

**QUEERING YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE: EXAMINING SEXUAL  
MINORITIES IN CONTEMPORARY REALISTIC FICTION  
BETWEEN 2000-2005**

A Dissertation

by

**CORRINE MARIE WICKENS**

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

December 2007

Major Subject: Curriculum and Instruction

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**ABSTRACT**

Queering Young Adult Literature: Examining Sexual Minorities in Contemporary

Realistic Fiction Between 2000-2005. (December 2007)

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Fiction that incorporates gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning of heterosexuality itself (GLBTQ) themes and characters has been noted among the most widely censored novels for young adults (ALA, 2007; Finnessy, 2002; Karolides, 2002). Despite many teachers' and librarians' anxiety about even recommending a novel that includes homosexual characters, more novels with GLBTQ characters and themes are receiving significant literary accolades and awards. Furthermore, acclaimed researcher and young adult literary historian, Michael Cart (2004) notes that reading young adult literature, "the quintessential literature of the outsider," provides "the lifesaving necessity of seeing one's own face reflected in the pages of a good book and the corollary comfort that derives from the knowledge that one is not alone" (p. 46). For GLBTQ youth, this is exceptionally important given the heteronormative structures in place to monitor and control sexual and gender identities and expressions.

With this in mind, I utilized a dynamic and multi-faceted analytic approach, including interpretivist, textual discursive, and literary analyses, to examine seventeen GLBTQ themed novels for images, characterizations, and messages depicted about

nonconforming sexualities and gender identities. I sought to answer three primary questions: 1) What are the networks or systems of power that are unveiled as inhibiting the identities of the characters? 2) How are the identities of these characters constructed? 3) What messages do the texts convey regarding nonconforming sexual and gender identities?

I found that the authors largely created dynamic, three-dimensional characters with complex histories and narratives that affirm and validate GLBTQ identities. Moreover, I observed two overarching set of factors: one that encompasses culturally mediated forces, which include cultural institutions and practices, persecution, and social networks, and a second that emphasizes a critical modernist construction of identity. Additionally, I found a progressive-oriented didacticism pervasive through the texts that positively portrays GLBTQ characters, denounces homophobia, frequently challenges heteronormative assumptions and behaviors, and instructs readers about various issues and conflicts common to GLBTQ youth.

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And most of all, I want to thank my long term partner, Carol, and my sons, Seth and Ian, who through their unwavering love continually challenge me to be a better spouse, mother, and person. For that, thanks are never enough.

## NOMENCLATURE

Rather than the more common phrase “same sex couple,” in this dissertation, I will be using the phrases “same gender couple” or “same gender desire” to indicate affectional, romantic, or sexual attraction or relationships.

According to Judith Butler (1990, 1993), the term “sex” has been constituted as a prediscursive concept, referring to a physical body endowed with specific genitalia that stands before/ outside culture and “gender,” in liberal feminist terms, as the culturally negotiated construct of sex. However, Butler contends that we understand *nothing* outside of culture, not even our own physical bodies. As such, sex is as much culturally constructed as gender, and yet for her, the concept of gender underscores the repeated performative acts and rituals associated with specific gendered persons.

Especially in recent years, the increasing awareness and recognition of transgendered individuals (Mackenzie, 1994) and intersex persons (Fausto-Sterling, 2000) has challenged the binary assumptions of sex and gender, underscoring the idea that an individual may enact a gender regardless of their given sex.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Fiction that incorporates gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning of heterosexuality itself (GLBTQ) themes and characters has been noted among the most widely censored novels for young adults (American Library Association, 2007; Finnessy, 2002; Karolides, 2002). Despite many teachers' and librarians' anxiety about even recommending a novel that includes homosexual characters, let alone minor homosexual references, more novels with GLBTQ characters and themes are receiving starred reviews, e.g. *Boy Meets Boy* (*School Library Journal*), receiving major book award nominations, e.g. *Orphea Proud* (nominated for Michael L. Printz Award), winning awards themselves, e.g. *Target*, *Keesha's House*, *Postcards from No Man's Land* (Printz honors and award winners) and *Luna* (National Book Award honorees).

