilistic truth and predictability, for the stereotype, must always be in excess of what can be empirically proved or logically construed” (emphasis original 66). The construction of adults’ social and cultural ambivalence toward teenagers as troubled helps to construct and reinforce this typification of the adolescent as in need of control and policing, as in need of proscribed boundaries for identity formation and permissible rebellion against social norms followed by acceptance back into such constructs.

Postcolonial theorists such as Bhabha and Albert Memmi, author of *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, consider the exploitation of the colonized in a manner that may also be applied to teens. As the colonizer depends upon the exploitation of the colonized (Memmi 79, 149), the exploitation of the teen comes from the social, cultural, and economic need to keep teens in school, out of the workforce. The success of the adult economy and social structure depended and continues to depend upon the existence of the teen; after World War II, the success of returning soldiers depended upon the prolonged adolescence of high school students. In the ways that skin color, national origin, and ethnicity may be signifiers in the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, age may likewise signify the fundamental power differential in contemporary American social and cultural situations of teens versus children or adults.

Memmi's assessment that "Nothing could better justify the colonizer's privileged position than his industry, and nothing could better justify the colonized's destitution than his indolence" seems to ring true to the situation teenagers have been put in since the late 1940s (79). Memmi suggests that the colonizers' power rests within the colonized: "If the colonized is eliminated, the colony becomes a country like any other, and who then will be exploited? Along with the colonized, colonization would disappear, and so would the colonizer" (149). The supposed inherent instability, immaturity, and inferiority of teens allow adults to keep tight the reigns of control. Lesko borrows Bhabha's theoretical lens of "*splitting*": obfuscating the "relationships of institutions and apparatuses of power while it emphasizes the inadequacies of the colonized" (106-7). The elimination of such "*splitting*," of the expanded distinction between child and adult -- prolonged adolescence as a time of struggle and tumult requiring great external adult control -- would collapse without the narrative of the troubled teen.

Bhabha explains that the colonial subject -- the colonized -- is turned by colonial discourse into a "misfit" (74-45). So is the adolescent. Moreover, Memmi suggests that the colonized may come to see themselves as misfitted: "...the rebellious colonized begins by accepting himself as something negative" (138). Memmi goes on to explain, "In the midst of revolt, the colonized continues to think, feel and live against and, therefore, in relation to the colonizer and colonization" (139). This unresolvable contradictory position is where teens may find themselves, self-aware or not. Moreover, individuals who express gender or sexual diversity may likewise find themselves in such a position. Disempowered by their purported divergence from social and cultural norms,

the queer teen is doubly misfitted.

Postcolonial theory explains that the colonized is at once glared upon and overlooked; at the same time, the unending surveillance of the colonized cannot easily be resolved against the stereotypical and symptomatic depiction and expectation that the colonizer projects upon them (Bhabaha 236). Teenagers fall in a similar position; they are at once highly observed and monitored and at the same time easily neglected as insignificant. Lesko, utilizing Jeremy Bentham's conception of the "panoptical prison," later explored by Michel Foucault, explains that for teenagers, adolescence is a panoptical prison in which teens "watch and correct themselves" as they attempt to at once fit into and fight against whatever social and cultural boundaries they believe hold them (91). Teens are to be controlled; if rebellion is to occur, it must be within the boundaries and expectations, ultimately returning them to the realm of the acceptable adult. It could be argued that American culture does not necessarily bother to *hide* the power adults have over teens. Rather, according to Lesko, American culture *displays* "the simple, unitary description of teenagers as rebellious stands. In this way, the discourse on adolescents tends to produce a fixed opposition between adults and youth approaching the permanent opposition of the colonizer and the colonized" (110). Scholarship such as Lesko's and that of Roberta Seelinger Trites, author of *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*, demonstrates that teens effectuate maturity and autonomy in closely monitored borders of acceptability; the adolescent performance and the adult surveillance and self-monitoring make for conflict.

The Marginalized Troubled Teen in Pop Culture

Since the World War II era, popular culture, from film, to television, to music, to literature, has demonstrated its capability as a tool of social construction and commodification of this kind of conflict and the "identity crisis" narrative of adolescence. In the 1950s, iconographic pop culture images such as James Deans's *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) helped to establish the troubled teen figure. In literature, J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) created the paragon of the troubled teen with Holden Caulfield, and John Knowles's *A Separate Peace* (1959) added the dimension of homosocial relationships to the conflicts faced by troubled, white, privileged young men. Novels like *Catcher in the Rye* and *A Separate Peace*, both written, published, and marketed as adult novels, helped to usher in the previously defined "problem novel" as a reinforcement of the cultural conception of adolescence as a time of crisis by featuring a teen protagonist who undergoes some sort of difficulty, some sort of stumbling block, on his or her either metaphorical or literal journey toward adulthood.

The teen protagonists of adult novels established tropes for the young adult literature genre, not just as stories but also as supposed life-lessons presented to teens in the form of realistic "problem novels." Young adult literature scholar Allan E. Cuseo, like most young adult literature scholars, cites S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, Ann Head's *Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones*, and Jean Thompson's *House of Tomorrow*, all published in 1967, and Paul Zindel's *The Pigman*, published in 1968, as the first "realistic novels" (2). Pace Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson and Nilsen concur that in the late 1960s, "modern realism" or "new realism" became the dominant mode of young adult literature (9th ed. 115, 116), and Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins refer to *The Outsiders* and Robert

Lipstye's *The Contender*, also published in 1967, as "the first modern young adult novels" (1). Modern realism or new realism in young adult literature in the late 1960s was characterized by its embrace of difference in characters and settings; characters came "from a variety of social and economic levels" and grew up in "settings that are harsh and difficult places to live" (Pace Nilsen et al. 9th ed. 117). Authors began to offer up the stories of young people written in colloquial language, writing "the way people really talk, including profanity and ungrammatical constructions" (Pace Nilsen et al. 9th ed. 116). Moreover, problem novels changed the mode of young adult literature. Instead of comic or romantic, novels for young adults became more ironic and tragic, as "it became acceptable to provide readers with more vicarious experiences than would be either desirable or possible in real life" (Pace Nilsen et al. 9th ed. 116).

As scholars suggest that young adult literature provides a psychological verisimilitude that reflects the readers' reality, teen readers are supposed to interact with the texts in a manner that can somehow result in growth and new insight or understanding. Thus, young adult novels are purportedly capable of sharing morals or lessons, encouraging teen readers to identify with protagonists' and other characters' experiences, literally identifying with the normalizing narrative of the text. As such, young adult texts themselves can be at once empowering and disempowering. Trites suggests that young adult literature serves as an illustration for teens of what qualifies as an "institutionally tolerated form of rebellion that paradoxically allows them to remain within the system" (34). Young adult novels can mimic American social and cultural norms that allow teens to find a way outside of the hegemonic systems and

controls in which they live while still ensuring that by the end of the novel, they are reinscribed into the realm of what is socially and culturally acceptable. As a mode of socialization into social and cultural norms, young adult literature, according to Trites, works as a kind of Althusserian Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). Trites explains that young adult texts "delegitimize adolescents," rendering adolescence "unacceptable" and sending "the ideological message that [teens] need to grow up, to give up the subject position culturally marked as 'adolescent'" (83). Trites writes, "In communicating such ideologies to adolescent readers, the genre itself becomes an Ideological State Apparatus, an institution that participates in the social construction of the adolescent as someone who must be repressed for the greater good" (83).

From the 1960s forward, focusing on the tribulations of growing up and assigning some kind of educational value to fiction has greatly complicated the nature of young adult literature. While literature for children and young adults has historically served both an instructive and entertaining purpose, the genre seemed to become more didactic as titles offered morals or lessons on what adults considered to be the contemporary crises facing young people; problem novels share the teen protagonist's usually terrible experiences so that readers may learn from his or her mistakes. Cuseo identifies the inherent contradictory nature of young adult literature, particularly YAL that deals with sexuality: while the adults who control the young adult industry "have sought to have the genre moralize," the teen readers have "been eager for an understanding of society and his/her emerging, if not confusing, sexuality" (3). If readers of this new kind of young adult literature were either meant to learn from or to search

out answers in these fictional books, considering what kinds of lessons or messages the books were espousing, intentionally or not, can be revelatory. With *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*, implicit and explicit ideological assertions about homosexuality -- again, whether intentionally or not -- were established in the common narrative of homosexuality in young adult literature that would remain in place in the sub-genre for decades and continue on in contemporary novels, such as *The Vast Fields of Ordinary* (2009) by Nick Burd, winner of the American Library Association's first-ever Stonewall Book Award for Children's and Young Adult Literature. These two novels, a "classic" of the sub-genre and an award-winning contemporary novel, will be discussed in depth in the next chapter.

Young adult literature scholar Jeffrey S. Kaplan cites "the power of young adult literature to reveal the hidden and often confusing lives of young adults, particularly in today's world for those whose sexual orientation differs from the acceptable norm" (53). He considers what it means "to read (or maybe, not read) about yourself when your self-identity is not considered the norm" (53). In discussing this strand of current research in young adult literature, as well as the strand of "the preponderance of the use of young adult literature to inspire, and perhaps, change the lives of young people" (53) and the strand of young adult literature's "changing face" and how "its reflective nature mirrors societal norms and expectations" (53), Kaplan concludes that young adult literature has "the ability to inspire, challenge, and reflect the social customs and mores of our changing world" and has the potential "to shape and influence the lives of young adults" (59). This hopeful assessment of young adult literature certainly attempts to

inspire confidence in contemporary writers' and readers' abilities to examine the windows and mirrors of queerness; however, close, thorough, thoughtful examination remains necessary to assess and address the power portrayed in and wielded by the young adult literature industry in terms of queerness and representations of queer teens.

Adolescence and coming of age, in both reality and fiction, seem to become even more problematic for teens whose sexual or gender identity is not traditionally male or female or heterosexual. In *The Gay Teen: Educational Practice and Theory for Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adolescents*, editor Gerald Unks suggests that queer youth "suffer *more*" than other adolescents and queer adults because they lack the "social allegiances, educational resources, or cultural support that are routinely established by the adult society for other youth subcultures" (emphasis original 4). According to Unks's work, because of their age, queer youth cannot participate in the "highly adult-centered" queer culture and community, and they have no teen-centered alternatives. Thus, they are "powerless," subject to "ostracism at best, and physical abuse at worst" (6). Such rhetoric – powerless, ostracized, abused – has been potentially reinforced in queer young adult literature. Unks writes, "Lacking any significant support system, it is not surprising that the homosexual adolescent may achieve poorly, drop out of school, engage in substance abuse, run away from home, or attempt suicide" (7). These scenarios seem to have become expectations for queer teens, reflected both in young adult literature written about them and scholarship on them. Used both to criticize queer teens' perceived weakness and inability to cope and to appeal to adults to help

queer teens, this characterization appears again and again in the lives and experiences of young people.

Tracing the Development of Queer Young Adult Literature

The history of queer young adult literature could be considered as stretching as far back as the early 1940s. However, while Maureen Daly's 1942 book *Seventeenth Summer* and Madeleine L'Engle's 1945 book *The Small Rain* mention homosexuality, both do so only briefly; the protagonist of *Seventeenth Summer* goes with her boyfriend to hear a musician whose description is stereotypically gay, and *The Small Rain's* main character enters what seems to be a gay bar where she encounters a woman who is presumably a lesbian—a woman the protagonist describes as “it.” Another early, fleeting reference to a potentially homosexual character or situation occurs in Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. In a now famously debated scene, Holden Caulfield awakens to find his male English teacher stroking his hair. Whatever the teacher's intention, Holden considers it “pervery.” Then, Knowles's *A Separate Peace* depicted a destructive friendship between two young men with a certainly homosexual or homoerotic subtext (Cart and Jenkins 6-7).

Finally, 1969 saw not only the Stonewall Riots in Greenwich Village and the subsequent emergence of gay civil rights movement, but also the publication of the first young adult novel with undoubtedly homosexual content: John Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*. In *Homosexual Characters in YA Novels: A Literary Analysis, 1969-1982*, the first book-length analytical study of young adult literature with gay or lesbian characters, Cuseo explains that the American social and cultural climate and the

related creation of "the realistic novel published for the young adult" in the mid-to-late 1960s made books like Donovan's possible and publishable. Sex and sexuality, like other heretofore taboo subjects, became viable topics for young adult novels.

From its earliest days, queerness in young adult literature has been somehow linked with misery, punishment, violence, and death, and queer characters have been isolated or confined to their typical element of effeminate gay boy or tomboy lesbian girl; if a queer character disrupted norms of sexuality, then they disrupted norms of gender, as well. Romantic love plays a lesser part in queer relationships, and in many books in the sub-genre, such relationships are doomed to be short-lived and to end badly. The stories in these books seem to have had the unfortunate, unintentional effect of upholding such stereotypes as measures of homosexuality and heterosexuality; these stereotypes can and have become markers of normalcy or deviance, making the narrative of the performance of coming of age as a queer young adult seem dangerous and depressing.

Initiating Scholarship on Queer Young Adult Literature

The first scholarship on queer young adult novels came in 1976 with the publication of Frances Hanckel and John Cunningham's article "Can Young Gays Find Happiness in YA Books?" in *Wilson Library Bulletin*. Hanckel and Cunningham recognized that young adult fiction of the 1970s in general adhered to the idea that "contemporary American society is a difficult place in which to come of age" and that problem novels were "always among the most popular" in many libraries. Thus, they suggest that these books can play an important part "in promoting a healthy discussion of problems," and

therefore librarians had to consider a novel's "contribution in informing YAs and in aiding their development to responsible adulthood" (528). Hanckel and Cunningham suggest that librarians must consider both the honesty and the hope provided by young adult novels (528). While honesty and hope may be considered desirable traits for young adult literature, Hanckel and Cunningham seem to subscribe to the notion that young adult literature might be valuable more for its educational and social service than its literary merit, a notion that can be difficult to dismiss.

Hanckel and Cunningham's article is significant in that it initiated important discussions for librarians regarding queer youth. They pointed out that if young people are "looking for answers to their personal questions," they may look in young adult novels, so librarians who want to support these patrons need to consider "what kind of information will a young person find" on the shelves (530). They recommend that librarians consider, "The ability of the author as storyteller, the depth of characterization and style, and the degree of the author's success in clarifying moral and social questions" (532). None of the novels discussed in the article provide the kind of "life-support systems" that Hanckel and Cunningham think queer teens need, and they conclude with the challenge that "all human beings be presented fairly," stating "Gay people only expect to be treated with the awareness and sensitivity now shown to other groups" (534). A critical examination of queer young adult literature suggests that their challenge remained unmet for years to come, and in the interim, the sub-genre has centered around identifying one's homosexuality or same-sex attractions and coming out as crises for queer characters.

In 1983, *Interracial Books for Children Bulletin* published Jan Goodman's article "Out of the Closet, But Paying the Price: Lesbian and Gay Characters in Children's Literature." Goodman outlines ten stereotypes of lesbian and gay characters in books for children and teens. Goodman's list continues to serve as a means of evaluating clichéd representations of queer characters in young adult literature, as well as in other modes of popular culture. The stereotypes are as follows:

1. It is still physically dangerous to be gay.
2. Your future is bleak if you are gay.
3. Gay people lead lonely lives, even if they're happy with each other.
4. Gay adults should not be around children because they'll influence them to be homosexual.
5. Something traumatic in a gay person's past makes her/him homosexual.
6. Gay men want to be women and lesbians want to be men.
7. SEX: Don't worry. If you do "it" once, you may not be gay. It may only be a phase.
8. Gay relationships are mysterious.
9. All gays are middle/upper-middle class and white.
10. As far as young children know, there's no such thing as a gay person.

(14-15)

Goodman's scholarship demonstrated that the growing presence of queer characters in children's and young adult literature in the 1970s and 1980s was not necessarily constructive; "disturbing assumptions, stereotypes and inaccuracies" continued to

reinforce homophobia (13). Goodman points out the connection made between homosexuality and "violence and tragedy," "severe hardships and misfortunes," and childhood trauma (13, 14). She criticizes the lack of a "support system" for queer characters, containing the characters to a "semi-solitary confinement" (13). Goodman also calls attention to the "lack of racial and socioeconomic diversity among gay characters" (15), a fact later confirmed by Christine Jenkins in her 1988 article "Heartthrobs and Heartbreaks: A Guide to Young Adult Books with Gay Themes" published in *Out/Look* (82). Goodman concludes, "There are too few books with lesbian or gay men, and even fewer good books" (15). The search for good books initiated by Goodman in 1983 continues in this analysis of the sub-genre.

In "Heartthrobs and Heartbreaks" Jenkins also identifies several other stereotypical treatments of queer characters in young adult fiction. According to Jenkins, "reading is one of the few ways for adolescents to gather information privately" about homosexuality (82). David E. Wilson affirms this sentiment in "The Open Library: YA Books for Gay Teens" published in *English Journal* in 1984: "Young people often look to books for help, support, and guidance that they find so difficult to obtain in personal relationships. When they can't talk, they often turn to books, to libraries" (60). Thus, Jenkins calls for "[r]ealistic, balanced, and diverse portrayals of gay people and issues," instead of books that "confirm many of the American stereotypes of the generic gay person: a good-looking, white male in his twenties or thirties who is single, lives in a big city," "has a large disposable income," is probably involved in some way with the arts," "comes from a troubled family, is sexually promiscuous, and probably has AIDS" (82). In

her review of the almost forty titles published between 1969 and 1986, Jenkins reaches the conclusion that the "effect of these books is to either trivialize or mystify gay sexuality for their readers" (85). Wilson agrees that "more books with healthy, happy homosexual characters need to be written, published, and made available to young adults" (62).

Cart and Jenkins label *I'll Get There It Better Be Worth the Trip* as "tremendously important" not only because it is the first young adult novel to "deal with homosexuality" but also because it "established—for good or ill—the model for the treatment of the topic that would be replicated in many of the novels that followed in the 1970s" (14). Indeed, some aspects of the novel became stereotypes still visible in novels in the 2000s. Cart and Jenkins determine that Donovan's novel marks the beginning of the trend in queer young adult literature to focus on privileged white boys who usually have an "absent father" and a "disturbed and/or controlling mother" (14).

With Donovan's novel, homosexuality quickly became related to a difficult childhood and a broken home. Donovan's book also helped to establish the stereotypes that homosexuality is a "rite of passage experience with no long-term meaning or consequences" and, of course, "a matter of conscious choice" (Cart and Jenkins 14). Finally, and perhaps most disturbing, Cart and Jenkins point out that *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* connects homosexuality with death, an unfortunate association that continues on even into the twenty-first century with *The Vast Fields of Ordinary* (15). However, Cart and Jenkins fail to recognize that Donovan's novel also connects homosexuality with violence. Starting immediately with the first this book,

queer characters -- particularly gay male characters -- in young adult literature, consistently experience violence in a variety of forms. From 1969 to 2009, it seems that Joseph Cady's statement in "American Literature: Gay Male, 1900-1969" may in some cases still hold a modicum of relevance: "In their association of homosexuality with violence, suicide, murder or other kinds of pathetic death or at best with lives of freakishness or isolation, many works in the post-World War II outpouring of published gay male writing seem to confirm Mart Crowley's famous line in *The Boys in the Band*, 'Show me a happy homosexual and I'll show you a gay corpse'" (38-39).

The tendencies toward homophobia and heterosexism that can be observed even in the most seemingly progressive novels for teens expand beyond sub-genre of queer young adult literature into the wider realm of young adult literature in general; homophobia and heterosexism are a means of creating realism in young adult literature. Stereotypical depictions of masculinity and femininity, anti-queer verbal and physical attacks, suicidal feelings, loneliness, and so on are used to create a so-called realistic story. Every time the stories of anti-queer bullying, violence, rejection, and isolation are the ones that are told, homophobia and heterosexism are further normalized. The narrative becomes increasingly entrenched, and there seems even less of a chance of escape. Queer characters and even straight characters must maintain their positions within the culturally proscribed parameters of gender and sexuality. As Trites suggests, young adult literature acts as an ISA, allowing for the ritual of rebellion. Characters are allowed to explore issues of gender and sexuality only if they ultimately reinstate the social order. This potential indoctrination into gender and sexual normative roles,

whether intentional or not, appears to continue in the genre; books and the stories they tell are cultural products. If young adult novels persist in utilizing previously proscribed gender and sexuality roles and tropes, then the story seems familiar, and thus it feels true or realistic. Homophobia and heterosexism, used to create realism, become just the way the world is. Young adult literature may possibly operate upon this assumption.

Identifying Heterosexism and Homophobia in the Wider Genre of Young Adult Literature

Moreover, as homosexuality weaved its way into young adult literature over the last fifty years, traditional narratives of what it means to be homosexual have played a normative role for gender and sexual identities in young adult titles not specific to the LGBTQIA sub-genre. Homophobia and heterosexism regularly appear in the larger genre of young adult literature, utilizing homophobia and homophobic language to create a realistic teen world and culture, an ostensibly authentic voice and experience for its readers. Even pioneering, sophisticated narratives disseminate the spirit of openness while at the same time reinforcing generalizations and prejudices. Stereotypical depictions of masculinity and femininity, anti-queer verbal and physical attacks, suicidal feelings, loneliness, and more are tropes used to create a realistic story. Narratives of anti-queer bullying, violence, rejection, and isolation may inadvertently reinforce or normalize homophobia and heterosexism. An examination of Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, winner of the 2007 National Book Award, will serve as an example of a text that at once attempts to embrace queerness but at the same time utilizes stereotypes of queerness in its depiction of a realistic teen landscape in the fourth chapter.

In the larger genre of young adult literature and in its queer subgenre, queer characters and even straight characters seem to need to maintain their positions within the culturally proscribed parameters of gender and sexuality. To step outside of such parameters appears to be to step beyond the contemporary incarnation of modern or new realism. If heterosexuality and homophobia are the tenets of realistic fiction, then a socially and culturally accepted, safe, successful version of queerness is somehow beyond the boundaries of realism in a more fantastical realm. *Boy Meets Boy* by David Levithan will demonstrate that true acceptance of queerness can lie beyond the realm of reality. These narratives in which queerness is overtly and perhaps overly recognized, supported, and celebrated, are somehow a step removed from reality, from realism.

From the first critical publication in 1976, scholars of queer young adult literature have asserted that, "Young gay women and men can and should be portrayed as heroes as simply as their nongay counterparts, with no special emphasis on the sexual component of their identities" (Hanckel 532). Twelve years later in 1988, Christine Jenkins hoped, "Perhaps there will come a time when a novel appears containing a protagonist who *is* gay in a plot which is not chiefly dealing with gay problems" (85). However, it takes well into the 1990s for the type of progress these scholars called for to be made. Goodman's list of ten stereotypes remains part of the formula for queer young adult literature; isolation and violence are common into the twenty-first century. The same stereotypes Goodman identified in 1983 appear in *The Vast Fields of Ordinary* in 2009, and whereas certain progress has been made, similar problematic depictions of queerness remain in queer young adult literature.

Chapter Three

Locating the Trip's Starting Point: John Donovan's

I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip.

With the 1969 publication of John Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*, implicit and explicit ideological assertions about homosexuality were instituted that would remain in place in young adult literature for decades. These assertions, reinforced again and again in queer young adult literature from 1969 to the present, influenced the expression and understanding of what it meant to be a queer teen, according to texts written for, marketed toward, and read by an adolescent audience. In "Composing Themselves: The Discursive (De)Construction of Queer Identity in Six Young Adult Novels," James R. Gilligan points to adolescents' potential for creation of self-identity via narrative. By reading, writing, and creating stories, adolescents can select, try on, and discard various identities. Citing Jane Kroger's explanation that "language is a text out of which identities are constructed, justified, and maintained," Gilligan states that in the language of stories, "the adolescent can negotiate issues of power and self-empowerment, a salient theme in the development of one's identity" (45). Readers might find "subversion and transgression" in young adult narrative (Saxena 43). In interacting with language and narrative, adolescent readers might transform and develop many different ideas of identity; however, with queer young adult literature, the stories told about queer teens in many ways lack variety. The evolution of the queer teen story has in some ways stagnated; while the number of books published has steadily increased, the stories have in some ways remained the same in the past fifty

years. Whereas in the real world, identity is constantly changing, in young adult literature, there seems to be rather limited identities available for queer teens, limited by social norms and stereotypes reinforced by authorial powers.

The influence that the adult world of authors, editors, publishers, booksellers, librarians, and teachers exerts upon young adult literature should not be disregarded. The access adolescent readers have to stories and texts depends upon what the adult world has deemed appropriate for -- and marketable to -- them. The wider genre of young adult literature can be a tool of acculturation and socialization. Young adult literature has been described as a "tolerated form of rebellion" (Trites 34) that allows some escape outside heteronormative, hegemonic American social and cultural systems as long as the characters are reinscribed into them by the end of the story. For queer teen characters in young adult literature, the ways into and out of society and culture seem limited, defined in the 1960s and reinforced today. Gilligan values the "qualities of instability, indeterminacy, and constant mutability" of identity, as outlined not only by the identity development theories of Jannis K. Androutsopoulos and Alexandra Georgakopoulou, but also by queer theory in general (49). The conception of gender and sexual identity as fluid, indeterminate, and ongoing, however, is not necessarily reflected in young adult literature with queer characters and content. Instead, queer young adult literature seems to offer rather restrictive possibilities. In an exploration of six queer young adult novels published from 1982 to 2006, Gilligan notes, "Interestingly...the construction and deconstruction of queer identities remains strikingly similar throughout" the novels. Gilligan's description is fitting; from *I'll Get*

There. It Better Be Worth the Trip. in 1969 to *The Vast Fields of Ordinary* in 2009, the range of queer identities does not exactly expand. Rather, the 2009 publication seems eerily familiar, reminiscent of a story told fifty years earlier.

**Donovan's Contribution to the Construction of Homosexuality
in Young Adult Literature**

The narrator of John Donovan's novel is Davy, a thirteen-year-old boy who had been raised by his grandmother until her death, which opens the book. Davy and his beloved pet Dachshund Fred must now move to New York with his emotionally distant alcoholic mother. At his new all-boys Episcopal school, Davy meets Douglas Altschuler, a popular but reserved athlete. Cart and Jenkins point out that "private schools provide the setting for many of the homosexual novels in the early years of the genre—perhaps because, like English boarding schools, they offer a ready-made, same-sex environment for boys or girls away from home for the first time" (9). Davy and Altschuler quickly become close friends, and during an afternoon playing with Fred, the two move from wrestling the dog to wrestling one another in a manner that will become a trope for physical contact between two boys in young adult literature. After a game of keep-away, Fred runs out of the room with his toy, and the boys lay on the floor together, neither moving to get up and chase Fred again. Davy feels "Unusual," and as he and Altschuler look at each other "peculiarly," Fred jumps between them and licks their faces (142-43). Then, Davy reports, "I guess I kiss Altschuler and he kisses me" (143).

Neither boy knows what to make of the kiss, and in an attempt to deal with the situation, they pretend to box, "two bantam-weight tough guys" (143). Davy comments,

"I mean very tough. I mean a couple of guys like Altschuler and me don't have to worry about being queer or anything like that. Hell, no" (143). Immediately, the intimacy is replaced with a physicality that emphasizes their masculinity, and queerness is established as an unwelcome and unwanted identifier. The kiss becomes rough-housing, and Davy assures himself that he and Altschuler are "tough"; Davy subscribes to the belief that "tough" guys can't possibly be "queer," so he and Altschuler have nothing to worry about. The expression of intimacy and the potential for sexual pleasure is cloaked by violence, a questionable tactic that will be repeated again and again in queer young adult literature, a topic I will return to in a later chapter.

For several days after their first kiss, the boys avoid each other, but then, when Davy's mother makes plans to go out of town overnight, she makes arrangements for Altschuler to stay with Davy so that he is not alone. The events of the night Davy and Altschuler spend together are not given; however Davy remarks on Sunday morning, "I have a new way of looking at Altschuler because of what we did together last night" (151). The sexual contact remains off of the page, and no details are shared, but Davy recounts that the boys "got to talking about all the girls we had made out with," and then, he states, "That's how it happened" (151-52). What exactly happened is unclear, but Davy attempts to assure himself, "I'm not ashamed. There was nothing wrong about it, I keep telling myself" (151). Altschuler leaves after what Davy calls "the strangest, weirdest goodbye I ever had to say to anybody," but soon after, Davy begins to feel "weird" (151-52).

Davy's response is typical to any young adult experiencing what could be

considered romantic feelings for another person. He thinks, "I want to call up that bastard Altschuler and have a good long chat with him. What about? I don't know. Do you have to have a reason?" (152). He wants to talk to Altschuler, just to hear his voice. Their conversation is awkward and brief, and later that day, Davy contemplates calling him again. In what seems a believable fashion for a young person in Davy's position, he decides not to and remarks, "Besides, isn't it his turn to call me?" (154). Of course, Altschuler does not call, and Davy seems to panic: "There's nothing wrong with Altschuler and me, is there? I know it's not like making out with a girl. It's just something that happened. It's not dirty, or anything like that. It's all right, isn't it?" (154). Davy seeks reassurance, seeks confirmation that he is normal, that he is not tainted or unclean in some way, and that his behavior is well within the range of acceptability.

Davy's fears are somewhat assuaged when later that week he and Altschuler walk home from school together and talk about what they "did last Saturday" (156). They admit that neither of them had actually "made out" with the girls they had claimed to have been with and that they both thought often about what they had done together (156). Lying about sexual acts with girls, the two boys hide their inexperience and perhaps their disinterest in the opposite sex. The boys make their way to Davy's apartment, and again, in playing with the dog, they come in close contact, and Davy explains, "dopey me, I give Altschuler a dumb kiss" (158). They are both surprised by the kiss and respond to it by deciding to drink whiskey. The alcohol gives them a means of avoiding confrontation and an excuse for any further physical contact. The boys pass out, and Davy's mother finds them lying asleep on the floor with their arms around one

another. Her response is to frantically question Davy; she is not concerned about the whiskey, but she is extremely worried about what the boys were doing together in the dark on the floor. After she has had several drinks herself, she asks, 'Nothing...unnatural...happened this afternoon with you and Douglas, did it?' (162). Her use of the word "unnatural" demonstrates her lack of acceptance of any same-sex relationship. Davy says no, but when his mother asks him if anything had "'ever'" happened between them, Davy does not answer her but instead angrily accuses her of never caring for him (162-63). Davy's reaction seems to confirm her fears, and his mother, overemotional, continually repeats, "'I can't cope...I can't'" (163). She calls Davy's father, and when he arrives, she takes Fred for a walk to leave them alone to talk, despite Davy's plea that she not take his dog outside, knowing that she is drunk and cannot handle Fred's energy.

Davy's father asks him if Altschuler is "'a special friend'" and "'I guess you have a crush on your friend, is that it?'" (165-66). Davy quickly responds, "'I'm not queer or anything, if that's what you think'" (166). Davy's father says, "'I'm sure you're not, Davy'" (166). He tells Davy that "a lot of boys play around in a lot of ways when they are growing up" and that Davy "shouldn't get involved in some special way of life which will close off other ways of life" to him (166). His father's reactions, while at least less dramatic than his mother's, offer only one kind of understanding: it is acceptable for Davy to have a crush on another boy and to even have sexual contact with another boy, as long as Davy leaves such same-sex attraction and attachment behind in his young adulthood. He has to choose the correct way of life.

In the midst of the conversation, Davy looks out the window to see his mother chasing Fred, who is not leashed. Frantic, Davy chases down the stairs, afraid for Fred's safety, and rightfully so. "No more than thirty seconds all told from the window to the bottom of the stairs. And then I hear it. A big thud. A terrible, unnatural yelping," Davy recounts. Fred, hit by a car, dies in Davy's hands. Davy is crushed by Fred's death, and he questions who is to blame. As he's beginning to conclude that "It just happ...", he realizes that his mother took Fred for a walk because she wanted his father to talk to him about what he had or had not done with Altschuler. Davy asks, "Is this why it happened?" His response: "Yes, God, yes. It's my fault. Because of everything I did. It wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for me. It is too my fault! All that messing around. Nothing would have happened to Fred if I hadn't been messing around with Altschuler. My fault. Mine!" (172). Davy considers Fred's death punishment for his relationship with Altschuler; he is paying for what he has done with another boy. The notion that there is a price to pay for being gay reaches far into the future of young adult literature.

From that moment on, Davy avoids Altschuler as much as possible, and his anger at Altschuler grows. He blames Altschuler: "It was that talk about making out with Enid Gerber and Mary Lou Gerrity that got us started. It was a bunch of lies....Fred died because of some stupid lies about making out. It certainly isn't in my nature to queer around. I never did it before. If it hadn't been for Altschuler, I would never have done it at all" (174). Davy begins to feel "hate" for Altschuler as he lives with the belief that Fred's death was caused by the boys' feelings for one another (174).

Davy busies himself with baseball and becomes a star on the team. Several

weeks into the baseball season, he is showering in school locker room when Altschuler enters the shower and claps Davy on the shoulder as he congratulates him on a good game. Davy reacts violently to Altschuler's touch. He yells, "'We're going to end up a couple of queers....You know that, don't you?" (176). Altschuler tries to walk away, but Davy grabs him and hits him. Davy yells at Altschuler that it was their fault that Fred was killed: "That's why my mother was walking Fred that night. Because of us. Because of all that queering around" (177). Altschuler tries to tell Davy that Fred's death had nothing to do with them, but when Davy continues to argue with him, Altschuler hits him. The boys fight until Altschuler stops at the sight of Davy's blood. This actual physical confrontation mirrors the pretend boxing match they engaged in after their first kiss. Simulated aggression developing into real violence will become a trend in young adult literature with gay male characters still traceable into the twenty-first century, from Bette Greene's 1997 *The Drowning of Stephan Jones* where a gay man is accidentally murdered in a gay-bashing attack to Alex Sanchez's 2001-2005 *Rainbow Boys* series in which an effeminate high school student is harassed and attacked on a regular basis. From name-calling to assault to murder, violence will come to play a significant role in queer young adult literature.

After the violent episode, the boys find the fight is cathartic, and over time, they become friends again. When Davy and Altschuler make a "date" to go to the Museum of Natural History on a day that Davy would have normally spent with his father, he calls his father to change their plans. His father's girlfriend Stephanie answers the phone, and when Davy tells her he'll be going out with Altschuler on Saturday so cannot see his

father, Stephanie says, "Is that the boy..." (184). Davy retorts, "He's my friend. Did my father tell you something?" (184). Stephanie responds kindly: "No, Davy, only that he was a best friend....I'm glad you have a good friend" (184). Stephanie shows more kindness, understanding, and acceptance than either of Davy's parents, and Davy responds to her warmth. They make plans for the four of them to have lunch together. After writing down directions to the restaurant, Davy adds to the note: "*Saturday, May 11, 12:30, Alt., Stephanie, Father, and me*" (184). Davy's note seems to suggest a pleasure and comfort in taking Altschuler to meet his father and Stephanie. Their lunch plans seem to normalize his relationship with Altschuler for Davy.

Alone after Stephanie and Davy's father leave after their lunch together, the boys decide they have to "talk about this queer business" (188). Altschuler confides that what they did together "didn't feel wrong," and he implores Davy not to feel guilty for Fred's death. Altschuler more willingly acknowledges his feelings while Davy hesitates to recognize his. Davy concludes, "I guess the important thing is not to do it again," and Altschuler responds, "If you think it's dirty or something like that, I wouldn't do it again. If I were you" (188). If Altschuler is attempting to tell Davy that he does not think their same-sex attractions are dirty and that he is willing to be intimate with Davy again, Davy does not hear him. The boys decide that they need to make out with more girls so as to avoid having "to think about, you know, the other" (188).

The novel ends with the boys discussing what kind of adults they will grow up to be. Neither of them think of their parents as role models; both sets are divorced, the mother is unstable, and the father is absent. Davy remarks that he respected his

grandmother very much, and Altschuler comments that he respected his friend Wilkins who had faced a difficult childhood and then death from leukemia. Davy says, "I guess we could respect each other....Do you think so?" (189). "Sure," Altschuler answers to bring the novel to a close. While it is heartening that the boys have found respect for one another and will most likely continue to be friends, it seems unlikely that the two will develop a meaningful romantic relationship. Instead, it seems that although Altschuler may grow up to be "queer," Davy will not choose that "special way of life." While groundbreaking in its portrayal of homosexuality in a novel written for a young adult audience, *I'll Get There*. helped establish a master-narrative of what happens to queer teenagers. In "What a Wonderful World: Notes on the Evolution of GLBTQ Literature for Young Adults," Michael Cart explains, "Donovan established a less than salutary model for the homosexual novel that would be faithfully replicated for the next dozen years: homosexuality is presented as both a rite of passage experience with no long-term consequences and as a matter of choice. Worse, though, is the equation Donovan makes between homosexuality and death" (48).

Critical Reception of *I'll Get There*.

In this same article, Cart notes that the publication of *I'll Get There* was met with "considerable trepidation" by its publisher, Harper & Row, in 1969 (48). Among the publishing house's means of dealing with such trepidation was "the solicitation of a statement for the dust jacket" from Dr. Frances Ilg, director of the Gesell Institute of Child Development, Yale University and Dr. Mary Steichen Calderone, authority on sex education of Sex Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) (Cart

48, Lewis np). In seeking such an endorsement from experts in the field of child development and sex education, Ursula Nordstrom, director of Harper's Department of Books for Boys and Girls wrote to Dr. Ilg, "If you like the book as a whole, we would be so glad if you could give us a quote we could use. It seems strange that a curtain has been drawn over this entire subject in fiction for young readers" (Marcus 261-62). Nordstrom's proposition that authors of young adult literature might raise the veil hiding characters' sexuality may have been courageous for Harper & Row, but the boldness of such a suggestion seems tempered by the publishing house's need to seek out the approval -- almost the permission -- of a child development expert and a sex education expert for the book's cover. Cart reports that Dr. Ilg indeed offered a statement of praise for the book, and when *I'll Get There* finally made its way onto bookstore shelves, "it received almost universal praise. Indeed, both the *New York Times* and *School Library Journal* named it to their respective annual best books lists" (48). Moreover, the book was named to the 1969 Honor Roll of Spring Children's Books by the Washington Post (Lewis np). That the novel somehow required the endorsement of a child development professional, who presumably was not a literary critic or expert in literature, seems to demonstrate what Cart identifies as a central issue with early queer young adult literature: a "nearly universal absence of art" (49). Dr. Ilg's and Dr. Steichen Calderone's sanctioning of the novel seems to make *I'll Get There* more technical, less literary. *I'll Get There* does not seem to have been as readily treated as literature. Cart posits that perhaps the subject of homosexuality was not seen as the stuff of a compelling story, but rather a "problem that needs resolution" (49), resulting

in the “form of the ‘problem novel,’ the ripped-from-the-headlines work of fiction— first appearing in the 1970s—in which the central problem becomes the tail that wags the dog of the novel” (49). The characters seem to be identified and defined by their sexuality, and their sexuality seems to be identified and defined as a problem. The apparent designation of homosexuality as the problem that needs resolution in the story, in Cart’s words, delayed or even prevented the development of “more literary considerations, such as form, structure, and setting” (49). These aspects of the narrative did not seem significant and thus received “scant attention” (Cart 49).

The May 4, 1969 *New York Times* review of *I’ll Get There* upholds Cart’s assertion. Authored by John Weston, the review opens with, “The contribution this book makes, giving reason why it should be available wherever young people read, is that it touches, with lyricism and simplicity, upon a spontaneous sexual relationship between two adolescent boys” (np). With the commendation of the novel’s “lyricism” and “simplicity,” it seems as if the literary qualities of *I’ll Get There* may be evaluated; however, those two words are the last about the novel as literature. The remainder of the review focuses on the examination of homosexuality -- and its connections to boys’ need for sexual release, bestiality, scatology, and chances against surviving into adulthood -- as the central problem of the novel.

Weston asserts that in the novel, author John Donovan suggests, “homosexuality is to some degree a natural occurrence among close friends old enough for sexual desires without heterosexual outlets” (np). Weston’s words seem a fit example of one of the stereotypes surrounding homosexual characters in children’s and young adult literature

outlined by Jan Goodman in 1983: "SEX: Don't worry. If you do 'it' once, you may not be gay. It may only be a phase" (14-15). Weston continues, "And he makes it clear that the best way to counter such desires is to face them honestly for what they are: something beautiful at the moment, but to be replaced in the natural course of life with interest in the other sex" (np). Cart and Jenkins recognize that *I'll Get There*. also upheld the stereotypes that homosexuality is a "rite of passage experience with no long-term meaning or consequences" and "a matter of conscious choice" (Cart and Jenkins 14); however, not only does *I'll Get There*. itself, but some of its reviews do so as well. Weston's review may likewise be duplicitous in its treatment of homosexuality as the subject of the novel. Weston clearly recognizes damaging stereotypes of homosexuality. He calls attention to the fact that both boys are raised in single-family homes, which asks "the reader to be once again led into the foggy belief that only in fatherless homes do boys become infatuated with other boys. (That simply isn't true.)" (np). However, Weston seems to fail to recognize that in his review, he too is dealing in stereotypes -- some quite outlandish.

Weston's review seems to become almost bizarre when he claims that Davy "concentrates his affection on his dog almost to the point of bestiality" and conjures up Freud to explain Davy's "absolute fascination with Fred's fecal and urinary functions," stating that "As Freud emphasized, scatological interest is not an uncommon erotic symbol in childhood, nor is it to be considered abnormal" (np). Davy's devotion to his dog does not near bestiality, nor do their regular walks make Davy fascinated with Fred's excrement. Although there is no way to determine, it would be interesting to

explore if Weston would have come to the same conclusions about a boy who did *not* engage in homosexual acts. There appears to be no thoughtful analysis behind Weston's claims about Davy. Perhaps his review, either overtly or inadvertently, ties homosexuality to the abnormal or the unnatural. Perhaps the review, accidentally or not, suggests that a boy who is willing to engage in sex acts with another boy is capable of bestiality and expresses his sexual desires with an obsession with excrement. In a letter to author John Donovan, editor Ursula Nordstrom wrote in regards to Weston's review: "I think the first part of the *Times* [Weston] review is fine and that the last part is ridiculous. Oh hell, the whole thing is ridiculous and I can't pretend otherwise... Bestiality?" (qtd. in Marcus 270).