With only a few exceptions, most of the books published for young adults with GLBTQ characters fall into the genre of contemporary realistic fiction (CRF). CRF is fiction set in modern day, at least in relation to its publication date, and demonstrates characters, conflicts, and settings that are realistic in that they *could* happen (Norton, 2003). Children and youth are frequently drawn to this fiction because they may be more inclined to identify with characters and conflicts similar to their own, people they understand (Norton, 2007). It also allows youth to feel less alone, that someone else

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This dissertation follows the style of *Educational Researcher*.

understands and feels as they do. Reading young adult literature, “the quintessential literature of the outsider,” writes Michael Cart (2004) provides “the lifesaving necessity of seeing one’s own face reflected in the pages of a good book and the corollary comfort that derives from the knowledge that one is not alone” (p. 46).

For instance, one child commented about Judy Blume’s novel *Are you there God, It’s me, Margaret*, “‘I’ve read this book five times; I could be Margaret’” (Norton, 2003, p. 363). For GLBTQ youth, the body of novels that portray characters and situations similar to their own-- such as “coming out,” falling in love with someone of the same gender, dealing with homophobic name-calling and harassment in schools-- has been exceptionally scarce. Thus, identification with characters, to which they could respond “I could be Annie,” (from *Annie on my mind*) or “I could be Luna/Liam” (from *Luna*), has also been limited. Additionally, CRF enables readers to see life through another person’s eyes, to hear as he or she does, to feel as she or he does-- both characters who seem familiar and those who don’t (Bauer, 1994).

Much of the publishing, readership, and curricular debate around the incorporation of novels with GLBTQ images and characters reflects contemporary public discourses around sexuality and homosexuality specifically. Books with sexual content of any kind have been widely censored for their “inappropriateness” for children and young adults; however, books with references, images, and characterizations of homosexuality have been increasingly censored in the past fifteen years (ALA, 2007; Finnesy, 2002; Karolides, 2002). Heightened visibility and legislation around gay rights

have spurred more intense debate about the nature of homosexuality itself: deemed sinful and unnatural by some and normal and appropriate by others.

### **Statement of the Problem**

#### ***Historical tensions around homosexuality***

This contention around the nature of homosexuality stems from conflated issues of sex, gender, and sexuality. Sex<sup>1</sup> itself is commonly understood in two major ways: 1) the constitution of male and female based on respective, dimorphic (the fact that humans usually come in two forms) reproductive organs and 2) the act of sexual intercourse (Cameron & Kulick, 2003). In the first definition, sex is a noun, synonymous with gender; in the second, sex enacts a verb. Thus, the understanding of sex as intercourse implies the first: two sexes engage in sex for purposes of reproduction. The very suggestion of homosexuality takes issue with both of these: the constitution of men and women hinges on their sexual desire for and sexual intercourse with the opposite “sex” and the constitution of sex denotes intercourse necessarily conducted between women and men (Cameron & Kulick, 2003). Thus, a woman must desire and engage in sexual behaviors with the opposite sex and vice versa; to do otherwise is to be considered not a real woman or a real man (Butler, 1990).

Furthermore, religious doctrine in a number of religious traditions across the globe have significantly upheld traditional gender roles and definitions, again conflating sex, gender, and sexuality. In the United States, conservative Christian denominations have been the most vocal in denouncing homosexuality as an aberration. The Committee on the Study of Human Sexuality for Province VII of the Episcopal Church (1992)

effectively summed up this position, declaring: “All homosexual acts are sin, first, because they violate the strictures of Scripture and second, because they are a willful perversion of the natural order” (cited in Jones & Yarhouse, 2000, p. 75). Although not necessarily so, for many the laws of nature and the laws of God have become inextricably intertwined.<sup>2</sup>

Numerous studies have documented the strong correlation between negative attitudes towards GLBTQ individuals and religiosity. In fact, both affiliation with conservative Christian denominations<sup>3</sup> and increased frequency of church attendance have demonstrated high predictability for negative attitudes towards homosexuality (Finlay & Walther, 2003; Herek, 1987, 1998; Schulte & Battle, 2004). Vicario, Liddle, & Luzzo (2005) acknowledge the impact of deeply held values on attitudes, making them more resistant to change. Of their sample of seventy-one undergraduate women (a group more usually correlated with more positive attitudes towards gays and lesbians), seventy-eight percent of them ranked the value of salvation as either number one or number two in most importance. Therefore, to exact change in attitudes towards GLBT individuals, one may first need to examine the values, most frequently religious values, on which these attitudes hinge.