Weston recognizes that in Davy's mind, his "homosexual engagements result in the death of Fred the dog," which leads him "to assume a heavy mantle of guilt that could conceivably affect him forever" (np). Strapped with the knowledge of his homosexuality, his apparently bestial love for his dog, his guilt over his dog's death, and his broken home, Weston concludes, "the chances against David's surviving to adulthood seem greater than the optimistic title would indicate" (np). Weston assumes that Davy will die before he reaches adulthood.

In "Are We There Yet? A Retrospective Look at John Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip.*," Don Latham notes that other reviews of the 1969 publication of the novel "generally praised it for its honesty and artistry, but reactions to the homosexual elements varied" (42). The support came from reviewers who appreciated the "courage" of the novel and its "taboo-busting" potential (Latham 42). The concern

can be found in reviews like Martha Bacon's in *The Atlantic Monthly*; Bacon worried that the novel "might have the opposite effect on this age group from that which the author intended. It would not meet the needs of the initiated and might arouse in the unconcerned unnecessary interest or alarm or both" (150). Bacon's first concern that the author's intentions might not be realized speaks to the manner in which the literary aspects of the novel were seemingly secondary to authorial intent, to the social and cultural implications of the message the author would send to his readers. Bacon refers to presumably homosexual readers as "the initiated" and to presumably heterosexual readers as "the unconcerned," in whom the book could potentially "arouse...unnecessary interest or alarm or both" (150). The use of the term "initiated" for homosexual readers seems to connote that homosexuality is somehow a group, subculture, or cult into which one is recruited or indoctrinated, a stereotype long-held by people who fear that an individual, especially a young person, can be turned into a homosexual. The suggestion that readers who are not concerned about homosexuality could be "aroused," an interesting word choice in itself, to "interest or alarm or both" likewise seems to call upon the fear of an upstanding young person being lured into homosexuality.

In a 1978 *The Lion and the Unicorn* article entitled "John Donovan: Sexuality, Stereotypes, and Self," critic Suzy Goldman seems to at once confirm and repudiate reviewers like Weston and Bacon. While Goldman praises *I'll Get There*, and two other novels by Donovan for their "theme of self-realization" and convincing protagonists, she argues that the books are "flawed by the fact that the relationships between the

heroes and the loved ones involve somewhat bizarre sexual elements, and many of the secondary characters, including some of these loved ones, are stereotypes” (28). One of the “bizarre sexual elements” to which Goldman is referring is the same as one raised by Weston: the “sexual aspects” between Donovan’s protagonists and their dogs. Goldman calls Fred “Davy’s lover dog” and, like Weston, suggests that Davy shows an “unnatural interest” in Fred’s “excretory functions” (31). According to Goldman, Donovan’s “descriptions of Fred kissing and jumping all over Davy go way beyond the conventional relationship between a boy and his pet” (34). These condemnations of what Goldman calls Davy’s “quite perverse” (31) relationship with his dog are curious; again, this reading of Davy and his dog seem to equate homosexuality with bestiality and scatology. Goldman explains that Donovan clearly “is trying hard not to advocate homosexuality,” but at the same time the author recognizes “that his characters need to express their eroticism, and the animals enable them to do so” (35). The fact that it is in playing with Fred that Davy and Altschuler first kiss, according to Goldman, “seems of far deeper concern even than the affair with Altschuler, and yet Donovan seems totally unaware of any problem here” (34). Perhaps Donovan is unaware of the problem because it is a potentially degrading reading of the character, linking his sexuality to his desire for erotic engagement with a dog. Indeed, Goldman attempts to argue that Davy’s feelings of sexual desire for Altschuler are “easier to express...for an animal without the social indictment that comes with expressing the same feelings toward another, male friend. In this way Donovan can play down, cover up, the actual homosexuality while at the same time letting his characters express it” (34-35). Perhaps more securely tying

homosexuality to bestiality, Goldman concludes, “ It is clear that Donovan is trying hard not to advocate homosexuality, but it is equally clear that his characters need to express their eroticism, and the animals enable them to do this” (35). While Goldman reiterates these same questionable concerns as those expressed by Weston in his review, she also, like Weston, does acknowledge the connection made between homosexuality and guilt, including guilt for the death of Fred, in the novel: “Davy and Altschuler suffer agonizingly for their encounter, and for Davy the episode brings an everlasting burden” (33). This grim forecast for Davy’s life -- “an everlasting burden” -- echoes Weston’s equally dismal prognosis that Davy will not survive into adulthood.

Like Bacon’s review in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Goldman’s article makes use of the word “arouse” in the context of the novel’s potential impact on its readers. Goldman points out that Donovan’s treatment of the “two homosexual encounters, both mainly involving a little kissing” are “delicate and sensitive,” and she continues, “There is little here that might arouse the reader” (33). Whether Goldman is referring to readers’ interest, excitement, desire, anger, or suspicion is not clear, but Goldman concludes, “clearly this homosexuality is regarded by the author and characters alike as the road not to take” (33).

Leaving potentially negative or destructive stereotypes and assumptions in the year 1969 does not seem possible. In 2009, Flux, a Minnesota-based young adult publisher, issued a fortieth anniversary edition of *I’ll Get There.*, meaning that again, these stereotypes and assumptions were offered up to readers in the context of the twenty-first century. When Brian Farrey of Flux read a blog post about *I’ll Get There.* by Kathrine

T. Horning, director of Madison, Wisconsin's Cooperative Children's Book Center, Farrey sought a copy of the out-of-print novel. Farrey states, "I read it and it was brilliant, and I thought, "Why is this *not* still in print?"'" (qtd. in Lodge np). In Farrey's opinion, "the writing is not at all dated and the loneliness that the teenage protagonist feels is utterly timeless'" because the story is "about a lonely, confused boy trying to reach out to people to find a human connection," "something teens today can easily identify with" (qtd. in Lodge np). Farrey does not identify any potential association between homosexuality and bestiality or scatology in the novel, nor does he suggest that Davy's life will be guilt-ridden, burdened, and brief. Instead, Farrey seems to offer a more auspicious reading of the novel. In an Associated Press article "Books with Gay Themes for Young Readers Take Off" written by Leanne Italie, Farrey is quoted as saying that the 1969 publication of *I'll Get There*. demonstrated "there won't be people with pitchforks and torches waiting for you at the door. It opened the closet to teens and said you are not alone'" (np). Farrey's assessment that *I'll Get There*. initiated recognition of homosexuality in young adult literature may be correct, but his suggestion that it communicated to queer teens that they are not alone does not seem accurate. *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*. did not entirely lift the veil that had shrouded homosexuality in young adult literature, and it added a layer of association with wrongdoing, guilt, punishment, suffering, and death to it, a layer that can still be found today.

Reaching an End Point: *The Vast Fields of Ordinary*

Published in 2009, the same year as the fortieth anniversary edition of *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*., Nick Burd's *The Vast Fields of Ordinary* seems in

some ways as if it were almost a rewrite of Donovan's 1969 novel. The first-person narration of *The Vast Fields of Ordinary* begins with the first days of protagonist Dade Hamilton's last summer before leaving for college. Dade is an outcast, considered a bit of a weirdo. While not publically "out" in his small town, Dade clearly self-identifies as gay and in fact finds himself heavily involved in a secret sexual affair with the star of the high school football team and most popular boy in school, Pablo Soto. Pablo, "student council secretary and the Cedarville Warriors' star quarterback" (15) is nicknamed the "Sexican" (15), a seeming take on the hyper-sexualized "Latin Lover" stereotype.

Dade's relationship with Pablo begins when they are sixteen. After working on a class project together, they share a joint, and while "stoned and spacing out on his bed," Pablo starts fondling Dade (15). Like Davy and Altschuler's whiskey, Dade and Pablo's marijuana make physical contact possible. Dade has known since he was ten that he is gay, but at sixteen, he's come out only to his soap dish, the fan above his bed, and his favorite blue glass (16). He confesses, "I would then wait for the orphaned drinking glass to shatter, the ceiling fan to drop, or for the soap dish to let out a bloodcurdling scream" (16). Dade's approach to his own sexuality suggests that homosexuality is to be kept secret, to dare not speak its name; moreover, homosexuality, in Dade's estimation, will most likely be despised by others, even the soap dish. The glass will shatter, the fan drop, and the soap dish scream, all rather physical and guttural rejections of Dade's sexuality.

As one might imagine, Dade is forbidden to acknowledge his relationship with Pablo. Reinforcing the trope that same-sex experiences and relationships are shameful

and thus must be kept secretive, immediately after their first encounter, Pablo warns, “We don’t tell anybody about this” (16). Dade describes their “sexual encounters”:

“Our sexual encounters always lasted less than five minutes and ended with him looking even more depressed and pissed off than usual” (16). They never kiss; when Dade attempts such intimacy, Pablo regularly pushes him away (84). The secret sexual relationship, devoid of the kind of intimacy that Dade desires, is in Pablo’s mind temporary; just as Davy and Altschuler will somehow grow out of their attraction to one another, Pablo will do the same. Pablo tells Dade that there is no room for Dade in his life after high school. Pablo says, “I want a normal life” (35), crushing Dade, and as if to reinforce his masculinity through violence and sex with women, after delivering this proclamation, Pablo turns up “some hip-hop track that started out with a series of gunshots and a woman screaming” (35).

Dade suffers from a self-inflicted and social and cultural solitary confinement. His queerness puts a distance between him, his friends, and his family. When Dade becomes friends with Lucy, the niece of Dade’s neighbors, she bluntly asks if Dade is gay. Shocked, he admits that he is but says, “I just never have talked about it because there was never really anyone to talk about it with” (99). Lucy declares that she is a lesbian and explains she was sent away from home to her aunt and uncle after she came out. Adhering to what seems to be a more recent stereotype, Lucy’s parents are extremely religious and threaten her with a “camp where they brainwash the gay out you” until she is able to convince them to allow her to go to her relatives instead (99). Dade says, “I’ll tell them after I’m out of the house. I don’t want to have to be around them after I

tell them” (99), and they talk about his ““escape plan,”” in Lucy’s words (99). Dade manages to distance himself from Pablo, particularly when he becomes interested in Alex, the local marijuana connection for some students in Dade’s high school. Pablo actually makes attempts at rekindling their relationship, but only on his own terms. Pablo continues to want his girlfriend and his public relationship with her and then separately, never to mix, Dade and his secret relationship with him. Dade rejects Pablo and instead moves into a relationship with Alex. Alex’s previous relationship was with an older man whom he met online. David, a thirty year old English teacher, is “smart and fatherly” to Alex (155). Alex states that the relationship was good for him, as David ““saved”” him: ““I mean, I think everyone gets really close to that void, ya know? That loneliness that’s so easy to fall into....It can turn you into someone who deep down inside, you don’t want to be. He taught me that I was worth something, which I needed”” (156). Alex’s words reinforce the loneliness and isolation so common in queer young adult literature; indeed, these stories tend to focus on one queer kid almost miraculously and certainly against the odds finding another. In Alex’s case, however, it is not another kid, but a thirty-year-old man.

Pablo seems to wish he could be the visible boyfriend, the publicly affectionate boyfriend, that Alex is; he sends Dade jealous text messages. Then, Pablo shows up as Dade is stocking the dairy cooler at Food World. He spits in Dade’s face and Dade calls him ““Sad...Beyond sad. Tragic”” (237). Dade returns to his work but hears Pablo undoing his pants. When he turns to Pablo, he sees him with his pants down his thighs and his penis exposed. Pablo literally exposes his most private parts to Dade in what appears to

be an attempt to bare his heart to Dade. However, Dade immediately flees, flustered and upset. He stands at his car, wishing he could “levitate away from it all” (239). He thinks, “I wanted people to look up and see it happening...And then I wanted Pablo to come outside and wonder why everyone was looking up. I wanted him to follow everyone’s gaze and see me, the last thing he expected” (239). In this moment, perhaps Dade wants to be both figuratively and literally above Pablo, beyond their exploitive, unsatisfactory, empty relationship. Dade wants “levitate away from it all” to escape, to leave Pablo and their injurious relationship behind.

Dade’s story develops alongside the story of a missing little girl. Jenny Moore’s disappearance remains in the news in the background of Dade’s story. Stories of sightings of the girl proliferate among the stoners, meaning the young people who regularly smoke marijuana or experiment with other drugs, in town. Dade observes, “People on TV keep talking about her in the present tense like that’s what’s gonna keep her alive” (80). Dade himself understands that he continually searches for places to hide, to lose himself. He may want to disappear like Jenny Moore. Looking out at the expanse of a moonlit cornfield, he says to himself, “*All you do is look for places to get lost*” (82). A psychic who specializes in locating missing children is interviewed on the news program Dade watches. She says, “There aren’t any rules for this sort of thing. When you cross certain borders, there is no telling what you may find. Anything is possible. Both the best and the worse about situations like these is that there is always room to be surprised” (134). The psychic’s proclamation that when crossing certain borders, anything is possible and there is always room for surprise seems to cloak

Jenny's -- and in extension, Dade's -- story in the mantle of transgressions and boundary-crossings between visible and invisible, known and unknown, alive and dead. Jenny's disappearance reflects Dade's need to discover himself and the life he intends to live.

At this point, Dade is himself astray. He has not yet "found himself," has not yet identified himself openly as gay. After his first date with Alex, during which the two have sex, Dade returns home, drinks vodka, and falls asleep outside by the pool. He wakes in the middle of the night, still feeling drunk, and thinks he sees a child crawling into the bushes. He thinks he sees Jenny Moore. He chases after, stumbling and vomiting, and calls out, "Don't be scared...I'm not gonna hurt you. I wanna help you. I wanna help them find you" (185). As he passes out in the bushes, he thinks he sees Jenny curled up into a ball making a loud chirping noise and glowing from some light source within her (185). In this scene, Dade seems to be in a liminal state, metaphorically between two worlds. He wants to help Jenny, wants to help others find her because he himself needs help, needs others to find him and see him for who he is. Dade needs to tap into his own light source and shine it inward on what he is attempting to hide or disguise within himself.

When Dade's father finds him in the bushes the next morning, a family argument ensues. During the fight, Dade comes out, crossing a boundary he fears, illuminating who he is. Immediately upon saying he is gay, he begs, "Tell me it's okay. Tell me that it doesn't matter....That's been my biggest fear. That it won't be okay. I need to know that it'll be okay" (190). Despite this very sincere pleading for reassurance, acceptance, and

unconditional love from his parents, all his mother can manage is an “I don’t know” and his father answers, “I always knew. I hoped I was wrong but apparently I wasn’t” (190). Dade’s mother does embrace him and tell him she loves him, but Dade’s father disengages. Eventually, Dade’s parents do try. They ask Alex to come to dinner, and the evening is as awkward as can be expected of any eighteen year old bringing home for the first time the person he or she is dating. However, Dade’s father does not make it through the meal; he storms away from the table and does not reappear for the remainder of the evening. The boundary that Dade has crossed is, for his father, a dividing line, and he has not yet determined how to span it.

The climax of the novel relies upon the narrative of the death of a queer character via a car accident, a “cliché” in queer young adult literature (Cart and Jenkins 22). Pablo appears in Dade’s bedroom in the early morning hours following a huge party Dade has thrown while his parents are traveling abroad. Pablo, finding Dade and Alex asleep together in Dade’s bedroom, taunts Dade about his “dickhead” new boyfriend. Pablo cries, and Dade sees him in a new light. When Pablo pulls Dade to him and kisses him, Dade thinks that he is kissing him “really for the first time” (299). When they part, Dade thinks, “His tearstained face now registered more fear than sadness,” and he watches Pablo leave. For the last time. Dade states, “No one ever saw Pablo Soto again” (299).

Dade reels from the pain of being told that Pablo was in a single-vehicle accident. From Dade’s observations, the reader comes to understand that after Pablo left Dade’s house, he purposefully crashed his truck into a tree, not wearing a seat belt (302). Dade

thinks, “In retrospect, I think I knew as he sped down my street that he was going to kill himself” (302), and he carries with him an “overwhelming sense of failure” (302), similar to the overwhelming sense of guilt Davy feels for his dog Fred’s death in *I’ll Get There*.. He dreams of Pablo crying out to him and his futile efforts to answer Pablo’s pleas. After Pablo’s death, Dade immediately breaks up with Alex. As Davy suffered tremendous contrition for Fred’s death, Dade feels overcome with responsibility and guilt for Pablo’s death. Dade and Alex meet just once more for Dade to tell Alex that he is going on to college and starting over. Alex is to be left behind; Dade moves on to college. Dade’s roommate becomes one of his best friends, and his mother sends him a check with the memo, “To Take a Nice Boy Out to Dinner” (307). He begins writing a book, titled *The Vast Fields of Ordinary*, and he says that he “stopped wanting to float away from his life” (309). He no longer wants to escape; he no longer needs to rise above crisis and confusion. Instead, he observes, “There is always hope. The world is vast and meant for wandering. There is always somewhere else to go” (307). Dade can find and cross the kinds of borders described by the psychic who tried to help find Jenny Moore. While Dade’s hopeful ending may be more satisfying and more heartening than Davy’s, like the conclusion of Davy’s story, Dade reflects the tenet that queer young people may not find acceptance, happiness, and success until later, when they are older and have moved into a new place and community.

Critical Reception of *The Vast Fields of Ordinary*

Speak, a Penguin imprint aimed at young adults, published *The Vast Fields of Ordinary* to tremendous accolades in 2009; Speak did not hesitate to publish it, worry

about its reception, or seek the endorsement of specialists in child development or sex education as Harper & Row had forty years earlier with *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip.*, all of which are signs of progress. In addition to winning the American Library Association's Stonewall Book Award in Children's and Young Adult Literature, it was named a Lambda Literary Award finalist for LGBT Children's/Young Adult Literature and was included on *Booklist's* Rainbow List, a bibliography of queer young adult titles, for 2010 (Steele np). Moreover, *The New York Times* included *The Vast Fields of Ordinary* on its list of notable books for 2009 (Stelle np), similar to what the newspaper had done forty years before with *I'll Get There.* In an interview with *Lambda Literary*, Burd was asked what was his intent or purpose for this novel, his first and thus far only. Burd stated that he wanted to challenge clichés in queer young adult literature; he didn't want "“finding love” to be the ultimate goal of the novel,” that he instead he wanted it to be about Dade ““carving out his place in the world and figuring out who he is on a variety of levels”” (qtd. in Taylor np). A review of the novel on Young Adult Library Services Association's (YALSA) website suggests that Burd succeeded, stating, “Dade's story is neither cliché or dramatic. He feels real, tangible, and very human” (Mitra np). Ned Vizzini states in his review of the novel for *The New York Times* “Sunday Book Review,” “Dade plays against type in two immensely gratifying ways: he fights when cornered, and he wastes no time talking about what it ‘feels like’ to be gay” (BR13). *School Library Journal's* review declares, “Burd addresses the themes of family, unrequited love, bullying, and sexuality in a fresh and believable manner” (Allen 116).

Similarly, the *Kirkus Review* of *The Vast Fields of Ordinary* states that “Burd

breathes new life into the old coming-out formula with a blast of 21st-century testosterone-injected anger, heaps of longing and insecurity and even some violence” (np). However, Kirkus’s assessment that the novel’s “testosterone-injected anger, heaps of longing and insecurity and even some violence” are fresh “21st-century” innovations seems misguided (np). Insecurity and the longing to belong and violence are not new topics in young adult literature, including in queer young adult literature. The types of insecurity and violence seen in *The Vast Fields of Ordinary* can be found in *I’ll Get There. It Better Be Worth The Trip.* and other texts published since. A likewise potentially problematic aspect of Kirkus’s review is that it suggests that the “allure of the illicit, decay and regret are only a few of the irresistibly dangerous themes woven in the mix” and describes Dade’s relationship with Alex by stating that “readers will watch in rapt fascination and dread as Alex draws a willing Dade into his dark world” (np). Such an assessment suggests there is some kind of darkness surrounding Dade and his relationship with Alex, something destructive or disagreeable. This seeming objection to Dade and Alex’s relationship casts a shadow on their story; while not bestiality or scatology as it was with Weston’s review of *I’ll Get There.*, this review also poses the threat of something abnormal, dangerous, or forbidden.

This seeming appraisal of the perils of a queer relationship between Dade and Alex appears to be in contrast to other reviews, such as that of *School Library Journal*, which praised Dade and Alex’s relationship: “Alex is handsome and mysterious; most importantly, he adores Dade and isn’t afraid to show it” (Allen 116). Michael Cart reviewed the novel for *Booklist* and agrees, “But then he meets the dangerous yet

fascinating (and unapologetically gay) Alex, and things take a turn for the better...for a while” (np). Although Cart refers to Alex as “dangerous,” his assessment of Alex does not seem to vilify him or cast him as baleful. In *VOYA*’s review, Alex is “the charming and considerate Alex Kincaid, who also happens to be a marijuana dealer” (np). Peter Hepburn summarily writes in the announcement of the Stonewall Book Awards for 2010, “First-time author Burd writes his characters with an authentic voice that realistically captures the teenage experience. He does not shy away from the realities of the lives of many teenagers. His characters unapologetically drink, smoke pot, and have sexual relationships, which makes them more realistic examples of 21st century adolescents” (np). In many ways, Hepburn’s description of Dade as a 21st century adolescent is affirmative and construction; while Dade may be more 21st century in his drinking, smoking pot, and having sex, however, Dade as a queer character and his story come across as a retelling of a mid-20th century character.