### ***Theoretical tensions around homosexuality***

While historical debates around homosexuality have been fueled by religious doctrine and affiliation, theoretical tensions around homosexuality exist as well in the unusual form of queer theory. Known for its activist agenda on behalf of “queer” (discussed later in this chapter) individuals, it also contests the very notion of identifying

such groups. Ironically, queer theory advocates for increased recognition of people who necessarily may not “be.”

For instance, queer theory underscores the need for increased visibility of positive GLBTQ characters and themes for young adult readership and consumption, so that young adults who have already self-identified as gay and are coming out or questioning their sexuality, can read about characters similar to themselves with similar conflicts. Queer theory also advocates the importance of such novels for young adults who perceive themselves as firmly heterosexual, so they may understand the perspectives and potential struggles of friends, family members, acquaintances (Cart, 1997). It encourages questioning of homophobic and heterosexist discourses that suggest everyone must be heterosexual to be a worthwhile, “intelligible” (Butler, 1990) human being. On the other hand, queer theory also problematizes the representation of GLBTQ identity formation as a singular, unified, and linear process. Frequently, in “coming out stories,” a young adult meets another gay or lesbian student that reflects a certain truth about oneself. In this meeting, there frequently is a struggle to stay straight; but also in the recognition there is a yearning for that sense of wholeness and vitality previously denied or unknown. Postmodern and poststructural theories, from which queer theory emanates, challenge however the notion of any “true” self, of a stable subject that can be finally realized (Slattery, 2003).

In this study, I deconstruct this dialectical tension as represented in contemporary realistic young adult fiction. I examine both sexual and gender identity constructs as demonstrated in the fiction, and the incursions and disruptions of those identity

constructs as well. In doing so, I hope to explore means by which discursive production of gender and sexual conforming and non-conforming behaviors are furthered or interrupted.

### **Significance of the Study**

Theorizing of GLBTQ youth, their identity formation, and their conflicts within larger discourses of homosexuality is still quite young, given that queer theory itself is little over a decade old. Specifically, examination of fictional GLBTQ characterizations has been scarce (Cuseo, 1992; Cart & Jenkins, 2006; Lee, 1998) and poststructural or queer theorizing of these characterizations in contemporary young adult literature has also been limited (Lefebvre, 2005; Trites, 1998). This study seeks to explore these depictions for the powerful import they play in light of ongoing national homophobic and heterosexist discourses. This study also seeks to examine the way competing discourses around sexualities are demonstrated through contemporary young adult fiction.

### **Research Questions**

As such, I examine the characterization of sexual minority characters, images, and references in contemporary young adult fiction. Specifically, I ask: Within the character representation of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning individuals as part of the broad genre of contemporary realistic fiction for young adults, 1) What are the networks or systems of power that are unveiled as inhibiting the identities of the characters? 2) How are the identities of these characters constructed?

3) What messages do the texts convey regarding nonconforming sexual and gender identities?

### **Discussion of Key Terms**

Although elaborated in Chapter II, I briefly highlight discussions and contradictions around several key terms for this study: 1) GLBTQ/ homosexual/ queer; 2) homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormative; and 3) identity. As this study hinges on the investigation of GLBTQ individuals as characterized in young adult fiction, I begin there.

#### ***GLBTQ/ homosexual/ queer***

The use of language and appropriate terminology is greatly debated among queer theorists and activists and so needs clarification here. The terms “gay” and “lesbian” suggest for many a hearkening of assimilationist discourses of identity politics, i.e., “I may be gay, but we’re really all the same” (Jacobs, 2003; Pinar, 1998; Sears, 1999). However, these terms also represent for individuals significant markers of self-identification: this is who I am. The identity makers also emphasize gender differences, where “gay” has problematically come to subsume all non-heterosexual identities, obscuring significant power differentials and subject group affiliations. Some lesbians, for example, define themselves as gay, some as lesbian, sometimes using the terms interchangeably, sometimes distinctly (the converse is not true, however, for gay men, who never exchange the gendered marker of lesbian for gay). Issues of bisexuality also frequently elicit controversy, because they are not necessarily denied heterosexual privileging. They can “pass” more easily as heterosexual, if they so desire, and gain any

of 1050 federal rights and privileges granted to heterosexual married couples (Wilkinson, 1996).

While the terms gay, lesbian, and bisexual foreground sexual identity, the term “transgender” emphasizes gender nonconformity, not sexual nonconformity. A transgender individual perceives her or his biological manifestations of sex and gender to conflict with his or her internal perceptions of gender. These, however, may be completely unrelated to their sexual attractions, behavior, and desires.