Same Kid, Forty Years Apart

Davy in 1969 and Dade forty years later adhere to the stereotypes of gay male protagonists in young adult literature as identified by Jan Goodman (14-15). In 1983, Goodman pointed out the lack of diversity among queer characters, noting that most gay characters are white and middle or upper class. Davy and Dade are both examples. Neither Davy’s nor Dade’s race is marked in any obvious way; the assumption is that they are both white. Both boys come from upper-middle to upper class families, families that can afford a comfortable life in the city and a private school in Davy’s case and an extravagant home in Dade’s. Both boys have strained relationships with their parents,

and they both struggle to find someone they can confide in. Moreover, both boys demonstrate some of the most troublesome tropes of queer young adult literature: isolation, repression or denial of sexual expression -- particularly loving sexual expression, a hopelessness for the present and thus a desire for the future, violence, and death.

The Experience of Isolation and Loneliness

Two questionable aspects of queer young adult literature, from Davy's story to Dade's, are the suggestions that, in Goodman's words, "gay people lead lonely lives" and the "future is bleak if you are gay." A larger queer community barely exists or is absent altogether, and often the queer characters must face whatever issues they may encounter on their own, in isolation. There is no suggestion at all of a larger queer community in *I'll Get There.*, and in *Vast Fields*, there is one lonely gay bar in Dade's hometown, frequented only by about ten patrons, and the closest lesbian bar is in another county. The queer community exists in erasure, leaving the characters with only a slight chance of the possibility for more collective compassion and empathy.

Neither Davy nor Dade openly acknowledge that they are gay, but Dade does not deny it either. Dade reflects, "The one good thing about people just assuming I was a queer was that I never had to confirm or deny it, and without my input, there would always be a tiniest speck of doubt in their minds. Without me, they could never know for sure" (60). In his own mind, Dade thinks, "I was afraid of giving myself away. I didn't want anyone to know. Sometimes even I didn't want to know" (63). Both Davy and Dade censor themselves; they complicity adhere to the social norms. They refuse their own

voice and put the restrictions upon themselves. Both boys live silent lives of solitude, censoring themselves.

According to Goodman, experimentation excuses the act of physical intimacy or sexual expression; both boys and girls can safely experiment with same-sex sexual activity without considering themselves queer. Davy attempts to reassure himself that despite his feelings for and attraction to Altschuler, he's not homosexual, and Davy's father reinforces that it is acceptable for Davy to "play around" with other boys, so long as he isn't getting too deeply involved in a "special way of life." Likewise, Pablo holds fast to the idea that he is not gay or bisexual, even though he regularly has sex with Dade, because he also has sex with his girlfriend, and when he does have sex with Dade, he takes the more aggressive, active position while Dade passively receives him. Acts of loving, sensual, physical intimacy are rare in young adult literature in general, particularly in queer young adult literature; from kissing to intercourse, physical acts are often shrouded in mystery and euphemism in queer young adult literature. Cart and Jenkins explain, "With few exceptions, YA books...have adhered to the conventions of mainstream television serials, which generally place physical intimacy at the end of scenes where a couple's embrace and kiss are followed by a convenient fade-out" because "the concern remains that sexually explicit texts encourage readers 'to try this at home'" (34-35). Cart and Jenkins continues, "the treatment of sexuality is foggy once it proceeds past the first kiss. While this lack of sexual detail is evident throughout most of YA literature, fictional gays and lesbians seem to have *extremely* limited sex lives" (emphasis original 52). There is no description of what transpires between Davy and

Altschuler, and even fifty years later, no blatant descriptions of sex appear in *The Vast Fields of Ordinary*. Still, some progress has been made in that in *Vast Fields*, there are several imagistic scenes of kissing between Dade and Alex that express deep romantic and physical love (219). Allowing such scenes visibility and voice is important for queer young adult literature. Over the decades, straight teen couples in young adult literature have been allowed more and more sexual expression; a more realistic depiction of queer teens' lives would allow for this unconcealed physicality as well. Keeping it off the page is tantamount to keeping it in the closet; if straight couples can express their sexual desire, queer couples should be able to as well. Only in doing so will homosexuality and bisexuality be normalized instead of either demonized or diminished, ignored or invisible. The physical relationship can be a source of great joy, comfort, connection, and expression for both straight and queer teens alike.

The Experience of Bleak Futures and of "It Gets Better" Ones

In the late 1960s, perhaps Davy would have faced what seemed sure to be a bleak future if he had decided to live as a gay man, had Davy *chosen* the "special way of life." Latham suggests that *I'll Get There* ends with an "ultimately hopeful message to teens" (46), presumably meaning the possibility of a mutually respectful friendship between Davy and Altschuler. While respect for one another would be a welcome resolution for the two boys in the novel, there does not appear to be impetus for anything beyond that; Davy's conclusion seems to still suggest confusion, isolation, and trauma. Davy's possibly bleak future evolves in the twenty-first century into a much more obviously hopeful one than that which Latham proposes; however, in any case,

the hopefulness remains in the future, not in the present. The present remains lonely and isolated; if there is to be community, compassion, and empathy, it is to be found later in life. As Dade's friend Lucy says, queer teens have an "escape plan" (99). The escape plan is for another time, another location; most likely in college and in a major city, the queer teen will have a better future, beyond and outside of adolescence. Whether the future is hopeful or not, the teen years, it appears, remain difficult and devastating.

This trope of the acceptance, happiness, and success in the future reflects what has been made a popular maxim by celebrity advice columnist Dan Savage; Savage professes as such with his "It Gets Better" campaign. Started in 2010 by Savage and his partner Terry Miller with a video meant to "inspire hope for young people facing harassment," the It Gets Better Project quickly expanded to "more than 50,000 user-created videos viewed more than 50 million," all sharing the same mission: "to communicate to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth around the world that it gets better, and to create and inspire the changes needed to make it better for them" (What is the It Gets Better Project?). Videos from President Barack Obama, former Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, Ellen DeGeneres, the staffs of Google, Facebook, and Pixar, and the players of the Philadelphia Phillies, Baltimore Orioles, Chicago Cubs, and Boston Red Sox are among the many supporters who have posted videos. The goal of the project, which has spawned a website, MTV documentary, and book, is to show queer teens "how love and happiness can be a reality in their future" (What is the It Gets Better Project?). The It Gets Better movement is at once uplifting and

disheartening. While the forward momentum toward a more fulfilling future is certainly helpful, unfortunately, the sentiment does little to address the problems queer teens face in the present. Looking forward to a better future might be beneficial, but failing to address the issues of the present not only normalizes those issues but also seems to implicitly accept them, as if they are an unavoidable part of queer young adulthood. This premise is problematic as the narratives of suffering, bullying, isolation, denial, and so on are propagated. Dade rightfully observes, “I want it not to matter. I’ve spent so much time worrying about being gay and telling people. I want to move beyond that. I want to worry about other stuff” (255). Dade wants that “better” future, and while such a thought may inspire hope in some readers, for others, it might just reinforce the hardship of the present. Why should Dade have to wait for a future where he doesn’t have to worry about being gay? Why can he not expect such a situation in the present?

The Experience of Violence

Most unfortunately, in almost all young adult titles that feature a gay male character, there is violence. Violence appears in many queer young adult novels, from the threats against a homosexual adult in Bargar’s *What Happened to Mr. Forester* (1981), to a fight the protagonist’s young brother gets into when classmates call his sister a lesbian in Nancy Garden’s *Annie on My Mind* (1982), to taking out anti-gay aggressions on other hockey players on the ice in Wieler’s *Bad Boys* (1989). It seems to become almost a requirement -- not just a common occurrence, but a requirement. Cart and Jenkins identify the “threat of homophobic violence” throughout the history of queer young adult literature. The violence exists as almost a right of passage,

something that the queer teen must face and endure in order to become an adult. The violence derives from both positions: the queer guy and the straight community around him. Both Davy in 1969 and Dade's secret boyfriend Pablo in 2009 demonstrate the queer teen's dependence on violence to cloak affection or sexual desire. When Davy and Altschuler kiss, they quickly devolve into the pretend violence of boxing to hide the physical attraction. Something like boxing is acceptable contact between two males; it serves as a useful substitute for sexuality. Moreover, it serves as a reassurance. If a boy likes to participate in violent sport or violent music, then he cannot be queer. Violence marks straightness. Enjoying something violent makes the boy a predator, not the prey; the queer kid is the prey.

The pretend violence becomes real for Davy and Altschuler when the boys are naked in the shower together after a baseball game. As both boys stand vulnerable and exposed, Altschuler congratulates Davy for a good game with a pat on the shoulder, a friendly gesture that Davy immediately misinterprets as sexual. Wanting to perhaps prove his masculinity and his heterosexuality, Davy initiates the fight as the predator, refusing to be prey. He hits Altschuler in the face, accusing him of causing Fred's death: "It was because of what we did, you dumb bastard!...Because of us....Because of all that queering around" (177). The fight ends when Altschuler realizes Davy is bleeding; Davy's stitches become a badge of pride for him. He has conquered Altschuler – and homosexuality – via violence. The fight is cathartic, and the boys regain respect for one another; their friendship seems as if it will continue.

In the story of Dade and Pablo, Pablo ducks for cover behind a culture of

violence. From rap music with gunshots to aggressive football tactics, Pablo continually asserts his masculinity and heterosexuality via violence. The violence is the means of proving his masculinity and thus cementing his reputation and outward appearance and performance as a heterosexual male. Pablo can hide behind the screen of the stereotypical aggressive, physical, heterosexual boy. Dade cannot. Dade is the victim of the violence, and it sets him apart as other. When Dade is harassed in the school cafeteria, he cannot defend himself; this makes him somehow less of a man. Pablo must come to his defense. At once, Pablo is asserting himself as a heterosexual male capable of protecting himself and at the same time defending his friend who cannot stick up for himself. The double-sided defense Pablo is able to launch gives him far more power than Dade is able to obtain on his own. Pablo is able to maintain his position through the use of violence, something Dade is not able to do.

Dade is at the mercy of the masculinity surrounding him, the violence surrounding him. When asked if he's a "faggot" and a "homo" in the crowded cafeteria by one of the football players, Dade cannot shield himself and looks to Pablo for support. He depends on the hyper-masculinity of football star Pablo, and while Pablo does indeed protect Dade by punching the football player in the face, the trouble does not end (19). "FAGIT!" is written on Dade's locker. Although Pablo may be able to delay the violence against Dade by starting a fight of his own, Dade is still victim to the physical, emotional and verbal taunts of his classmates. He still must endure.

Moreover, when Dade goes to Pablo's house to thank Pablo for standing up for him, there is more violence. Dade expresses how he feels for Pablo, and when he says

“I love you,” Pablo grabs Dade, pushes him against the wall, and raises his fist to punch Dade in the face. He tells Dade to “take it back,” and when Dade won’t, Pablo smacks him across the face repeatedly (21). Dade attempts to get beyond the threat of violence, to declare his sincere affection for Pablo, but there is no way Pablo will allow that to happen. To be sure, instead of getting outside the threat of violence, Pablo reinforces it -- and escalates it. Now, not only will random football players who know nothing about Dade and Pablo threaten Dade, but Pablo himself will. Pablo himself is willing to physically assault Dade if necessary to reinforce the heterosexual normative situation he thinks he needs to put into place for Dade and himself.

This physical threat reaches far beyond the lunchroom and the social setting that Dade and Pablo find themselves in as typical high school students. The threat of violence extends into Dade and Pablo’s physical relationship. The boys engage in sexual activity together, mutually agreed upon sexual activity, but even in that consenting relationship, Pablo attempts to establish himself as dominant through the use of physical activity. Pablo refuses to allow Dade to perform sex acts upon him; rather, he is only willing to be the aggressor while Dade is the passive receptor. In sex, Dade explains, “I kept my face buried in Pablo’s pillow the entire time” (31). Even in what is supposed to be an expression of affection, desire, and mutual attraction, Pablo asserts himself as masculine, powerful, and superior through physical strength. Perhaps doing so allows Pablo to deny the significance of the sexual experiences he has with Dade: he is not emasculated or feminized by sex with Dade if he is in the dominant position.

Something particularly interesting about the relationship between Pablo and

Dade is that a female figures into it prominently. And, this girl threatens physical violence herself. Judy is Pablo's girlfriend, the girl behind whom Pablo hides his true physical, emotional, and sexual desires. Pablo sincerely cares about Judy, but as a friend, not as a partner, lover, or potential future mate. Judy responds to Dade in exactly the way we might expect males to respond. When Judy comes to understand that Dade is "Pablo's Dade," she reacts immediately.

"Pablo's Dade?" Jessica asks. Judy, Pablo's girlfriend, chastises Jessica immediately for suggesting such a thing and then turns on Dade: "...if I catch you talking to Pablo or even *looking* at Pablo, I'll have Bert and every player on the team beat the living fuck out of you....Consider this your one and only warning" (43).

Threatening violence against Dade as homosexual is socially acceptable and normative for everyone he interacts with.

The Experience of Tragedy and Death

In addition to violence, death has become a trope in queer young adult literature. Davy's story begins this trend, and it continues today. Tragedy and death are somehow punishment for being gay. Davy's beloved dog Fred is struck by a car and killed, a misfortune Davy believes was caused by Davy's physical involvement with Altschuler. If Davy hadn't kissed Altschuler, he figures, his drunken mother would not have taken Fred for a walk to escape having to deal with the situation, and Fred would not have been killed. Davy absolutely considers Fred's death punishment for his engagement in homosexuality.

The tragedy is particularly complex when a queer adolescent punishes himself or herself, something that happens too often both in literature and “in real life,” or “IRL.” Queer teens are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than other teens; indeed, “suicide is the leading cause of death among gay male, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual youth” (Gibson np). The narrative of the self-destructive or suicidal queer teen has become ever more prevalent in the last decade. While perhaps more private and less recognized in the past, in the present, queer teen suicide makes headlines and permeates social media. While this change could be viewed as progress because it calls attention to the issue and demands recognition and results, on the other hand, it may be not just a stereotype or trope but rather a social and cultural construction that propagates the idea of the “self-destructive” queer teen, rendering the queer teen as sensitive, unstable, and dangerous. Davy, Altschuler, Dade, and Pablo all blame themselves for their situations or become self-destructive. Drugs and alcohol play a part in the pattern of self-harm. Drugs or alcohol provide an excuse for engaging in physical or emotional contact with another boy: Davy and Altschuler get drunk and Pablo gets high. They hide their desire behind this impairment. Hindered by guilt afterward, they continue to get drunk or high to lessen the emotional or mental pain. Thus, the use becomes a cycle, a pattern in the literature of self-hate and self-harm. This cycle, like other patterns, in many ways began in 1969 and has continued on through the decades. The questionable assumptions about homosexuality and about what it is to be a queer teen made in *I’ll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip.* in 1969 can still be found in *The Vast Fields of Ordinary* in 2009. Over the intervening years, stereotypes and tropes have

been established and reinforced, creating and maintaining an expectation or an either implicit or explicit understanding that life as a queer teen is confusing, depressing, lonely, and scary in texts written for, marketed toward, and read by an adolescent audience.

Chapter Four

The Fantastical World of David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy*

The year 2013 marked the ten-year anniversary of the publication of *Boy Meets Boy* by David Levithan. Lauded as a significant development in queer young adult literature with its open acceptance of homosexuality, this novel is frequently cited as a progressive story of a hopeful future. *Boy Meets Boy*, winner of the 2003 Lambda Literary Award in the Children/Young Adult section, exudes not tolerance but acceptance; moreover, not only is the novel about acceptance but it is about celebration of difference, diversity, and individuality. Since its 2003 publication, David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* has been praised as a pioneering text in queer young adult literature for its portrayal of happy, out gay teens in an idyllic environment. The *Publishers Weekly* review characterizes the novel with, "In this gay love story, debut author Levithan imagines a community where sexuality is not a source of conflict" (np). As a "gay love story" and as an imagined community "where sexuality is not a source of conflict," this novel is one of many that allows 2003 to often be considered a "watershed" year for queer young adult literature (Levithan "Defending" np). The year 2003 marked the publication of many more queer young adult texts than had ever been published in a single year alone. This year seemed to indicate a sort of turning of the tides with queer characters emerging in young adult literature, not only for a queer reading audience, but for a straight one, as well.

In the fictional world of *Boy Meets Boy*, which *School Library Journal* describes as a "present-day gaytopia" (Lewis np), protagonist Paul has openly acknowledged his

queerness since the age of five or so (Levithan 8). In his review of the novel for *Booklist*, Michael Cart writes, “Clearly, the world Paul inhabits in this breakthrough book (the first upbeat gay novel for teens) differs from the real world” (np). Paul has known he was gay since kindergarten (Levithan 8); he did not self-identify, but rather his kindergarten teacher remarked on his report card that “Paul is definitely gay and has very good sense of self” (8). He proudly announces his homosexuality to his parents, and he comes out to his best friend Jodi in second grade (10). In third, he runs for “openly gay class president” with the campaign slogan, “VOTE FOR ME...I’M GAY!” (11). In sixth grade, Paul helps form the first gay-straight alliance because, “Quite honestly, we took one look around and figured the straight kids needed our help” (12). Decidedly atypical of its usual portrayal in young adult literature, particularly queer young adult literature, Paul’s junior high experience is a “pretty fun” time (13), and now he’s enjoying high school. The *Publishers Weekly* review of *Boy Meets Boy* explains, “The story line takes second place to the elements of the setting. The author creates a real wonderland: the cheerleaders ride Harleys, the school fields a quiz bowling team (its captain ‘score[s] a strike while listing the complete works of the Brontë sisters’) and the students frequent a Veggie D’s (vegetarians ran the ‘usual processed-slaughterhouse fast-food joint’ out of business, and now the place serves items like Tofu Veg-Nuggets)” (PW Reviews: *Boy Meets* np). In high school, Paul and his new-found object of affection, Noah, not only meet up at one another’s lockers throughout the school day, but Noah brings Paul flowers as he meets Paul’s parents and picks him up for a date (61). Their romance seems like the stuff of fairy tales, almost as idealized and romanticized as a Disney

fantasy prince and princess's courtship and happily ever after. Everyday life of high school seems perfect with no cliques, divisions, judgment, or conflict; Paul comments on the school cafeteria seating, "I think people can sit wherever they want nowadays" (5), fully inverting the stereotype of the caste system of the lunchroom, reflected in decades of high school popular culture and media.

Michael Cart notes in *Booklist*, "In its blithe acceptance and celebration of human differences, this is arguably the most important gay novel since Nancy Garden's *Annie on My Mind*; it certainly seems to represent a revolution in the publishing of gay-themed books for adolescents." *School Library Journal* describes the arc of Paul and Noah's relationship in *Boy Meets Boy* with, "They pass notes rife with meaningful detail; paint in Noah's psychedelic, art-covered room; and fall in sweet, realistic teenage love, unencumbered by gay bashing, sexual-identity crises, and parental rejection. With these real-world plot constraints removed, the narrative is driven completely by colorful, literate characters at their unfettered best" (Lewis np). In these ways, *Boy Meets Boy* seems innovative and original. As an ostensibly revolutionary novel, *Boy Meets Boy*, with its acceptance and celebration, seems an attempt to move outside the powerless, exploited, colonized position of adolescence as described by Nancy Lesko in *Act Your Age!: A Cultural Construction of Adolescence*.

Postcolonial Literature and Magical Realism

Lesko aligns ideas from the likes of Bhaba, Memmi, and Foucault to suggest that adolescence functions as a subaltern state. Particularly the at-risk teen serves as a stereotype and a convenient argument for maintaining awesome surveillance of, control

over, and exploitation of adolescents. Just as the colonizer deems colonization beneficial and the best possible situation for the colonized, adults consider their surveillance, control, and exploitation to be the best for teens -- particularly at-risk teens, including queer teens. In the seminal "Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse," Stephen Slemon suggests that the purpose and intent of magical realism traces its roots to a response to colonization. The term "magical realism," established by Franz Roh in 1925, often appears in conjunction first with Latin-American and Caribbean culture and literature and then beyond into Indian, African, and other cultures and literatures, signifying what Slemon calls "a kind of uniqueness or difference from mainstream culture" (9). Magical realism is associated with the third world, with colonized cultures, and with post-colonial literature. Slemon proposes to utilize the concept of "magical realism" to "enable us to recognize continuities within individual cultures that the established genre systems might blind us to: continuities, that is, between present-day magic realist texts and apparently very different texts written at earlier stages of a culture's literary history" (10). In "Magical Worlds, Real Encounters: Race and Magical Realism in Young Adult Fiction," Vandana Saxena describes magical realism as "a narrative mode suited to the experience of adolescence in the Western culture" (43) in that an "adolescent can be seen as an 'other,' an outsider to the categories of child and adult" (43). In *VOYA's* review of *Boy Meets Boy*, Cynthia Winfield notes, "Hilarious, romantic, and optimistic, the story provides another view of what life could be like if the world were more accepting, showing how youth solidarity can overcome the fears of the most homophobic parents." The youth vs. parents binarism and the struggle between the two

in this novel seem to speak to the struggle between colonized and colonizer in magical realism. Saxena, examining race in magical realist young adult texts, argues that “the magical realist zone of adolescence destabilizes the established attitudes and narratives that organize racist discourses, hence opening space for renegotiation, revision, and redressing of official history of racial encounters” (43). Saxena’s claim may also apply in part to sexuality; perhaps magical realism can be utilized to illuminate the seemingly colonized culture of young adults, particularly queer young adults, in more contemporary texts such as *Boy Meets Boy* versus early books such as *I’ll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*.

Young Adult Literature and Magical Realism

Francesca Lia Block’s 1990s *Dangerous Angels* series featuring the pixie-like Weetzie Bat and a cast of eccentric characters in a whimsical Los Angeles landscape serves as a seminal example of magical realism in young adult literature. According to Lois L. Warner, author of “Francesca Lia Block’s Use of Enchantment: Teenagers’ Need for Magic in the Real World,” Block’s use of fairy tales, genies, witches, among other mythical or magical beings, coincide with Bruno Bettelheim’s theory that children need “works that incorporate magic to understand and navigate their world” (26). Warner suggests that Block’s novels “reveal truth through magical means that young teenagers can understand” (27). Don Latham, author of “The Cultural Work of Magical Realism in Three Young Adult Novels,” argues that Block utilizes magical realism to explore “the fact that identity is fluid and contingent rather than fixed...through personal metamorphoses” (65). According to critics like Warner and Latham, the use of magical

realism in literature for young adults can be empowering; Latham argues that it can encourage readers to “question and destabilize the values and assumptions of the dominant, i.e., adult, society,” suggesting that “magical realism offers a liberating potential that makes it particularly well-suited to young adult literature” (670). While magical realism may hold such potential, what becomes questionable is whether or not it can meet it. Latham suggests, “the effect of magical realism is generally to undermine society’s power structures” (61); however, whether it does so or not in young adult literature is not necessarily clear. While potentially empowering and liberating, magical realism in young adult literature may not necessarily prove to be as powerful as imagined, as exhibited in Block’s *Baby BeBop* and Levithan’s *Boy Meets Boy*.

The Binarism of Magical Realism

In 2005, when Francesca Lia Block won the Margaret A. Edwards Award for lifetime accomplishment in young adult literature, David Levithan, who has in his career become one of the most popular writers and editors in young adult literature, particularly queer young adult literature, interviewed her for *School Library Journal*. In describing her own young adulthood, the reality she existed in as a young woman, and the magical cityscapes she creates in her books, Block says, “It’s always this contrast between the dark and the light, the feminine and the masculine, that’s interested me” (qtd. in Levithan “Wild Thing” 46). She continues, describing the settings of her novels with, “It’s such a great metaphor -- going to a really dark place, but then appreciating these simple and beautiful sparks of light that exist” (46). Block’s observations of the contrast between dark and light, between feminine and masculine speak to the binarism

of magical realism. Block notes that reading *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez influenced her writing, stating that “‘I discovered that magic isn’t less valuable than realism’” (46). This intersection of magic and real can create complexities. While on the one hand the result is compelling narratives, on the other hand, Slemon takes issue with magic realism as an “oxymoron, one that suggests a binary opposition between the representational code of realism and that, roughly, of fantasy” (10-11). He writes that in a magic realist story, “a battle between two oppositional systems takes place, each working toward the creation of a different kind of fictional world from the other,” a battle that keeps the worlds “locked in a continuous dialectic with the ‘other,’ a situation which creates disjunction within each” (10-11). Utilizing Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of “the novel is the site of a ‘diversity of social speech types’ in which a battle takes place ‘in discourse and among discourses to become the language of truth’” and Michel Foucault’s idea of “‘power knowledge,’” Slemon posits that magical realism employs “two opposing discursive systems, with neither managing to subordinate or contain the other,” which “forestalls the possibility of interpretive closure through any act of naturalizing the text to an established system of representation” (11-12). This binary between realism and fantasy, the past and the future -- and in the case of queer young adult literature, teens and adults -- prevalent in the magical realism of postcolonialism may prove problematic if it cannot break down barriers and eliminate distinctions that propagate a superior/inferior relationship.

Slemon states that magic realism helps maintain binary relationships -- between fantasy and reality, youth and adults, colonized and colonizer, past and future,

heteronormative and beyond heteronormative -- but can also “posit a point beyond binary constriction” (15). Slemon writes, “In post-colonial terms, this represents an imaginative projection into the future, where the fractures of colonialism heal in the ‘re-visioning’ process that produces a ‘positive imaginative reconstruction of reality’” (15). Perhaps this is how *Boy Meets Boy* functions. In *Boy Meets Boy*, the glory of Paul’s fantastical perfect world is opposed by the apparently more realistic family and school setting of Tony, Paul’s best friend. If Paul is one side of the binary, Tony is the other; if Paul represents all wondrous possibility and perfection in queer teen life, then his best friend represents reality, for better or for worse. Tony, is from “the next town over,” with “extremely religious” parents and the unfortunately stereotypical constraints on his ability to freely express his identity. Tony experiences the kind of typical so-called “it gets better” existence as a queer teen. Paul meets Tony on one of Tony’s excursions to a nearby big city, a respite and relief from his everyday life. Lying to his parents, Tony claims to be at a youth group event, but really, he has “hopped on a train to visit the open doors of the open city” (36), repeating the story of the queer teen looking for community and comfort in the big city. Tony calls attention to the un-reality of Paul’s life: “I honestly couldn’t believe that someone like you could exist or even a town like yours could entirely exist....I thought my life would start only when I was out of here...I don’t have the courage that you do” (150-51), a comment that reminds readers that Paul’s and Tony’s experiences are worlds apart. Tony receives no acceptance of who he is from his family or his school; finding no solace or support in his own town, Tony seeks it elsewhere, looking for the place and time when it will “get better,” which leads Tony

to Paul. When Tony and Paul become friends, Tony gives Paul not his phone number but his email address, saying that it is “safer” for Tony that way (37). Tony leads a closeted life, unable to enjoy freedom for who he is in his own place and time. When Tony’s parents suspect he is gay, “...they prayed loudly, delivering all of their disappointment and rage and guilt to him in the form of an address to God” (96). Tony’s life appears to be the “realistic” mode throughout the novel while Paul’s idealized life is a “floating reality,” in Paul’s words (2).

The Continuation of Binarism in the Post-Colonial Consciousness

If the “colonial encounter” includes the “silencing of otherness” (Slemon 17); then in this manner, Tony represents the colonized, despite the irony that he is a white, middle-class male. As the “other,” Tony is marginalized, living outside of Paul’s hometown, attending a different school, and dealing with recalcitrant parents. However, “awareness” of such marginalization or silencing “can provoke the imagination into recovering lost aspects of self, habitual absences in the post-colonial consciousness” (Slemon 17); Paul and Noah, then, are the post-colonial imagination. Thomas Crisp, author of “From Romance to Magical Realism: Limits and Possibilities in Gay Adolescent Fiction,” explains that as a magical realist story, *Boy Meets Boy* looks to “challenge readers to deconstruct both the novel and the contexts in which they live” (340), but in the post-colonial position, there exists the possibility of “the recuperation of silenced voices as axial to a ‘positive imagined reconstruction of reality’” and “the imagination becomes stimulated into summoning into being new and liberation ‘codes of recognition’” (Slemon 20). Slemon writes,

magic realist texts implicitly suggest that enabling strategies for the future require revisioning the seemingly tyrannical units of the past in a complex and imaginative double-think of 'remembering the future.' This process...can transmute the 'shreds and fragments' of colonial violence and otherness into new 'codes of recognition' in which the dispossessed, the silenced, and the marginalized...can again find voice, and enter into the dialectic continuity of ongoing community and place. (21)

Saxena likewise suggests that these texts can lead "to the formation of an identity that is mobile, fluid, flexible, and enriched by the dangerous encounters between the self and the other" (44). The concept of a "positive imagined reconstruction of reality" or an identity "enriched by the dangerous encounters between the self and the other" may seem enticing to the colonized; however, such a reconstruction does not necessarily upset the binary or work to undo reality. Instead, it may reinforce the binary and call attention to the failures of reality, to the impossibility of fantasy.

While a high school experience without harassment, isolation, and violence may be exactly what appears ideal, creating such an experience in a realm of ridiculousness and unbelievability does not help, but rather it might hinder; in highlighting how unrealistic such a construction is, a self-fulfilling prophecy seems to be created and maintained. *Boy Meets Boy* attempts to fashion a "gaytopia" may have made such a world seem less unattainable, less possible; the result may be that the novel does not come across as hopeful, but rather as hopeless, as if the real world, the world that is not fictional and magical, cannot attain what has been established in the novel.

Harassment, isolation, and violence are normal; anything other than that is outside normal -- beyond normal -- in the realm of magical realism. Crisp writes that magical realism attempts to “de-center privileged discourses and disrupt what may have previously been taken as ‘logical’ or ‘normal’” (340). In postcolonial literature, magical realism creates an alternate world, a universe where other options and different decisions reshape reality, revise history, and imagine an new future. In doing so, however, the real and present aren’t necessarily elevated; instead, the “it gets better” philosophy endures; readers are left looking forward to what might be, what could be, instead of appreciating, enjoying, and living in the now.

The Unreality of Magical Realism

In *The Bulletin’s* review of *Boy Meets Boy*, Deborah Stevenson notes,

...Paul’s narration evinces a tremendous delight in humanity in general and specific, in the many ways people connect with each other, in how much we can matter to one another. In a genre filled with darkness, torment, and anxiety, this is a shinningly affirmative and hopeful book; it’s fitting that the final sentence is ‘And I think to myself, What a wonderful world.’ It may not quite be reality as any of its readers experience it, but, then, that’s what fiction’s for. (np)

Just as the wider genre of young adult literature reflects the coming-of-age struggles of adolescents, queer young adult literature “filled with darkness, torment, and anxiety” is standard fare; decades of queer young adult fiction trade in rejection, isolation, self-doubt, self-loathing, and violence. The master narratives of the at-risk queer teen

establish expectations of a miserable adolescence but hope for a preferable adulthood in a big city. Stevenson identifies the “not quite...reality” of affirmation and hopefulness in *Boy Meets Boy*, a not-quite-reality that seems to reinforce the idea that any affirmation or hopefulness is not the norm, not the status quo, not what queer teens should expect. Instead, such affirmation and hopefulness is the fantasy, the magic, the step beyond realism that queer teens may desire but most likely should not expect. Saxena suggests that the wider genre of young adult literature “emerges as a volatile field of engagement with institutional politics and social constructions” (44).

Levithan himself notes, “You don’t have to write a book in order to reflect reality. You can also write a book to create reality. Most teen readers, I found, understood this, because they were living their lives to create reality, not merely reflect it.” He continues, “Tragedy and miserablism are no longer prerequisites for writing queer YA, and our literature is much more honest because of that, since tragedy and miserablism aren’t prerequisites for a gay adolescence either (present, certainly -- but not prerequisites).” While such a statement seems quite welcome, it may actually mean little to nothing. Levithan’s desire to create an alternate reality, a reality where queerness is not just tolerated but accepted and celebrated seems exciting, progressive, and positive. In creating this other world, Levithan reinforces the much wider issue that literature for teen readers, just as most of youth culture, is at worst determined by and at best shaped by adults. In “From Romance to Magical Realism: Limits and Possibilities in Gay Adolescent Fiction,” Thomas Crisp writes, “It is not surprising then that the literature written for and given to young readers contains depictions that reflect how that society

wants itself to be viewed and seen. Children's and adolescent literature educates, teaches, and indoctrinates, and these books serve as repositories for social values, revealing what a society wants itself to be" (335). In such a didactic stance as this, perhaps the adults involved in the production of queer young adult wish to demonstrate what they want culture and society to be, but that wish does not necessarily come true.

The distinct binarism and separation between fiction and reality such as that which exists in *Boy Meets Boy* does not appear to help prove Levithan's point or support his major forward momentum. Instead, *Boy Meets Boy* may just further divorce tolerance, acceptance, and celebration from reality; the creation of a magic realist landscape may not help to establish or create an actuality. Rather, it may help to further distinguish, polarize, and pull apart what might be -- magical realism -- from what indeed is -- realism; it reinforces the existing binary. Magical realms of what could be are of little help to readers who exist in a more realistic realm of now, as I discuss in the next section.

The Fantasy and Utopia of Magical Realism

At first blush, *Boy Meets Boy* may appear innovative and inspirational; however, in many ways, *Boy Meets Boy* seems more of a fantasy or utopia in the guise of magical realism. Reviews of *Boy Meets Boy* draw the connection between it and Francesca Lia Block's magic realist work. *School Library Journal's* review notes, "Levithan's whimsical, energetic prose and surreal setting draw comparisons to Weetzie Bat-era Francesca Lia Block (Lewis np). *Kirkus's* review likewise alludes to Block's world: "Somewhere on the

eastern coast of the US that's home to Francesca Lia Block's Los Angeles is a town where six-foot-five drag queens play high-school football, kindergarten teachers write comments like 'Definitely gay and has a very good sense of self' on student report cards, quiz-bowl teams are as important as football teams, and cheerleaders ride Harleys" (np). In *Boy Meets Boy*, Paul resides in a town where "straight guys try to sneak into the Queer Beer bar" (Levithan 1) and the only trouble that the transgender homecoming queen/quarterback Infinite Darlene, ne' Daryl, runs into is not because Darlene is transgender, but because the second-string quarterback has a crush on Darlene that Darlene does not reciprocate (16). In the *Booklist* review of the novel, Michael Cart writes, "Clearly, the world Paul inhabits in this breakthrough book (the first upbeat gay novel for teens) differs from the real world: two boys walk through town holding hands; the cross-dressing quarterback, named Infinite Darlene, is not only captain of the football team but also homecoming queen; the school has a biker cheerleading team." In this high school of fantastical, utopian acceptance and celebration of individualism, including gender and sexuality, few semblances of reality exist; this is a place beyond reality -- this is a place of magical realism.

In what can be rather heavy-handed didacticism, Paul espouses wisdom such as, "Who am I to approve or disapprove? If she's happy, then good for her" (34). Such a statement might be made by a straight person who accepts and acknowledges the relationship of a queer friend. Here, the tables are turned; it is the queer friend who accepts his straight friend's decisions. When Paul's ex-boyfriend Kyle realizes he is attracted to both boys and girls, he says not that he's divided, but that he's "doubled"

(85). Kyle remarks, “The world loves stupid labels. I wish we got to choose our own” (85). Paul’s school seems a Xanadu, a paradise for not just queer students but for everyone. No matter what their situation, identification, or expression, students are accepted for who they are, possible in the realm of magical realism, “irreconcilable in other modes of fiction” (Zamora and Faris 6).

The Genericism of Magical Realism and Its Role in Heteronormativity

The “boy meets boy, boy loses boy, boy gets boy” trope apes the traditional romantic comedy storyline in *Boy Meets Boy* in a manner that does not function to renew the queer narrative but rather to further exhaust the stereotype and render it generic. Crisp explains, “reader expectations, based on familiar stereotypes, are fulfilled” (336). Paul experiences all of the typical signposts of a new relationship; he worries about the time he’s not with Noah and considers how he would feel if Noah weren’t his boyfriend (82). These irrational concerns and petty jealousies may be the stuff not just of teenage romance, but really of new relationships at any age. Still, Noah is nothing less than the perfection of Prince Charming in any fairy tale. He proves again and again that he is the perfect boyfriend -- and friend. For example, Noah sees Paul’s friend Infinite Darlene, the transgender quarterback, as a girl. When he asks ““Are all the girls at this school as nice as you?”” Darlene is “taken aback, because it’s like he’s seeing her just as she wants to be seen. So few people do that” (41).

Crisp argues that the genericism of the love story in *Boy Meets Boy* does not change or challenge heteronormativity, but rather reinforces it. The concept of heteronormativity, coined by Michael Warner in “Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet”

in a 1991 special issue of *Social Text*, traces its origins through Gayle Rubin's "Thinking Sex: Notes Toward a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sex" (1984) and Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980). Rich explains that "heterosexuality is presumed the 'sexual preference' of 'most women,' either implicitly or explicitly" and that "heterosexuality...needs to be recognized and studied as a *political institution*" (13, 17). Rubin agrees that the "realm of sexuality also has its own internal politics, inequities, and modes of oppression...the concrete institutional forms of sexuality at any given time and place are products of human activity" (143); sexuality and gender roles are "social constructs" with "historical...contexts," not "biological entities" (149-50). Western culture places gender and sexuality in a "hierarchical system of sexual value," married heterosexual couples with children at the top (150). Rubin explains,

Individuals whose behaviour stands high in this hierarchy are rewarded with certified mental health, respectability, legality, social and physical mobility, institutional support, and material benefits. As sexual behaviours or occupations fall lower on the scale, the individuals who practice them are subjected to a presumption of mental illness, disreputability, criminality, restricted social and physical mobility, loss of institutional support, and economic sanctions. (151)

Drawing upon such conceptions, Crisp explains that heteronormativity includes all forces, institutions, policies, and traditions that "reinforce the belief that human beings fall into the male/man and female/woman categories, which exist in order to fulfill complementary roles" (335). Heteronormativity refers to all the ideological, social, and

cultural constructions that render the concept of heterosexuality as “normal” and “natural,” and dismiss anything else as “abnormal” or “unnatural.”

Viewing queer young adult literature through the lens of heteronormativity, what becomes obvious is that the ostensibly positive presence of queer characters “still often rely on heteronormative or heterosexist assumptions” (Crisp 335). Queer characters remain within the boundaries of heteronormativity in that they often play either a more masculine or a more feminine role, and they attempt to place themselves in a monogamous partnership. The frequency of stereotypically gendered roles and the drive to form exclusive relationships keep queer characters trapped within the constrictions of heteronormativity. Traditional values are reaffirmed, hierarchies and social structures are supported, and constructions of “normal” and “natural” are upheld. Crisp states, “the portrayal of gay characters with either stereotypically ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’ traits limits the extent to which such books constitute a departure from heteronormative traditions” (336), as does the desire to partner with only one person who generally displays the other gender role’s characteristics. Crisp writes, “In [its] reliance upon the heteronormative genre convention of the traditional coupling formula...‘the shape of the narrative is predictable, even when the outline of a specific plot seems to represent an innovation’” (Mussell qtd. in Crisp 343).

Boy Meets Boy “molds gay males to fit into an ‘acceptable’ heteronormative frame” (Crisp 343). The boundaries of intimacy, sexuality, gender, and love are not far stretched. Crisp states, “This formulaic representation of love, desire, and consummation of desire reflects a domesticated, ‘female’-socialized orientation to

sexual desire emblematic of reproductive futurism: it removes non-normative gay adolescents having various kinds of non-monogamous sex...and places gay males safely inside a 'female's' sex and marriage scenario securing the promise of a better tomorrow" (343). What may appear as the breaking of new ground in portrayals of homosexual relationships may not necessarily be far beyond simply applying heteronormative expectations of male-female relationships to two boys. In other words, the heteronormative rom-com stars two boys in this book. Crisp reinforces, "Rather than 'mainstream' acceptance of non-normative sexual identities, these representations of gay characters are frequently molded to fit into a heteronormative frame" (334). Crisp explains, "many gay adolescent novels use homophobia as the foil against which characters with non-normative sexual identities struggle in order to find happiness as a monogamous couple" (335-36). In this way, even the celebratory and hopeful queer young adult literature story reinforces heteronormativity.

Violence in the Realm of Magical Realism

Although far less prevalent, violence still makes its way into Paul's idealized life. Allan A. Cuseo calls attention to "society's impression of the homosexual as an individual it is permissible to harass" (55); the queer characters in even the most utopic, magical realm of *Boy Meets Boy* are subject to harassment, but what makes Paul's world utopic and magical is that Paul is rather easily able to overcome it. Crisp explains, "textual constructions that reinforce a view of gay people as outcasts subject to being the targets of physical abuse and verbal harassment" (336). Paul encounters "verbal abuse" such as "queer, faggot, the usual" in eighth grade, but the fencing team comes

to his defense (13). In high school, Paul does his best to avoid victimization by violence. When two wrestlers attack him after a late-night showing of *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, Paul thinks, "I wasn't about to take such verbal abuse from strangers" (13) and strikes back. Paul is not expected to tolerate any such attack and not only defends himself but triumphs against the bullies. Such a situation is a far cry from most queer young adult literature stories. For example, in Jack Gantos's *Desire Lines* (1997), when protagonist Walker is bullied for being gay, to protect himself he quickly points his finger at his classmates Karen and Jennifer, accusing them of being lesbians; the relentless harassment of Walker, Karen and Jennifer ends in tragedy. In Brent Hartinger's *Geography Club* (2003), Brian Bund, a quiet, sensitive, outcast boy who is assumed to be gay even though he is not, faces constant bullying and cruel pranks.