Not disregarding the ambiguities of language of sexual and gender identity, but highlighting them, “queer” has become the preferred signifier among these theorists. Not only does it challenge the fixed nature ascribed onto sexual identity, it critiques the heteronormative structures of Western culture that constrain both sexual and gender identity. In this way, queer theory and activism encompass transgender individuals as well, regardless of sexual orientation.

Queer also devalues the use of the term “homosexual” on two bases. First, the term “homosexual” derives from scientific and medical categorizations of sexual perversities and deviances, for which pathological definitions of homosexuality remained until the early 1970s. “Queer” also disputes the binary of homo/heterosexual as one of many artificial dichotomies originating from the era of Enlightenment that includes mind/body, normal/abnormal, good/bad, true/false, and male/female. Queer theorists contend that sexuality, and gender constructions for that matter, are fluid, dynamic, and variable, such that dualistic oppositions constrain sexual expressions and understanding.

In this study, I will use these terms differentially. I will use the particular identity markers gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender as appropriate to and specified in the different young adult novels. I will use the term homosexual sparsely and only as part of a discussion of homophobic and heterosexist societal structures. I will typically use the term “queer” to invoke queer theory or politics. Finally, I will use the acronym GLBTQ when I seek to be encompassing of all non-heterosexual identities without reference to gender and sexual politics.

***Homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormative***

Distinctions between three other central terms need to be clarified: homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormative. Homophobia is characterized as intense fear or hatred of those who desire individuals of the same gender (West, 2004). While homophobia emphasizes individual attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs, heterosexism and heteronormativity underscore societal structures and power inequities. Heterosexism and heteronormativity suggest that the act or appearance of being heterosexual privileges those individuals who are or appear to be heterosexual. Adrienne Rich (1986) first questioned heterosexuality as “compulsory,” while Epstein and Johnson (1994) disputed the frequent presumptions of heterosexuality that are “encoded in language, in institutional practices, and the encounters of everyday life” (p. 198). Ingraham (1997) argued that not only is heterosexuality compulsory and assumed, that it has indeed been institutionalized as “heteronormativity,” in which heterosexuality “constitutes the standard for legitimate and prescriptive sociosexual arrangements” (p. 275). In this way,

heteronormativity reinscribes the male/female binary, curtailing “proper” and accepted gender identities through regulation of sexual arrangements.

### *Identity*

Conceptions of human identity are basic to understandings of personal and social interactions, but explanations about identity are often overlooked because it is considered, well, so *basic*. “In the absence of a definition, the reader is led to believe that identity is one of those self-evident notions that, whether reflectively or instinctively, arise from one’s firsthand, unmediated experience” (Sfard & Prusak, 2005, p.15). Recent research in adolescent literacy particularly highlights ways in which multiple literacies<sup>4</sup> are used to facilitate identity development (Moje, E.B., 2002; Schofield & Rogers, 2004; Smith, M., Mikulecky, L., Kibby, M., Dreher, M., & Dole, J., 2000). It is also crucial to discussions of young adult literature because adolescence has traditionally been considered the time of crucial identity development and formation (Erikson, 1968), as adolescents explore and seek to answer one of the greatest existential questions, “Who am I?” Likewise, several constructivist researchers pose the concept of identity as the “missing link” between learning and sociocultural contexts (Sfard & Prusak, 2005; Lave & Wenger, 1991), but without clear elaborations of the multiple ways it has been discussed.

Despite the contradictions around the term, I use the term identity(ies) due to its descriptive power. Ironically, to claim a GLBTQ identity is to set oneself apart, to in fact name oneself as ‘Other.’ And unlike other marginalized groups historically, GLBTQ individuals do not grow up in a cultural community that provides networked responses to

the stigmatization, prejudice, and possible violence imparted to (or sometimes self-imposed upon) GLBTQ individuals. Thus, to name one's identity (even as it might change) often may evoke exclusion, ostracism, and harm but may also invoke inclusion into new communities, self-awareness, and self-fulfillment.

### **Researcher Perspective**

As an interpretivist researcher, I recognize that I bring my own perspectives and subjectivities to bear in choosing and conducting any research study. The research cannot be disassociated from the researcher as the data is indeed filtered through the researcher (Marshall, 1981; Wolcott, 1990). The researcher serves as the instrument weaving a particular narrative drawn from other narratives. In this way, objectivity is not viewed as an empirical goal, but a falsehood; and subjectivity is not deemed an obstacle to rigorous research, but rather a conduit.