Even in Block's fantastical world of the Weetzie Bat books, Dirk, the queer protagonist of *Baby Be-Bop*, faces violence; even this utopian, fantastical, magic realist world demonstrates that "for those with non-normative sexual identities, there are things (and people) to fear" (Crisp 343). In *Baby Be-Bop*, Dirk's epiphany on what it means to be gay comes when he is attacked by neo-Nazis at a punk rock show. Dirk, in what could be construed as a self-destructive act, seems to initiate the violent confrontation when he calls out to the neo-Nazis, "Fuck fascist skinhead shit" (Block 45). As might be expected, one of the skinhead boys replies, "Where are you going, faggot?" (Block 45), and the fight begins. With the use of the word "faggot," Dirk feels as if the skinheads "had looked inside of him to his most terrible secret and it shocked him so much that he lost all the quiet strength he had been trying to build for as long as

he could remember” (45). Dirk immediately understands and internalizes the violence as homophobic. Dirk thinks, “He wondered if he deserved this because he wanted to touch and kiss a boy” (45). Dirk believes his queerness makes him rightfully the deserving target of violence. Moreover, Dirk admits suicidal thoughts: Dirk thinks, “He wanted to die” (45) as he allows himself to be beaten. He thinks of this homophobic attack as a “confirmation of that other pain” (45). The violence and suicidal thoughts reflect the long-standing stereotypical experiences of queer teens in young adult literature; even in a widely considered anti-homophobic series that embraces and espouses individuality, even in a world full of magic, violence and suicide are inescapable for queer teens.

The Ending/Beginning of Magical Realism in Queer Young Adult Literature

Toward the conclusion of *Boy Meets Boy*, Paul’s closeted, colonized best friend Tony attempts to stand up to his parents by going out on a group date to a school dance with all of his friends, including Paul, Noah, and Infinite Darlene. Confronted with a large group of students -- a coalition of gay, straight, male, female, drag queen, siblings -- his mother allows Tony to join his friends (Levithan 183). Instead of heading directly to the school gymnasium, the friends hold a dance of their own in “a clearing surrounded by trees and bushes, under the protection of a hill we like to call a mountain” (Levithan 184). The novel ends with a saccharine scene:

Someone’s brought a radio, and we’re dancing as the tunes dangle in the air. We are illuminated by flashlights and candles...We are in the middle of somewhere and we are feeling everything. The dirt is our dance floor. The stars are our elaborate decoration. We dance with abandon--only the happiness exists for us

here..." (184)

Paul remarks, "In this space, in this moment, we are who we want to be. I am lucky, because for me that doesn't take that much courage. But for others, it takes a world of bravery to make it to the clearing" (184). This conclusion reinforces Crisp's claim that "in order to survive, gay young people must learn to be resilient to homophobia" (336); they must be brave. By the end of the novel, Tony appears to gain some momentum toward an outwardly queer life; in the clearing, he dances with someone who will most likely become his first boyfriend. But the idea that bravery or resilience to homophobia should be necessities for queer young adults in queer young adult literature remains suspect.

The Success/Failure of Magical Realism in Queer Young Adult Literature

Cart and Jenkins name *Boy Meets Boy* as the "only one title" of early 2000s queer young adult literature in which "gay characters are truly--even blithely--accepted and assimilated" (144). They call the novel "an authentic breakthrough book in the sense that it is the first feel-good gay novel for teens" (144), which is what Levithan wanted to write. Levithan himself remarks, "The desire to write the novel, ultimately called *Boy Meets Boy*, came from wanting there to be a new kind of queer young adult literature. I was happy to be gay, and I wasn't finding very many characters in YA (or any other media) who felt the same way." Levithan's desire to create and sustain happy queer characters is commendable, but the success of the *Boy Meets Boy* is questionable, as the binaries of past and future, colonized and colonizer, teen and adult, homosexual and heterosexual, masculine and feminine, fantasy and reality all remain intact in the novel; they are just reversed. Although Levithan may wish to flip the binary, "in many

ways, he simply shows the other side. He repositions the world to bring the inside-out and the outside-in, but 'out' and 'in' values persist and ultimately leave the binary intact" (Crisp 343).

Cart and Jenkins write that in *Boy Meets Boy*, the "real world does intrude in subplots" (145). Their comment about the "real world" impinging upon the fantasy world of *Boy Meets Boy* seems to reinforce that fantasy vs. reality binary. Cart and Jenkins suggest that *Boy Meets Boy* is a "near-revolution in social attitudes and the publishing of GLBTQ books" (145), but the revolution may really only be an inversion, an inversion of binaries that seems to be possible only within the fantasy world of the novel. Cart and Jenkins write, "Like Block's *Weetzie Bat*, Levithan's novel contains elements of magical realism (or wish-fulfilling idealization)" (145). If this text serves as wish-fulfillment and idealization, then not only is it depending upon the utilization of binaries, but it also hinges on the supposition that the switching of the good/bad or positive/negative values is possible only in an idealized, wish-fulfilling world.

The drive for wish-fulfillment is not only tied to magical realism, but it is also a critical part of romance literature. In "Identity by Design: The Corporate Construction of Teen Romance Novels" in *Growing Up Girls: Popular Culture and the Construction of Identity*, Norma Pecora explains that romance novels are "powerful purveyors of a particular ideological positioning" and the "ritualistic repetition of a single, immutable cultural myth": monogamous heterosexual coupling (50). The lure of and drive behind romance novels tends to be that socially and culturally constructed ideal. In these ways, perhaps *Boy Meets Boy* is also a kind of romance novel. In "Sexual Fantasy: The Queer

Utopia of David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy*," Amy S. Pattee argues that the arc of Levithan's narrative similarly reflects that of the traditional romance novel's focus on the "happy heterosexual union" (156). Instead of heterosexual, though, Levithan's monogamous coupling and happy union is homosexual. However, Pattee does not seem to take issue with Levithan's approach of what seems to be simply recreating the romance novel plot with the mere difference of making it the story of two boys. While Pattee recognizes that "to reach the utopian conclusion that seals its status as a romance novel, the story must be set in a utopian world" (159), Pattee calls the world of *Boy Meets Boy* where both the male and female roles of the heterosexual romance narrative are played by boys as a "heterotopia," a place that allows for diversity in identifications as and expressions of gender and sexuality (162-63). What seems to be Pattee's apparent appreciation for the "heterotopia" of *Boy Meets Boy* may be problematic. Pattee suggests that in the heterotopic setting of *Boy Meets Boy*, Levithan "effectively subverts the paradigm of compulsory heterosexuality in young adult fiction in general and young adult romance, specifically, and creates a new template for the gay young adult novel" (156), an assessment that seems to glorify *Boy Meets Boy*. Whether the novel subverts the heteronormativity or the compulsory heterosexuality of young adult literature is questionable; with its dependence on the use of utopia and the traditional romance narrative arc, the novel does not necessarily allow for the creation of new social and cultural constructions, but rather it seems to make just minor, temporary adjustments. The heteronormative wish is still fulfilled, as it is in romance novels, but because the couple is homosexual, it can be fulfilled only in a utopian world.

Pattee herself points out, “homosexual romance requires a utopian setting for the romance’s conclusion to be considered genuinely blissful” (159). This assessment of *Boy Meets Boy* seems to make her statement that the novel’s utopian setting “encourages active critique of the ‘real’ world outside its own literary boundaries” (157) ring less true.

Max Gluckman’s conception of “rituals of rebellion” explores the use of role reversals as ritual in African cultures, role reversals intended to in some way temporarily challenge social and cultural rules and practices. As if flipping social, cultural, and political binaries, in participating in these rituals, members of the society or cultural were momentarily allowed to partake in what was otherwise forbidden. Gluckman identified these rituals of rebellion as “conflicts” that actually work to reinforce “cohesion in the wider society or over a longer period of time” (109). In Gluckman’s estimation, such rituals did not necessarily protest or invert the status quo, but rather reinforced it. Gluckman explains that rituals that go against the norm: “by allowing people to behave in normally prohibited ways, gave expression, in a reversed form, to the normal rightness of a particular kind of social order” (116). Such rituals of rebellion resonate with members of the culture as somehow incorrect; the status quo in turn feels right, and thus, it is continued. Perhaps *Boy Meets Boy* works in this way. As a ritual of rebellion, it allows queer teens or teens with any number of different gender or sexual identities to become the dominant, visible, powerful faction. However, if this is indeed how *Boy Meets Boy* functions, then the conclusion of the narrative must be examined; perhaps the rebellion in the narrative is a move toward permanent social, cultural, and political change, or maybe it is just a temporary means of entertainment in

a heterotopia that ultimately reinforces the status quo of heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality.

In “Rituals of Rebellion-Rebellion as Ritual: A Theory Reconsidered,” Susanne Schroter applies Gluckman’s philosophies to Western youth cultures. Similar to Roberta Seelinger Trites’s discussion of young adult literature as a kind of Althusserian Ideological State Apparatus that delegitimizes adolescence and tolerates proscribed rebellions so as to reinforce the power of the systematic control of adulthood, Schroter sees Western youth cultures as “unique among the wide range of rebellions: they are rebels against their own society, against parents, teachers, and the older generation in general and also against most of their age mates. Consequently, their behavior is an active refusal of current customs, values and rules” (52). Schroter points out, though, that while youth subcultures exist in a “liminal state” with its own established “communitas” and “rituals,” when they become “‘real’ adults” they “reintegrate into society” (53). As such, the binaries of youth vs. adult, powerless vs. powerful, colonized vs. colonizer may be flipped, but the inversion is transient. Schroter points out that Gluckman theorizes “that ritual rebellions...do not lead to a revolution” (54). These rituals are not necessarily actual rebellion or revolution, but rather imitation or performance. Fiction of ersatz rebellion may not offer an ultimately satisfying empowerment for readers. When the story ends, so might the liberation. In the real world, there may be the potential for creating for rebels a “counter-world with its own rules and values that [gives] meaning to their existence”; the ostensible rebels may be able to tell the story of refusing to “accept either the prevailing order or their own

inferior status” (Schroter 54). However, the story may not extend any further than that.

From Levithan’s own discussion of his purpose in writing *Boy Meets Boy*, Levithan may be viewed as one of the forces that Schroter’s considers legitimately insurrectionist: “they were rebels, and their goal was to bring about a noticeable change of the social order” (54); yet, in the end, if the story Levithan created only temporarily suspends the rules, changes the social order, upsets the binaries, and challenges the status quo, whether or not there can be actual impact is questionable. It may not be possible for rituals of rebellion in narratives to advance past flipped boundaries to “truly disrupt heteronormativity” by moving “moving beyond identity categories” (Crisp 343). Instead, stories such as Levithan’s *Boy Meets Boy* may remain among “outlets” that serve as “an example of a ‘ritual of rebellion’ in which participants are granted ‘temporary license to violate selected sociocultural rules; in doing so, they provide much-needed outlets for expressing and relieving social tensions,’” but in the end “promote social normativity by ‘reaffirming the values and reasserting the social structure of the dominant order’” (Crisp 334-35).

Another Binary: Magical Realism or Realism

Adult vs. adolescent, colonizer vs. colonized, conformist vs. rebel, heterosexual vs. homosexual, couple vs. single and other binaries with the ability to disempower and oppress complicate the stories -- whether magical or realistic -- of adolescence, perhaps particularly for queer teens. Slemon states that magical realism helps maintain binary relationships -- between fantasy and reality, between youth and adults, colonized and colonizer, past and future, heteronormative and beyond heteronormative -- but can also

“posit a point beyond binary constriction” (15). However, despite its ability to potentially identify a point beyond the binaries, magical realism vs. realism may come to serve as just another binary. The use of magical realism to challenge and question sociocultural expectations and assumptions of gender and sexual identity has the potential to be quite effective; nonetheless, whether magic realist narratives can actually successfully subvert or undermine the status quo is debatable. While critics like Latham argue that magical realism in young adult literature can encourage readers to “question and destabilize the values and assumptions of the dominant, i.e., adult, society,” suggesting that “magical realism offers a liberating potential that makes it particularly well-suited to young adult literature” (670), what becomes questionable is whether or not magical realism really does hold and can actually exercise such potential. Latham suggests, “the effect of magical realism is generally to undermine society’s power structures” (61), yet whether it does so in young adult literature is not necessarily clear. While potentially empowering and liberating, magical realism in young adult literature may not necessarily prove to be as powerful as imagined, as exhibited in Block’s *Baby BeBop* and Levithan’s *Boy Meets Boy*. Thomas Crisp notes that magical realism is a “genre that has played an important role in the emerging genre of LGBTQ literature (most notably in the work of Francesca Lia Block) in its attempts to disrupt normativity for readers” (340). Still, whether or not it indeed disrupts heteronormativity, remains dubious.

Chapter Five

Heteronormativity and Homophobia in Young Adult Literature

Heteronormative narratives, stereotypical depictions, and fulfilled expectations of homophobic harassment and violence serve as tropes not just in young adult literature with queer protagonists but in stories with straight protagonists, as well. Utilizing these narratives, depictions, and expectations to create a sense of realism, the wider genre of young adult literature may actually inadvertently contribute to the reinforcement of heteronormativity and homophobia. Thomas Crisp suggests that young adult literature has a “reliance on homophobia as a mechanism for establishing believable ways in which the characters interact with one another and within the world in which they live” (336). When homophobia is an inevitability in stories, when anti-queer words and actions stand as a sign of realism in young adult literature, oppressive binaries threaten to remain in place in the genre. Disempowering assumption about teens, whether queer or straight, can potentially remain unchallenged in the genre if narratives continue to reinforce such suppositions. The opportunity for new, creative, innovative stories and the exploration of the diversity of the human experience may not as easily arise in young adult literature if stories stagnate around stereotypes and assumptions.

Homophobia as Realism in Young Adult Literature

In the ninth edition of *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, Alleen Pace Nilsen, James Blasingame, Kenneth L. Donelson, and Don L. F. Nilsen suggest that in the genre of young adult literature, the “modern problem novel” is one in which “the problems

are severe enough to be the main feature of the story” (9th ed. 112). When the concept of the problem novel grew in popularity in the late 1960s, it was referred to as “new realism” (Pace Nilsen et. al. 9th ed. 115). Pace Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, and Nilsen explain, “realism” in young adult literature is “young adult fiction with real-world settings in historical periods not far removed from our own” (9th ed. 103). These authors suggest that good realistic novels have “a strong, interesting, and believable plot centering around a problem that a young person might really have” and “a way of dealing with the problems so that the reader is left with insights into either society or individuals or both” (121). From the traditional *bildungsroman* to “the modern problem novel,” realism in young adult literature creates “serious coming-of-age stories to be read by teenagers themselves” with “candor,” in the language of “the way people really talk,” about issues people may actually face, with the attitude that “honest recognition that young people can suffer and face really difficult questions” (Pace Nilsen et al. 9th ed. 116-18).

These scholars suggest that problem novels “provide readers with more vicarious experiences than would be either desirable or possible in real life” (9th. ed. 116). The power of the narrative, they seem to suggest, is to allow readers access to stories and characters they may otherwise not encounter in their own lives. Moreover, they suggest that the problem novel is “based upon the philosophy that young people will have a better chance to be happy if they have realistic expectations and if they know both the bad and the good about the society in which they live” (9th ed. 115). Realism, they seem to suggest, is understanding both the bad and the good that exists in the readers’ worlds

and knowing what they can expect as reasonable outcomes to encounters with both in their lives. Their use of the phrase “the bad and the good” refers directly to a bad vs. good binary; one side of the story, whatever it is in the problem novel, is bad, and one side is good. Putting this framework of bad vs. good in place may possibly prevent problem novels from fully exploring a wide spectrum of what may be negative or undesirable and what may be positive or desirable; the continually grey areas of society and culture may not become parts of the story. If these scholars are correct, then the problem novel in its attempt to attain a sense of realism may rely upon and reinforce binaries, and in doing so, inadvertently avoid the much broader spectrum of what a culture, a society, a community, a group, or an individual may consider bad/negative or good/positive. Thus, binaries like heterosexual vs. homosexual, anti-queer vs. pro, rejection vs. acceptance, bully vs. victim, acceptance vs. isolation may be described and discussed in overly simplistic terms.

Such an understanding of realism in young adult literature reinforces heterosexual vs. homosexual continues to be an inescapable binary in the genre. If homosexual is at all “the other,” than heterosexual continues to be “the norm” in young adult literature. Homophobia, or the rejection of the other in favor of the norm, remains an issue in the ostensibly realistic narratives read by young adults. Homophobia seems to exist in stories as a problem young people encounter, a way that young people actually act, a difficulty young people may face. Even if the heterosexual vs. homosexual binary is overcome so far as to include a queer character, the heterosexism and homophobia the queer character faces maintains the norm vs. other binary;

heterosexuality remains the norm while homosexuality is relegated to otherness.

Nothing about that binary changes; rather, what has changed over time is the approach to dealing with it in young adult literature.

Over the years, the seeming purpose of homophobia in young adult literature has evolved, although it has not disappeared. In early novels that featured queer characters or storylines, homosexuality itself was the issue, the problem of the problem novel, as in the case of *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*. In *I'll Get There*. (1969), protagonist Davy has to face and deal with the feelings he has for his best friend, Altschuler. An experience with physical intimacy incites personal, social, and familial conflicts that pull the boys apart and result in a violent confrontation between them. After enduring rejection by his mother, the death of his beloved dog, for which he blames himself, and isolation from his friends, Davy has to find a way to accept the possibility he is gay, although he and Altschuler agree what they felt for one another and experienced with one another could be a phase, could be something they choose not to pursue again. Davy's struggle with his sexuality is the core conflict of the novel.

Such a storyline is not as prominent in contemporary young adult fiction as it was in the late 1960s through the 1980s, and what seems to have replaced it is homophobia as the issue. One early trend was a queer secondary character -- a queer friend or schoolmate of the protagonist or a queer adult in the life of the protagonist -- whose intentional or accidental outing might result in teasing, bullying, discrimination, isolation, and often violence or the threat of violence due to gender or sexual identity. In "Young Adult Novels with Gay/Lesbian Characters and Themes 1969-92: A Historical

Reading of Content, Gender, and Narrative Distance,” Christine A. Jenkins points out, “In eighteen of the thirty-one novels published from 1969 through 1984, the issue of gay/lesbian identity is one that affects another character, commonly an adult in the role of parent, teacher, or mentor” (12). Isabelle Holland’s *The Man without a Face* (1972), Gary W. Barbar’s *What Happened to Mr. Forster* (1981), Ron Koertge’s *The Arizona Kid* (1988), and Sandra Scoppitone’s *Trying Hard to Hear You* (1974) are examples of texts with an adult queer secondary character. Scoppitone’s novel follows this storyline, and ultimately the queer secondary character, Jeff, dies in a car accident, an example of what Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins identify as the “connection” between homosexuality and death that “haunt[s] the early history of gay and lesbian literature” in *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004* (15). Heterosexuality is still good; homosexuality is still bad, and is so bad, it may be either purposefully or inadvertently -- either blatantly or more metaphorically -- punishable by death.

These queer secondary characters acted as a means to address homophobia as a conflict in the story; the characters would often endure, and the straight protagonists would lament the unfair treatment their friends dealt with. Then, as queer young adult literature included more and more queer protagonists, the protagonists themselves would be the victims of homophobia. Lynn Hall’s *Sticks and Stones* (1978) tells the story of Tom; when rumored to be gay, Tom is shunned, completely isolated, and harassed by his peers; the novel also ends with a car accident, although Tom survives, a move away from the connection between homosexuality and death.

In a bit more contemporary storylines, the queer protagonists are not grappling with their gender or sexual identity like Davy and Tom, but rather, they're dealing with the homophobic harassment they face because they are queer. In the 1980s, for example, *I'll Get There*. might have followed a storyline something like Davy, who has more or less accepted his queer identity, faces verbal abuse, actual violence or the threat of violence, discrimination, and perhaps beyond into isolation and suicidal thoughts due to homophobia. Cart and Jenkins also note, "The sanctification of homosexuals and the corollary demonizing the homophobes has been a recurring problem through the entire history of GLBTQ literature" because it can create an oversimplified binary that "can undermine the believability of the entire story," as well as uphold the "cause and effect relationship between homosexuality and physical violence -- even death" (30-31). If homosexual characters are saints and homophobic ones are demons, than that same kind of good vs. bad binary can remain intact. Even if homosexual characters are likable and homophobic ones are unlikable, the notion that homosexuality is somehow different remains. The heterosexuality vs. homosexuality binary is still constructed, with one side as other or different and thus abnormal in some way.