As such, my own perspectives draw from my experiences and training as a literacy educator, an avid reader, a partner, a parent, and a lesbian. I remember my young adult years and the struggles therein, my naiveté, my inexperience, and my isolation. My sense of difference derived from my eschewing of social norms (my insistence on using my everyday, academic vocabulary as an adolescent, rather than the more common colloquial language; and my bewilderment around gender performances- girls batting their eyes, flipping their hair to get guys' attention and guys attraction to girls who acted their intellectual inferiors.) I remember my first relationship as a senior in high school and all of its contradictions.

Thus, in reading and analyzing these texts, I approach them from both aesthetic and critical stances (Rosenblatt, 1978). I respond with empathy to the unconscious flirtation between Nic and Battle in *Empress of the World*, to the difficulties of Mel standing up to her mother upon coming out in *The Bermudez Triangle*, to the heartrending reconciliation of Paul and Noah in *Boy Meets Boy*, to the fear and anxiety of contracting AIDS by Nelson in *Rainbow Boys* and *Rainbow High* (a good friend of mine died of AIDS at the age of 29 in 1995). Nevertheless, I also read and examine texts critically, particularly in relation to the development of character and conflict, to the messages authors convey through their texts, and the construction of identities depicted in these texts.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

In this research study I organize the research around key themes and issues in and amongst contemporary discourses around homosexuality and GLBTQ individuals in the following way: Chapter I introduces the key tensions in the area of young adult literature with GLBTQ characters and identities. Chapter II explores the different concepts briefly noted in chapter one, specifically examining the differing disciplinary conceptions of “identity,” historical constructions of childhood, shifts in publishing for children and young adults based on these changing cultural scripts, and the development of young adult fiction with GLBTQ characters, themes, and references. Chapter III explains the analytic process derived from a critical interplay between text and contemporary discourses, utilizing constant comparative inductive reasoning (Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), literary analysis (Vandergrift, 1990), and textual

analysis (Fairclough, 2003). Chapters IV, V, and VI delineate the findings thereto, in which chapter four explores the systems of power that forge oppressive contexts for GLBTQ characters; Chapter V examines the modernist constructions of GLBTQ identity formation related to same gender desire, romance, and agency; and Chapter VI analyzes the authorial messages that pervade these texts. Finally, in Chapter VII conclude my dissertation by first summarizing the results, then critiquing the constructions of identity in these texts, and lastly posing ongoing questions and challenges for increased inclusion in contemporary classrooms.

### **Summary**

Many of the GLBTQ-themed novels portray both “coming of age” and “coming out” thematic motifs, reflective of historic identity politics, in which naming and claiming one’s GLBTQ identity represents a momentous personal epiphany and significant social adjustments. Psychosocial notions of “identity” have traditionally emphasized specific social markers and psychological behaviors that together connote a complex, yet complete, unified whole “person.” Recent queer and poststructural theoretical conceptualizations refute, however, the stability and singularity of traditional identity construction, advocating rather a fluidity and multiplicity of contested and contradictory personal identities.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Butler's (1990, 1993) contention that both sex and gender are discursively constructs used to regulate human bodies is taken up in chapter 2. Here I only mean to introduce taken-for-granted assumptions of sex, gender, & sexuality as they impinge on conceptions of homosexuality.

<sup>2</sup> Although more traditional scriptural interpretations of homosexuality abound, there are progressive denominations or organizations with denominations that promote inclusion and dignity for GLBTQ individuals, e.g. open and affirming congregations of the United Church of Christ, the American Episcopal Church, Dignity USA and the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists (Siker, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> There is significant theological debate among Biblical scholars about supposed Scriptural injunctions against homosexuality. These debates are generally divided between two main camps: literal interpretivists and critical socio-historical interpretivists. Literal interpretations admonish that God made man and woman to couple and procreate with strong admonitions against homosexuality found in Scriptures, including Genesis 19:1-19 (the Sodom and Gomorrah story), Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 (the Holiness Codes), and Romans 1:24-27 (that looks at the abandoning of 'natural relations between men and women'). Critical socio-historical interpretations of these Scriptures seek to recontextualize Scriptural texts and trace shifts in language use and translation. For instance, a socio-historical interpretation of Sodom and Gomorrah contends the story confronts issues of inhospitality, not homosexuality. For reviews of these scholarly debates, refer to edited works by Balch (2000) and Corvino (1997).