What seems to be the ultimate goal of more contemporary queer characters in the 1990s and 2000s, characters who aren't necessarily struggling with their homosexuality but rather struggle with homophobia, is to either ignore or overcome obstacles, tolerate whatever level of social isolation or acceptance is made available to them by others, find romance, and work their way into a traditional monogamous

relationship, but with someone of the same gender instead of the opposite. If homophobia serves as the problem that queer characters must handle in order to achieve the ideal status of stable, loving, monogamous couple, then the plotline does little to break down heteronormativity in young adult literature. If a young adult narrative disregards the good/norm vs. bad/other of heterosexual vs. homosexual binary so as to render homosexuality as good/norm, then the queer characters seem to still have to adhere to heteronormative expectations and demands. Queer characters aren't necessarily allowed to be individually queer in whatever way might serve that individual; instead, they must be in many ways made "straight" by wanting what is stereotypically associated with straight coupling. In the magic realist *Weetzie Bat* (1989), the first book in the *Dangerous Angels* series, Dirk, who later becomes the protagonist of *Baby Be-Bop*, comes out to his best friend Weetzie Bat, who accepts and supports him wholly. Weetzie's response, "' Now we can Duck hunt together'" (9), meaning, now we can search out boys to fall in love with together, is telling; Weetzie and Duck want the same thing -- a loving, monogamous relationship with a boy. Dirk is rendered as straight as Weetzie in his desire for an exclusive relationship with a boy. What Dirk wants is the same as what Weetzie wants; they both seek out the same good, the same norm.

Cart and Jenkins note, "one can read this literature to learn something of the contemporaneous society's views on and responses to homosexuality -- or at least to learn what publishers believe, however correctly or incorrectly, will appeal to teen readers" (82); their observation helps to demonstrate that as homosexuality moved to

the margins of the plot, homophobia took its place at the center. However, at no time, it seems, did heteronormativity move from its fundamental position. In more current young adult literature, both with and without queer characters, of the 2000s and 2010s, heteronormativity and homophobia remain in place as essential parts of narratives of what might be considered anything from magical realism to the realistic modern problem novel.

Heteronormativity and Homophobia as Realism

in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

Heteronormativity and homophobia as indications of a realistic setting or plot manifest themselves not only in queer young adult literature, but rather in the wider genre of young adult literature in general. In a discussion of heterosexual male protagonists' homophobic reactions to good friends who come out as queer in two Canadian young adult titles, Diana Wiener's Governor General's Literary Award for Children's Literature winning novel *Bad Boy* (1989) and Brian Payton's novel *Hail Mary Corner* (2001), Benjamin Lefebvre notes that reviews of these books and similar titles suggest that such homophobic reactions are something "that many teenaged boys will relate to" (292). Lefebvre quotes another review that suggests that in the novels, the straight boys' homophobia is "unfortunate, but it certainly rings true" (293). Lefebvre questions the "internalized homophobia" in young adult literature; not just in queer young adult literature but in the wider genre of young adult literature in general, if homophobia in stories is understood as realistic, relatable, and true, then the chance for challenging and breaking down such narratives and creating new ones may become

more difficult. As seen in reviews of Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy*, a situation with no homophobia appears beyond the realm of real as magical realism, utopia, or wish-fulfillment fantasy.

Lefebvre admits that "most adolescent male readers have likely been in contact with a discourse of homophobia" prior to reading the novels he examines, and he understands that readers may "have already learned that being perceived as gay is as much a source of anxiety as actually being gay" (293). Lefebvre also concedes that "texts' mirroring of 'real' responses by actual boys is part of what constitutes realistic fiction" (293). However, he questions whether or not the perception of homophobia as realistic is an immutable force in stories for young adults. In a "chicken and the egg" approach, he asks how these novels "participate in the circulation of that discourse of homophobia" (293). Lefebvre poses, "since problem novels are chiefly concerned with shaping the attitudes of real adolescent readers, it seems paramount to resist limiting the discussion to the assumption that the books confirm reactions that adolescent boys supposedly already have" (293). Lefebvre's charge offers an important perspective on the utilization of homophobia to create a sense of realism in young adult literature; while homophobia may seem relatable and true to readers, relying upon it as realistic negates opinions, approaches, and ideas that other readers may have about what it means to be queer or straight in contemporary American society, culture, and young adult literature.

Like Lefebvre, Adrienne Kertzer, author of "Not Exactly: Intertextual Identities and Risky Laughter in Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*" challenges any assumption that young adult literature supports "the dominant discourse"

(72). Kertzer examines the construction of the male identity and the Native American identity in Alexie's first and only young adult novel, well-liked and widely read bestseller, and winner of many major awards and distinctions, including the 2007 National Book Award for Young People: *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007).

Seemingly destined to become a contemporary classic of the young adult genre, Alexie's novel tells the story of Arnold Spirit, also known as Junior, an intelligent, creative teen who leaves his school on the Spokane Indian reservation to attend Reardan High, an all-white school in a nearby small town, for a better education than can be provided on the reservation. Junior draws comics, plays basketball, and loves to learn, but he is also completely impoverished and marked by several signs of physical disability. When Junior begins attending his new school, he finds himself in a terribly marginalized position; he is an outcast at his reservation's school and the proverbial black sheep of his family; he is considered an outsider by most students at Reardan and a traitor by his family and friends. The novel explores what it means to be marginalized in a variety of ways, as a male who does not exhibit the outwardly appearances of masculinity to a Native American who struggles to fit in both among his family and friends and within the context of a larger community.

Investigating Junior's location on the margins, Kertzer writes, "to assume that a popular book must necessarily be read as supportive of the dominant discourse implies that the dominant discourse will never alter, and that the books most resistant to that discourse are least likely to have wide appeal" (72). Kertzer successfully challenges this assumption about masculinity and what it means to be a man in the relatively few

examples of contemporary Native American young adult fiction; approaching the widespread appreciation for and enjoyment of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Kertzer suggests that a novel as widely recognized and lauded as Alexie's can serve as a site for the deconstruction of modes of identity for young Native American peoples. She examines the "'crisis of identity' in the assimilated Native American" (74) and the severe limitations it might put upon young Native American men. Similarly, in "Alexie-Vision: Getting the Picture," Susan Bernadin argues that Alexie's popularity allows Alexie to articulate "the possibility of disrupting the formula" of what it means to be a young Native American man. While Lefebvre's and Kertzer's analyses may prove helpful to understanding Alexie's novel's impact on what it means to be a young Native American man, their arguments may not extend into the realm of how the homophobic comments and actions taken by the Native American characters who wish to defend how their own masculinity is perceived by others, both within and beyond the Native American society of their own tribes and reservation lands. Bernadin argues that Alexie is "transmitting, but also always transmuting; bending genre; and bending the rules" (52). Bernadin calls attention to "a binary logic separating non-Native and Native literary forms" and "critical approaches that have relied on reductive categories of identity, authenticity, and artistic production" (54). With keen consideration of what male and Native American identities mean, both singularly and combined, Kertzer and Bernadin call attention to the always problematic binaries of dominant vs. marginalized.

Alexie's heartfelt approach to realistic young adult literature can be found in his *Wall Street Journal* article "Why the Best Kids Books are Written in Blood." In this

manifesto of sorts, Alexie asks if it is possible for a “sexually explicit YA novel” to “somehow traumatize a teen mother” or if a “YA novel about murder and rape” could somehow “shock a teenager whose life has been damaged by murder and rape” (np). Alexie’s sincere dedication to authentically and explicitly representing the reality of “poverty-stricken, sexually and physically abused, self-loathing Native American teenager that I was” is clear in his article. He states that as an abused, self-hating teen himself, he would have loved to have had the opportunity to read realistic young adult novels that spoke to his suffering, such as Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak* about a high school girl who has been shunned by all of her classmates for calling the police to break up a party at which she was raped. Alexie writes, “I can only wish, immodestly, that I’d been given the opportunity to read *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Or Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak...*” (np). While critics may view books such as these as “irredeemable,” Alexie argues that he wrote his “YA novel as a way of speaking to my younger, irredeemable self” (np). Clearly, Alexie has very sincere intentions for his novel; he sees it as a chance to support those readers who may need it. However, in his attempt to be extremely realistic, relatable, and accessible to teen readers, Alexie relies upon the use of homophobia.

In the world of *The Absolutely True Diary*, homophobic slurs are common, and although Junior recognizes the insult, he still attempts to justify his and his friends’ use of words like “faggot.” Crisp suggests that Alexie, like other young adult novelists, uses “homophobic discourse as a form of ‘teen talk’ and to make their books feel contemporary and current for readers” (338). The idea of “teen talk” appears in the

New York Times review of Alexie's novel as well; reviewer Bruce Barcott notes, "Working in the voice of a 14-year-old forces Alexie to strip everything down to action and emotion, so that reading becomes more like listening to your smart, funny best friend recount his day while waiting after school for a ride home" (np). Calling other boys "fags" or commenting that a guy is "gay" is just something teen boys do, it seems. Junior seems to be a kind-hearted young man who harbors no negative opinions of or emotions toward queerness. For example, when Junior attempts to repair his broken friendship with his best friend Rowdy via an illustration of the two of them as superheroes, Rowdy's father, who regularly drinks and physically abuses Rowdy and his mother, says to Junior, "You're kind of gay aren't you?" and "Yeah, I'll give it to him. Even if it's a little gay" (Alexie 103). Junior, proud of his attempt to reach out to Rowdy, thinks, "if that was gay, then okay, I was the gayest dude in the world" (Alexie 103). Because he wants to reestablish connection with his best friend, Junior thinks that if doing so makes him "gay," then he will gladly take on the status of "gayest dude in the world." He does not shy away from or reject the name, ostensibly indicating that he takes no offense to it. Still, even if he is willing to be labeled "gay," the manner in which Junior uses the words "faggot" and "gay" so quickly and easily underscores the heteronormativity and the binaries that the story and its characters cannot seem to escape.

Junior's willingness to be "the gayest dude in the world" seems well-intentioned, but at the same time, his nonchalant use of epithets like "faggot" call his intentions into question. What seems to be reinforced is that homophobic slurs and derision of boys based upon how they fail to uphold traditional modes of masculinity are "normal,"

realistic, parts of everyday life. About both masculinity and femininity in children's and young adult literature, Laura M. Robinson writes in her article "Girlness and Guyness: Gender Trouble in Young Adult Literature," "Gender remains an implicit assumption, creating an implicit ideology" that exerts its power in the manner in which "it presents specific gender roles as simply the way things are, as common sense, and thus encourages the reader to accept them uncritically" (214). The assumption that genuine care for another male makes Junior somehow "gay" because it removes him from the domain of what is considered masculine appears to reinforce the assumptions of specific gender roles. Tying the ideology of gender roles to sexuality, Thomas W. Bean and Helen Harper, authors of "Reading Men Differently: Alternative Portrayals of Masculinity in Contemporary Young Adult Fiction" agree that masculinity, like other forms of identity, offers a positioning...discursively produced and organized" (12). However, in American social and cultural milieus, including on Native American reservations such as the Spokane lands within which Junior lives, "masculinity and femininity have been so strongly named and normalized as polarized and hierarchical opposites, and so deeply conflated with sexual identity, that there are serious repercussions for those who might resist or transgress gendered and/or sexual norm" (12). The masculine vs. feminine, heterosexual vs. homosexual, powerful vs. powerless hierarchies and binaries determine what qualifies as normal and what is deemed abnormal or unnatural. In Junior's world, these binaries in some ways control him.

In "'Us Boys Like to Read Football and Boy Stuff': Reading Masculinities, Performing Boyhood," Elizabeth Dutro notes that for boys and young men, books and

reading help to establish masculinity as “fixed,” “performative,” “integrated with race,” and understood only in “relation to femininity” (469-71). These descriptors suggest that masculinity can be restrictive and restraining, an idea reinforced by Bean and Harper: “The relatively small number of pages devoted to alternative representations of masculinity outside the norms of tough-guy poses and violence are important” (27). In their assessment of children’s and young adult literature, Bean and Harper note that the traditional hierarchies and binaries are what readers most often find, an assessment that can be applied to *The Absolutely True Diary*. Early on in the novel, when Junior wonders if anyone on the reservation would miss him if he were gone, he thinks that Rowdy would, but he would never admit to it: “He is way too tough for that kind of emotion” (14). Instead, Junior explains, Rowdy “fought everybody,” from boys to girls, men to women, stray dogs, and even the rain (17). A seething boy who in first grade says “everything” is wrong with him, the victim of continual domestic violence, Rowdy is quick to anger, even at his best friend (18).

When Junior exhibits an alternative representation of masculinity, he seems forced to take on the label of “gay.” Rowdy’s father’s estimation of what it means to be gay -- showing any kind of emotion, not sexual in the least, toward another boy -- remains within the very strict boundaries of heteronormativity. Bean and Harper question “when and where can boys express emotions,” “what events and things are boys allowed to be scared about,” and “what are they not allowed to express fear about” in young adult literature (27). In *The Absolutely True Diary*, when Junior expresses his feelings for his best friend, when he expresses fear of losing his best friend and the

desire to reconnect with him, Junior becomes gay. While Junior seemingly jokes that he is willing to step outside the boundaries that prevent him from openly demonstrating his platonic love for his best friend, he too reinforces heteronormativity -- in the name of realism. Crisp explains, "A careful look at the way in which Alexie works to make his characters 'believable' teens provides further evidence of the use of homophobia as a literary mechanism employed to invoke 'realism'" (337). He points to Alexie's use of words like "faggot" as "insults" and of "being gay is something to be feared" (337).

The idea that being gay is something to be feared, something to be rejected, is also raised when Junior befriends another student at his new school, Gordy. In attempting to get to know a Gordy, he says to him, "I want us to be friends" (Alexie 94). In response, Gordy, surprised, takes a step away from Junior and states, "I assure you...I am not a homosexual" (Alexie 94). Again, that Junior would initiate conversation and companionship with a fellow classmate, seeking to break down boundaries that might separate him from other boys his age like Gordy, means that Junior will be perceived as emasculated and gay is problematic. That Gordy assumes that another guy telling him he wants to be friends is somehow not masculine and is arguably proof of queerness -- and that Junior knows that this is what Gordy will assume and immediately discounts it and seems to apologize for it -- demonstrates that "homosexual" is bad, negative, scary, undesirable, feared.

Reassurance of boys' masculinity and heterosexuality and their use of words like "faggot," according to the novel, seem to be nothing more than what is typical for straight teen boys who wish to exhibit that they are the opposite of feminine and queer.

For example, at the conclusion of the novel, when Junior and Rowdy attempt to reconnect and repair their friendship, they do so through stereotypically homophobic and heteronormative language:

“We’ll kick your asses next year,” Rowdy wrote back. “And you’ll cry like the little faggot you are.”

“I might be a faggot,” I wrote back, “But I’m the faggot who beat you.”

“Ha-ha,” Rowdy wrote.

Now that might just sound like a series of homophobic insults, but I think it was also a bit friendly... (197-98)

From early on in the story through to the end of the novel, Junior wishes he could express his feelings for Rowdy, to tell him “that he was my best friend and I loved him like crazy, but boys don’t say such things to other boys” (Alexie 48). Regardless, heteronormative restrictions forbid him to do so; the social and cultural milieu that Junior and Rowdy exist in cannot accept the presence of emotions, connection, and love between two boys, whether sexual or not. Junior, claiming that Rowdy may be the most important person in his life thinks,

Let’s do the math.

I figure Rowdy and I have spent an average of eight hours a day together for the last fourteen years.

That’s eight hours times 365 days times fourteen years.

So that means Rowdy and I have spent 40,880 hours in each other’s company.

Nobody else comes anywhere close to that. Trust me.

Rowdy and I are inseparable. (22-23)

Despite this closeness, or perhaps to spite this closeness, hurling “faggot” as an insult, whether playful or not, and allowing himself to remain silent and paralyzed from expressing his feelings for his friends, whether sexual or not, reinforces all of the binaries that dominate and control masculinity and heterosexuality.

**Hyper-Masculinity in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*
and *The Vast Fields of Ordinary***

Rowdy’s aggressiveness -- even reflected in his name -- makes him seem hyper-masculine. Crisp suggests that “Rowdy’s overly-aggressive heterosexuality throughout the novel can be read as an attempt to ‘put on’ a ‘masculine’ gender to deny a queer/homosexual identity,” perhaps as either or both a young man and a Native American man (338). However, this analysis is problematic because as a critic, Crisp is himself utilizing and depending upon stereotypical portrayals of young men or perhaps of Native American young men, buying into troublesome representations of gender and sexuality, because he suggests that Rowdy’s expression of his masculinity is somehow suspect. Bean and Harper point to the limitations on the creation and expression of “alternative representations of masculinity” beyond violent tough-guy (27), and unfortunately, in his characterization of Rowdy as “overly-aggressive” about his heterosexuality, Crisp seems to reinforce these restrictions. In this case, Crisp seems to be suggesting that beyond the violent tough-guy is the closeted gay guy who acts extremely violent and tough in order to hide his homosexuality. This trope, from

television show characters like *Glee*'s David Karofsky, a football player who hides his homosexuality by bullying out gay classmates, to the closeted football star in Nick Burd's *The Vast Field of Ordinary* and a similar character in Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, which will be discussed later in this chapter, abounds in young adult literature. About Rowdy, Crisp suggests, "Because he works so hard to be a 'masculine heterosexual male,' the performance almost cannot help but be queer" (338). Such a take on Rowdy's exaggerated masculinity seems troublesome, though, because it encourages assumptions about and limitations upon masculinity and sexuality, suggesting that if a young man acts *too* masculine, he is hiding his queerness, which is in some ways merely another stereotype. While Rowdy's machismo recalls myriad stories of the queer guy overcompensating and hiding his homosexuality behind hyper-heterosexuality, surmising that Rowdy is a closeted homosexual continues to reinforce a stereotype that suggests that someone who does not want to admit to being gay will hide behind hyperbolic heterosexuality.

As an example of this potentially problematic stereotype, Rowdy seems to become a "Sexican" character, like Pablo in *The Vast Fields of Ordinary*. Pablo, desperate to remain closeted, puts on the act of the super sexy and sex-crazed guy. Although he feels affection and attraction for protagonist Dade, Pablo cannot admit it to anyone, including himself. Instead, he camouflages himself behind the prominent place on the high school football team of star quarterback and an overtly physical relationship with a beautiful girl, Judy. Pablo wants to be perceived not only as straight, but as a particularly virile, athletic, and macho guy. Although he finally stands by Dade in a confrontation

with the football team, for most of the novel Pablo readily participates in the team's harassment of Dade, who himself neither publicly admits or denies being gay. Moreover, Pablo demands the more powerful role in sex acts and physically assaults Dade himself and even spits on him in many attempts to forsake acceptance of his homosexuality.

Indeed, Rowdy is somewhat like Pablo in his drive to appear virile and athletic, and Rowdy is also belligerent toward Junior. When Rowdy's reservation school's basketball team faces Junior's new school's team, Rowdy plays forcefully, taking his hostility out on Junior on the basketball court. Rowdy, hurt by what he considers to be Junior's desertion, readily engages in gay-bashing. Rowdy, who has called Junior "wuss" throughout the novel (17), calls Junior a "pussy," and when Junior reaches out to touch Rowdy's shoulder, Rowdy calls Junior a "retarded fag" (51-52). Still, Rowdy's attitudes and actions may have nothing to do with his sexuality; he may not be hiding a queer identity at all. It may be that Rowdy is acting and reacting to expectations for men on his reservation, to the poverty and hopelessness he might feel, to the displays of masculinity he witnesses daily, including the tough-guy act and the violence. Laura M. Robinson identifies "the central masculine ideology of violence": "Violence leads to wounds -- physically, certainly, but mostly emotional" (218). Rowdy, like characters in the novels Robinson critiques, is "ineffectual and damaged because of the pressures of masculinity," unable to adequately face or effectively cope with his situation (218). He struggles to deal with his reactions to feelings of grief and abandonment; Rowdy has just learned that his best friend, described by others as "the only good thing in his life," is about to leave the reservation school (41). When Crisp suggests Rowdy is a closeted

homosexual, he risks oversimplifying gender and sexual identity, ignoring emotion and state of mind, losing sight of social and cultural issues that may influence Rowdy's behavior, from poor education to poverty, from hunger to alcoholism, from profound anger and sadness to domestic violence.

**Gay Coding in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*,
The Perks of Being a Wallflower, and *The Vast Fields of Ordinary***

The characters' struggle to be strong not weak, powerful not powerless, and masculine not emasculated in *The Absolutely True Diary* appear to be extensions of the control that binaries exert in the characters' worlds. Junior endures the trials of life on his reservation versus off of it, as the only Native American student among an all-white student body at school and the only Native American to leave the reservation at home. Adding masculine vs. feminine or heterosexual vs. homosexual to the already exhausting tests Junior faces daily complicates matters. Junior has to negotiate what it means to be a young man on the Spokane Indian Reservation with "lopsided" eyes, an "enormous" head, huge hands and feet on a skinny, weakened body, and a stutter and lisp, all of which seem to get him beat up; "Yep, I belong to the Black Eye of the Month Club," Junior quips (Alexie 2-4). Bean and Harper explain, "the narrow and rigid organization of masculinity has devastating effects on those who do not or cannot embrace or enact gender and sexual norms produced within this organization" (13), in Junior's case it being both the all-white Reardan and his all-Native American reservation. Bean and Harper's claim that "[a]cting outside the norms of masculinity can result in a myriad of problems ranging from name-calling to physical assault..." certainly seems to apply to

Junior and his black eye club membership, and it also applies to Rowdy's hostility and aggressiveness. Observing these characters negotiate such boundaries is already challenging in the novel, the idea of "gay coding" as a part of the characters' gender and sexual identity renders the storyline even more difficult. Lefebvre notes that the binary of heterosexual vs. homosexual can be "unevenly linked to actual experience and desire" (301) and that attempts to identify *against* a kind of tenderness or vulnerability allows characters to distance themselves "from two distinct versions of 'queer' -- one physical and one rhetorical (302). Reading sexuality into these issues of gender identity may prove not helpful, but rather more harmful.