<sup>4</sup> For explanation of multiple literacies, see Moje, E., Dillon, D., & O'Brien, D. (2000) or Bean, T., Bean, S., & Bean, K. (1999).

## CHAPTER II

### THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL INFLUENCES

To examine the multi-faceted influences on the inclusion of sexual minority characters in contemporary realistic young adult fiction, in this chapter I will highlight four central theoretical and historical facets important to this research: 1) constructions of sexual and gender identity (as well as constructions of *non-identities*), 2) constructions of childhood and children, 3) historical developments in children's literature, and 4) the increasing incorporation of sexual minority characters in young adult fiction.

#### Constructions of Sexual and Gender Identities

##### *Culturally regulated identities*

The concept of "identity" has captivated the attention of numerous authorities in various disciplines: philosophers have pondered the existential question "who am I" and debated the materiality (linkages to the body or the mind) of one's identity (Markie, 1998; Noonan, 1989; Rovane, 1993; Shoemaker & Swinburne, 1984; Vinci, 1998), psychologists have proposed stages of identity formation (Erikson, 1968; James, 1890), sociologists have analyzed the significance attributed to identity via social markers, e.g. race, class, gender, and sexuality (Andersen & Collins, 2004; Goffman, 1959; Holstein & Gubrium, 2003; Hull, 2006; Smith-Lovin, 2003), and most lately postmodern and poststructural theorists have posited a constantly shifting constellation of identities, rather than a singular, stable "identity" per se (Cannella, 1997; Lather, 1991; Pillow,

2000; Scheurich & McKenzie, 2005; Slattery, 2003). It is in this vein that I explore the notion of identity (or identities) as a culturally regulated construct.

To begin, postmodern and poststructural theorists reject the idea of a stable, unified subject. Drawing from Derrida and Foucault, they believe that bodies may be real, but the meanings ascribed to those bodies- sex, gender, race, sexuality, are discursively produced. That is, individuals live in a specific historical-cultural context, born into a set of signs, systems, and language. Moreover, language structures one's very thought processes, such that some thoughts in fact become unthinkable because of the language that has been inherited. In this manner, how people have come to think about sexed and gendered bodies instructs them about how to act, and so they do.

This is influenced by the notion of performativity. Performativity originally suggested cultural instances in which speech acts were conflated with actions themselves, as with wedding vows or judicial sentencing (Rapi, 1998). The speech acts were only significant and officially sanctioned in the performative acts of wedding ceremonies or criminal court cases. To Butler (1990, 1993), however, performativity suggests reiterative rituals and performances, e.g. 'going out, that constitutes an identity that it is supposed to be. Butler (1993) writes,

Performativity is thus not a singular 'act,' for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition.

In this way, our actions obscure the conventions that made my actions seem natural in the first place. Thus, I *am not* a woman, but rather, I *enact* womanhood.

Also drawing upon a poststructural discursive framework, narratively-defined identities suggest a stronger linguistic element of culturally regulated identities. In this fashion, identities are expressed not *in* the stories told to others, but rather the identities *are* the stories themselves. In this sense, narrative identities suggest not that I *am* a woman, but that I *claim* to be a woman. This highlights identity talk or identity claims about meaningful aspects of our lives, without referring to an essentialized, unified subject. “As stories, identities are human-made and not God-given, they have authors and recipients, they are collectively shaped even if individually told, and they can change according to the authors’ and recipients’ perceptions and needs” (Sfard & Prusak, 2005, p. 17).

Sfard & Prusak (2005) distinguish though between more or less powerful stories: those narratives that I repeat to myself, say about myself most often, and have come to believe to be “true.” As such, these stories come to claim more identifying power. “The ubiquity and repetitiveness of identifying narratives one tells and hears about herself make them so familiar and self-evident to her that she eventually becomes able to endorse or reject new statements about her in a direct, nonreflective way” (Sfard & Prusak, 2005, p. 17). These particular narratives gain significance as *designated* identities, because they are told and retold by influential narrators and important membership communities (Sfard & Prusak, 2005).

Sfard and Prusak (2005) underscore the collective nature of narratively-defined identities derived from a specific socio-cultural framework and told in and through significant membership communities. One might think of the stories told and retold at family gatherings; but also in societal terms, we can think of the stories told that inform and instruct us about how to be, e.g. what constitutes a “good girl” or “good mother.” In fact in regards to sexuality, we see this as the historical silencing- the *not* telling- around homosexuality as the “love that dares not speak its name.” In this way, the narration of different stories can serve as powerful regulatory mechanisms about how to act and how *not* to act.