When Rowdy replies to the news that Junior intends to transfer to Reardan with a shove and the words, "Don't touch me, you retarded fag!" (50), Junior is crushed; he thinks, "My heart broke into fourteen pieces, one for each year that Rowdy and I had been best friends" (50). Then, as Junior cries, Rowdy "started crying, too" (50). Showing weakness and emotion seems to make him the opposite of masculine; Junior notes that Rowdy hates the tears that move him to the feminine side of the binary. Junior explains, "He wiped his eyes, stared at his wet hand, and screamed. I'm sure that everybody on the rez heard that scream. It was the worst thing I'd ever heard. It was pain, pure pain" (50). Rowdy's pain causes Junior to reach out to touch Rowdy's shoulder for a second time, and this time, instead of pushing Junior away and calling him a "retarded fag," Rowdy actually punches Junior in the face. Junior is devastated; until this moment, Rowdy, infamous for fighting, had never struck Junior. Junior does not attempt any kind of retaliation, but just falls to the ground: "*Bang!* Rowdy punched me. *Bang!* I hit the

ground. *Bang! My nose bled like a firework*" (51). The boys' sincere dedication to one another and the depth of the friendship they have shared is undone with the help of homophobic slurs and violence. Ultimately, Crisp's suggestion that Rowdy is spurned on by his closeted homosexual feelings for Junior ignores the vast complexity of Rowdy's situation.

Furthermore, in Crisp's interpretation of the novel, Junior's status as a misfit and a "wuss" (Alexie 18) make him "'gay coded'" (337). Suggesting that outcast and "wuss" equals or approximates "queer" reinforces heteronormative binaries: male vs. female; masculine vs. feminine; strong vs. weak; insider vs. outsider; straight vs. gay. The troublesome nature of considering "wussy" guys "gay coded" figures prominently in Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999). Chbosky's book, celebrated for its "realism" in reviews (Goldsmith 126), is an epistolary novel of letters from the protagonist Charlie to an unidentified "friend." Charlie is himself a heterosexual teen boy, but he is introverted, awkward, artistic, and outcast. In working up to and through the confrontation of the trauma of sexual abuse, Charlie is emotionally and mentally vulnerable, and he has a difficult time relating to his classmates. Charlie exists on the margins of his high school until he meets the quirky, interesting, exciting Sam and her step-brother Patrick. Sam and Patrick exude self-confidence and self-acceptance; they are considered strange by their peers, and they do not mind it. Sam and Patrick's circle of friends choose to exist in a more alternative, underground milieu; they attend weekly viewings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* in full costume, run a 'zine, make mix tapes of alt music, dress in thrift store clothes, and read books like *The Catcher in the Rye* and

On the Road. They reject conventional popularity. If applying Crisp's critique, Charlie, like Junior, may be "gay coded" with his sensitivity, lack of physicality, and creativity. Like Junior, however, Charlie himself is not gay. Charlie dates one of Sam and Patrick's friends, Mary Claire, and harbors a deep affection for Sam herself. Charlie's difficulties with intimacy with girls has nothing to do with queerness: Charlie is the victim of a childhood trauma that he has not yet fully comprehended or faced. His sexual identity is indeed dubious, but not because Charlie is gay coded or queer; rather, it is because Charlie must confront the fact that he was a victim of molestation.

While there are not any overtly queer characters in Junior's story, in Charlie's, there is Patrick. Patrick and his secret boyfriend Brad are much like Dade and Pablo in *The Vast Fields of Ordinary*. Neither Dade in *The Vast Fields of Ordinary* nor Patrick in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* fit into the more popular, mainstream crowds at their high schools. The peer groups with whom Dade and Patrick feel they belong are more creative and unconventional; while they conform to one another within their groups, they do not place much value in popular high school conventions. Dade has just begun to grapple with his sexual identity and his willingness to be open and public about his homosexuality; Patrick, on the other hand, has in many ways already worked through those questions and issues and has determined that he does not care about the opinions of those outside his group of friends. On the opposite end of the spectrum, or on the other side of a sort of binary, are Dade's secret sexual partner Pablo and Patrick's hidden boyfriend Brad. Pablo and Brad are both athletic, assertive, and what might be considered traditionally masculine; they both play football, drink alcohol and smoke

marijuana, and take part in bullying other students they perceive to be weaker than they are. Moreover, they are both scared to reveal their identities as gay young men. They both publically date popular, attractive girls; their girlfriends serve as a cloaking device, a so-called “beard,” meaning a member of the opposite gender utilized to hide one’s attraction to or love for the same gender. Neither girl, however, thinks she is a “beard”; both girls involved believe themselves to be the boys’ girlfriends in every conventional manner.

From *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* in 1999 to *The Vast Fields of Ordinary* in 2009, these novels demonstrate that perhaps little changed in the depiction of out or closeted queer teens in those ten years. These narratives utilize the clichéd portrayal of the sensitive, creative queer guy and the surreptitious, sporty, virile guy who does not want to admit he is queer. Important to note is that both of these characterizations are stereotypical and these storylines are formulaic. Ten years apart, Patrick’s relationship with Brad seems to mimic Dade’s with Pablo. Perhaps these stereotypes and formulas continue to be utilized because they are familiar, because they are so pervasive in queer young adult literature. Moreover, perhaps they are prevalent in the wider genre of young adult literature, too, because they are deemed realistic. If a character like Junior or Charlie is considered “gay coded,” Rowdy is overcompensating to hide his queerness, and a Patrick or a Pablo are obfuscating their queerness by playing on the football team and dating a girl, then the wider genre of young adult literature may be relying on stereotypes and formulas instead of exploring new alternative territories and creating imaginative original stories.

If Junior and Rowdy's friendship seems to reflect the relationships of Patrick and Brad in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and Dade and Pablo in *The Vast Fields of Ordinary*, then stereotypes and expectations remain. Crisp believes that with Junior and Rowdy, it is easy "to imagine there is more to this relationship than a platonic friendship and open readers to queer possibilities" (337). However, suggesting that two boys cannot have a close personal friendship without it being queer is itself heteronormative. Crisp suggests that "the text works against this queer potential by rigorously and systematically constructing Junior as heterosexual" (337) when Junior expresses his desire for women and admits to masturbating to "one thousand pictures of naked movie stars" in the bathroom -- Junior notes, "*Naked Woman + Right Hand = happy happy joy joy*" (Alexie 25-26). However, suggesting that Junior must assert and reinforce his masculinity and his heterosexual desire is likewise heteronormative. To move beyond heteronormativity, any realm of masculinity or femininity or any expression of such should be available; Rowdy should not hate or fear his tears, and Junior should be able to express his desire and lust, whatever it may be.

Inevitable Violence against Queer Characters in the

Wider Genre of Young Adult Literature

The threat of and actual incidents of anti-queer violence seems almost omnipresent in young adult literature; whether a protagonist or secondary character, if queer, the character seems to inevitably face violence as a means of inhibiting transgressions of heteronormative boundaries of gender and sexuality. In many ways, violence seems to function as a measure of reinforcing the binaries of colonizer vs.

colonized, granting power and control to the colonizer and fear and intimidation to the colonized. Cart and Jenkins point out the “cause and effect relationship between homosexuality and physical violence” (31). As a confused expression of desire or as a rite of passage, queer characters deal with physical, verbal, and emotional threat and harm. Queer characters cling to courage to be brave in the face of the threat.

In *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip.*, Davy strikes and wrestles with Altschuler when Altschuler tries to touch him out of kindness and connection. Likewise, in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Rowdy punches Junior in the face when Junior reaches out to comfort Rowdy with a hand on the shoulder. In *The Vast Fields of Ordinary*, Pablo attacks Dade when Dade attempts intimacy beyond just sex with him. Terrified by the threat of being outed to the football team by Patrick, Brad participates when the team physically attacks Patrick in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. In *Baby Be-Bop*, Dirk is beaten to unconsciousness by a group of neo-Nazis. Even in the utopic *Boy Meets Boy*, in eighth grade, Paul faces the threat of violence from two members of his school's wrestling team. A reader of queer young adult fiction would be hard-pressed to find any novel that does not include some sort of anti-queer violence.

Crisp suggests that violence is one of the “textual constructions that reinforce a view of gay people as outcasts subject to being the targets of physical abuse and verbal harassment” (336). Recalling Allan A. Cuseo's suggestion that “society's impression of the homosexual as an individual it is permissible to harass” (55), this violence marks the queer characters as different, as other, as outsider, maintaining the binaries of heterosexual vs. homosexual, natural and normal vs. unnatural and abnormal. This

violence keeps queer characters marginalized with fear. Homophobic violence even appears between two straight characters -- Rowdy attempts to intimidate Junior with homophobic slurs and threats. This narrative of assault stands as an important site of investigation for its cultural and social implications. Violence -- physical, mental, or emotional -- keeps the colonized subdued, keeps the colonizer in control. That power imbalance cannot change if it is not identified, examined, and demystified.

Conclusions: The Possibilities and Powers of Books

Books are cultural products and artifacts, “‘things’ that have a circuit of production, circulation, and consumption,” according to Michael W. Apple’s *Ideology and Curriculum* (14). Books for children and young adults are created, manufactured, and sold by adults, securing the adult world’s influence and control. In *Poetics of Children’s Literature*, Zohar Shavit suggests that children’s and young adult literature are often viewed as “a vehicle for education, a major means for teaching and indoctrinating the child” into the society and culture maintained by adults (35). Jack Zipes agrees in *Sticks and Stones: The Troublesome Success of Children’s Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter*: “we adults ultimately shape and determine the children’s private and public spheres” (xiii). Thomas Crisp concurs that children’s and young adult literature “serve as repositories for social values, revealing what a society wants it to be” (225). With the many possibilities and powers of books, especially books for children and young adults, the examination of novels and narratives, stories and stereotypes, can help identify the hegemonic forces or ideological apparatuses at play.

A hopeful ending is often cited as an important part of young adult literature.

Pace Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, and Nilsen note the “long-cherished belief that young readers deserve books with happy endings” that has resulted in young adult readers often seeking “both the happy endings and the assurance that happy endings are possible” (9th ed. 120). Though many endings are not exactly happy, often, but not always, in young adult novels, the characters and readers are left with at least some small indication that there can be some kind of “recovery” (Pace Nilsen et. al. 9th ed. 120). In “Why the Best Kids Books are Written in Blood,” Sherman Alexie speaks to the power of hope in books for young adult readers: “...there are millions of teens who read because they are sad and lonely and enraged...because they live in an often-terrible world...because they believe, despite the callow protestation of certain adults, that books -- especially the dark and dangerous ones -- will save them” (np). Alexie writes of readers who need “more books about teenagers rescuing themselves from the adults who seek to control and diminish” them (np).

The concept of hope is understandably important not just for adolescent characters or readers but in many ways for all people, whether they are in the midst of growing up or whether they have long since been adults. According to some critics, one of the strengths of magic realist texts like Levithan’s *Boy Meets Boy* is that they offer “a feeling of hope uncharacteristic of LGBTQ adolescent literature” (Crisp 341). At the conclusion of the novel, when Paul’s best friend Tony, who has not had such a blessed and easy life, takes a stand against his homophobic parents, Paul thinks, “This is what a small victory feels like: It feels like a little surprise and a lot of relief. It makes the past feel lighter and the future seem even lighter than that, if only for a moment. It feels like

rightness winning. It feels like possibility” (Levithan 158). Block’s magic realist *Baby Be-Bop* likewise ends with Dirk’s hope for a future relationship with his soulmate. The less magical, more real stories of Donovan’s *I’ll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip.* and Burd’s *The Vast Fields of Ordinary* also conclude with hope of recovery from past pain and promise of brighter futures; Davy and Altschuler seem willing to become friends again, and Davy has the support of an open-minded, kind-hearted step-mother; Dade finds himself quite happy in college, complete with money from his mother to take a nice boy out to dinner. In Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Junior and Rowdy have found their way back to one another, and in Chbosky’s *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Charlie has begun to face, deal with, and overcome the tragedies of his childhood. However, while such small victories may be enough for the heterosexual Junior and Charlie, perhaps such stuttered steps forward are not enough for the queer characters. Perhaps this illusion of hope is acceptable for the magical worlds of Paul and Dirk, but not enough for the more real worlds of Davy and Dade.

Such a dependence on the vision of a better tomorrow is exactly the philosophy of Dan Savage’s “It Gets Better Project.” The “It Gets Better Project” has successfully raised awareness of support for queer young adults with its website, YouTube channel, television shows, and special events that serve to remind queer young people that they are not isolated and alone, that they are appreciated and respected, and that there is hope for a better future for them. Still, the “It Gets Better” narrative does not seem to address or resolve the homophobia and heteronormativity plaguing young adult literature. In looking forward to the better tomorrow of a brighter future, perhaps queer

characters in young adult literature are robbed of the prerogative to tell the story of a better today, of a successful, supportive now. Jack Zipes hopes for a childhood or adolescence “rich in adventure and opportunities for self-exploration and self-determination” and “greater freedom and creativity” in children’s and young adults’ lives (x). Zipes believes that children and young adults can “transform the material objects of their culture to bring about greater choice and freedom in life” (xii). Young adult readers may be able to do so only if the adults behind the young adult literature industry give them more to work with than just the idea of a better future for characters.

Maybe a less stereotypical story that refuses to depend upon the tropes of the unstable, damaged, at-risk teenager whose gender and sexual identity determines so much of their happiness and success would give readers more to think about and reflect upon. Lourdes Lopez-Romero suggests that the issues that plague young adult literature are “a symptom of a bigoted society which does not allow deviations from its accepted norms, be they related to race, class, sexual orientation, or personality traits. Most of the adult characters...are shown to provide neither support nor guidance, for they, too, are part of the same diseased environment” (155-56). Perhaps the ultimate goals for young adult literature, particularly queer young adult literature, should include both the art of storytelling but also the chance for critical thinking and awareness. Appreciation for the literary elements of queer young adult literature alongside the opportunity to utilize the stories as both a window and a mirror may both be important for the books’ readers. In doing so, readers may be able to notice, observe, and consider the diseased environment in which the characters live -- or possibly in which they themselves exist.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Laurie Barth Walczak

Education:

Ph.D. in Department of English at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Dissertation: "The Ordinary Trip: Heteronormativity and Homophobia in Young Adult Literature from 1969 to 2009."

Areas of Specialization: Contemporary American Adolescent Literature, Contemporary American Coming-of-Age Narratives, Critical Approaches to Race and Ethnicity in Literature and Pedagogy.

Masters of Arts degree in Human Resources Development from Webster University, 2001.

Thesis: "Management Engagement in and Accountability for Workplace Diversity Initiatives."

Masters of Arts degree in English from Illinois State University, 1999.

Thesis: "Antigay Violence in 1990s Gay Male Adolescent Literature."

Bachelors of Science degree in English Education from Illinois State University, 1997.

Illinois Standard Secondary Teaching Certification in English for Grades 6-12.

NCLB Highly Qualified Subject Areas: English (Grades 9-12), English as a Second Language, Journalism (Grades 9-12), Language Arts (Grades 1-8), Reading, Speech (Grades 9-12), Title I Remedial Reading.

Student teaching experience at Cavendish School in Eastbourne, England, January 1997-May 1997.

Employment Experiences:

Eighth grade English Teacher at University School of Milwaukee, a PreK-12 co-educational college preparatory independent school, August 2007-present.

Responsibilities include designing, implementing, and evaluating curriculum in literature, reading, writing, vocabulary, and grammar with a scope and sequence that spirals from fifth to eighth grades and scaffolds into the Upper School; establishing grading criteria, evaluating student work, assessing student progress, and identifying potential issues; collaborating with teachers across divisions and departments; serving as resident expert and trainer in SMART

Technologies hardware and software; serving as a project leader on the school-wide strategic plan initiatives.

Middle School Department of English Chair, August 2012-present.

Responsibilities include coordinating Middle School English Department curriculum and initiatives; managing department's curriculum development and assessment processes at all Middle School grade levels; managing department's annual budget; formally and informally observing and providing extensive feedback to teachers in the faculty evaluation process; coordinating and collaborating with Upper School and Lower School English Departments and with all other disciplines and departments in the Middle School.

Eighth grade Grade Level Coordinator, August 2009-June 2014.

Responsibilities include coordinating and managing eighth grade teacher initiatives; communicating with parents and addressing parent questions and concerns; coordinating retention activities and events with Admissions; managing end of the year events and closing ceremony; facilitating student transition to Upper School; and representing the eighth grade teachers in a variety of school-wide circumstances.

Adjunct Faculty at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, January 2005-June 2011.

Responsibilities included independently preparing and teaching an Undergraduate/Graduate-level course; establishing grading criteria and evaluating student work; and maintaining an online classroom environment with D2L and other web-based applications.

CURRINS 650: Reading Interests of Adolescents.

Preparation for Praxis II Subject Assessment Test in English Language, Literature, and Composition, intensive seminar for students retaking after failing the examination.

Graduate Teaching Assistant at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, August 2001-May 2003 and August 2005- May 2007.

Responsibilities included independently designing, preparing, teaching, evaluating literature and composition courses; establishing grading criteria and evaluating student work; conferencing with students; maintaining an online classroom environment with D2L and other web-based applications; and working with other Graduate Teaching Assistants to develop innovative teaching techniques, materials, and assignments.

ENG 248: Literature and Contemporary Life: Adolescence and Literature.

ENG 248: Literature and Contemporary Life: Growing Up Gay.

ENG 251: Fantasy in Literature: Tolkien, Lewis, and Rowling.

ENG 101: Introduction to College Writing.

ENG 102: College Writing and Research.

Presentations:

"Culture Clash: Embracing Global Perspectives" with co-presenter Gene Luen Yang, author of *American Born Chinese*, at National Council of Teachers of English, November 2008. "Culture Clash: Embracing Global Perspectives" at Wisconsin Council of Teachers of English, October 2008 and ISACS, November 2008.

"Gay-Straight Alliances as Political Action in Young Adult Literature" at Modern Language Association Convention, December 2007. "Reading Interests of Adolescents and Choice in the English Classroom" at Milwaukee Area Academic Alliance in English Meeting, October 2006.

Chair for Permanent Section on Young Adult Literature at Midwest Modern Language Association Convention, November 2006. Section Topic: "Sexuality in Young Adult Literature." Secretary for Permanent Section on Young Adult Literature at Midwest Modern Language Association Convention, November 2005. Section Topic: "Fantasy for Adolescents."

"Subversion or Perversion?: Depictions of Interracialism in Chris Crutcher's *Whale Talk*" at Midwest Modern Language Association Convention, November 2004. "Sexuality, Protest, Elves, and White Womanhood: Hermione and S.P.E.W." at Nimbus 2003, Orlando, FL, July 2003.

"Deconstructing Harry: Identifying (with) Whiteness in *Harry Potter*" at Midwest Popular Culture Association Convention, October 2002. "Antigay Violence in 1990's Gay Male Adolescent Literature: Homosexual Panic in Block's *Baby Be-Bop*" at 2000 Sigma Tau Delta International Convention, March 2000.

Grants, Honors, and Awards:

Winner of the 2013-14 John Stephens Fund professional development grant to attend the Capstone Summer Summit at Thacher School in Ojai, California.

Winner of the 2011-12 John Stephens Fund and Elizabeth Elser Doolittle Fund professional development grant to study Sherlock Holmes and Shakespeare in London and Oxford, England.

Winner of 2010-11 Think Big Fund professional development grant to study West

African culture in Ghana.

Winner of the 2009-2010 Charles F. Wright Technology in Teaching Award from University School of Milwaukee.

Winner of the 2009-10 Steinman Fund professional development grant to attend SMART Notebook Certification Training in Chicago, IL.

Winner of the 2009-10 Elizabeth Elser Doolittle Fund professional development grant to develop spiraling reading curriculum for the Middle School.

Winner of the 2008-09 Elizabeth Elser Doolittle Faculty Scholars Program professional development grant to travel to Monroeville, AL to study Harper Lee and Truman Capote.

Winner of the 2007-08 Steinman Fund professional development grant to study Shakespeare in Eastbourne, Stratford-upon-Avon, and London, England.

Winner of 2006 GTA Award for Teaching Excellence from University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Department of English.

Committee Service:

University School of Milwaukee Strategic Plan Point Person, August 2013-present.

University School of Milwaukee Shakespeare Committee, January 2008-June 2014.

University School of Milwaukee Diversity Committee, August 2010-June 2013.

University School of Milwaukee TechKnow Conference Steering Committee, August 2011-June 2013.

University School of Milwaukee Educational Technology Steering Committee, August 2009-June 2010.