Despite the complex disciplinary debate around identity/identities, most individuals take for granted a personal coherence that defines who they are- physically, psychologically, and socially (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003; Noonan, 1989). I don't have to daily ask the question ‘who am I?’ Rather, I take my impression of unity as a given and am able to proceed, rather than being stuck in an identity quagmire of uncertainty and ambiguity. Nevertheless, the personal identity I experience does shift in different spaces with the various roles I perform in midst of different socially defined discourses and contexts. In this way, I embody a different ‘me’ with each social interaction (James, 1890). Regardless, both these framings of personal and social identities suggest a stable entity that negotiates these different social contexts. In other words, I retain an essence, even as it shifts. This sense of coherence, however, belies historical and discursive influences through which language, knowledge, and power shape how we can even think

about gendered, racialized, and sexualized bodies (Butler, 1990; Cameron & Kulick, 2003; Sedgwick, 1990).

***Gendered and sexual identities as stable constructs***

Derived from bounded notions of a stable, unified entity, gendered and sexual identities seemingly identify elements of one's being. For instance, gender identity denotes how individuals first define themselves as male, female, (Renk & Creasey, 2003) or intersex (Fausto-Sterling, 2000) and describe themselves in relation to characteristics commonly associated with masculinity or femininity. For example, current educational debates around achievement among girls and boys in schools underscores presumptions of gendered behavior and aptitude: high achieving behavior is frequently associated with being girls while under achieving behavior with boys (Frank, Kehler, Lovell, & Davison, 2003). Also the psychological development of boys and girls is said to be distinct, with girls' more relational behaviors and boys engaging in more oppositional behaviors with long-term consequences of such self-defeating behaviors, including substance abuse, violence and aggression, even suicide (Mercurio, 2003).

Even so, gender identity is constrained through normative socializing processes through which people construct definitions of themselves. For instance, notions of womanhood have been historically so inextricably associated with childbearing, that many women, after undergoing hysterectomies, find it necessary to reevaluate and indeed reinvent their own definitions of womanhood (Elson, 2004). Likewise, notions of femininity have been so long conflated with heterosexual desire in Western culture that at different times, whether through activist stances or personal agency, women have self-

identified as lesbians in resistance to normalized<sup>1</sup> feminine characterization (Payne, 2002).

As suggested above, conceptions of gender identity have been intricately tied to that of sexual identity, in which individuals define themselves as bisexual, gay, lesbian, or straight (Cameron & Kulick, 2003). However, identifications based on sexual orientations- heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality- are relatively recent. The term 'homosexual' originates from the 1890s, but did not gain wide usage until mid 20<sup>th</sup> century (Katz, 1995). During the political movements of the 1970s, liberationists first promoted banners of gay pride, like the slogan of the same time period "Black is beautiful," in which gay pride celebrations sought to counter negative models of homosexuality and began self-identifying as 'gay' or 'lesbian' instead (Jagose, 1996). In the last decade, political activism and theory have debated a 'queer' identity that concomitantly strives for increased representation and acknowledgement of nonheterosexual identities, increased civil rights for nonheterosexual persons, but also challenges the ability to represent gays and lesbians as a singular 'community' (Sullivan, 2003).

### ***History of homosexuality***

Although the debate around homosexuality has significantly increased in recent years, its historical antecedent dates back to the late nineteenth century, in which sexuality was equated with procreation. The concept of desire or sexual proclivity regardless of reproduction functions was simply negated. In this way, both 'heterosexual' sex and 'homosexual' sex were both constituted as deviant, for both

involved non-procreative sexual activity (Katz, 1995). Dr. James G. Kiernan first coined the term 'heterosexual' in 1892 as one of several "abnormal manifestations of the sexual appetite" (Katz, 1995, p. 20).

"Hetero" in this case referred to erotic desire for *two* sexes, not specifically the opposite sex. "Homosexuals" on the contrary, were attracted to one sex, the opposite sex, but did not follow typical gender norms (Katz, 1995). These gender roles were circumscribed by procreation; so desire irrespective of reproduction constituted such acts as questionable. While homosexuals "bent the rules" governing sexual encounters, heterosexuals "deviated explicitly from gender, erotic, and procreative norms" (p. 20).

One year later, however, a Viennese doctor, Dr. Kraft-Ebbing resituated the issue of desire and sexuality by characterizing "hetero" as attraction to one different sex, not two. Although Kraft-Ebbing implied reproduction with his new term "hetero-sexual," he constructed "homosexual" as deviant, signifying "same-sex desire, pathological because [it was] non-reproductive" (Katz, 1995, p.22).

In the early twentieth century, Sigmund Freud helped solidify the negative constructions of homosexuality. He depicted homosexuals as those who lacked proper socialization, and thus remain "fixed" at an "immutable" stage of development, while intimating that proper socialization evinces normalized heterosexuality. Furthermore, Freud believed that environment determined sexual orientation, not genetics; as such, with appropriate psychiatric treatment sexual deviants could be reconstituted within sexually appropriate gender and sexual norms (Freud, 1962).

Moreover, the construction of homosexuality as medically, psychologically, and criminally deviant has remained well into recent decades. Pathological definitions of homosexuality as a sickness remained until the early 1970s. Although the American Law Association recommended decriminalization of homosexuality between consenting adults (Harvard Law Review Association, 1989), numerous states maintained sodomy laws that specifically targeted gays and lesbians until they were overturned in 2003.<sup>2</sup>

*Gender and sexuality as discursively produced constructs*

Although theorists have in recent decades recognized gender and sexuality as socially constructed, the recent poststructuralist turn in feminist and queer theory underscores the discursive processes that regulate, govern, and normalize aspects of gender, sex, and sexuality. To do so, I first elaborate Foucault's discussion of discourse, power, and governmentality. Then I move to the ways these regulate and construct gender, sex, and sexuality.

According to Foucault (1972), discourses serve to contain and build objects and concepts; they demonstrate the boundaries between and among disciplines and bodies of knowledge. But these discourses are produced in a complexity of fashions and arenas, sometimes cooperatively, sometimes competitively, sometimes hierarchically. Foucault argues that "truths" have been stripped of their historicity and that through various disciplining forces, certain ideas have been allowed to be propagated, unified, and reified as truths, while these same regulatory processes, culture, and language have precluded other ideas from even being thought (1972). Thus, in examining the formation of knowledge, objects, and statements, Foucault in fact investigates the nexus of power

structures that privilege certain speakers, particular discursive contexts, and institutional sites.

Thus conceived, discourse is not the majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject, but, on the contrary, a totality, in which the dispersion of a subject and his discontinuity with himself may be determined. It is a space of exteriority in which a network of distinct sites is deployed. (Foucault, 1972, p. 55)

Construed linguistically, discourse includes the dialogue, the silences, the pauses of various stable subjects in conversation (Johnstone, 2002). To James Gee (1996), discourse (referred to as Discourse- capital D) encompasses an entire context: they are “ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of a particular roles (or ‘types of people’) by specific groups of people” (p. viii). To Foucault, however, discourses underscore the networks of power that enable certain voices to be heard and listened to, while others are silenced, that then (re)shape the constructions around that discourse. In his other histories, Foucault investigates specific discursive productions of knowledge around normal/abnormal, legal/ delinquent, healthy/ ill, and sane/ insane (1977, 1978, 1994). These medical and scientific taxonomies served to create, define, and produce certain frames of knowledge, constructed as “truths,” which Foucault sought to deconstruct.

The naturalization of discursive statements, based on positions of authority and institutional force, into “truths” produced regulatory processes that demarcated social

and behavioral norms, Foucault called *governmentality*. That is, governmentality suggests ways that the state manipulates and controls, even “produces individuals” (Sawicki, 1991, p.22). Similar to Gramsci’s (1992) notion of hegemony, that is, state control is best maintained through individual complicity in one’s own oppression, Foucault’s governmentality pivots on the assumption of regulation of oneself and others.

This understanding of governance refers to all those ways of reflecting and acting that aim to shape, guide, or manage or regulate the conduct of persons- not only other persons [the governance of others] but also one’s self [the governance of self]- in light of certain principles or goal (Bloch & Popkewitz, 2000, p. 8).

Silin (1995) elaborates on the manner in which governmentality elicits compliance of the governed. “Social regulation is secured through production of emotions and attitudes that will enable us to claim our rights and adhere to our responsibilities as members of the body politic rather than through overt coercion” (p. 120). This governance works such that individuals mold themselves to fit these regulating forces and curb undesirable behaviors in others.

However, unlike neo-Marxist theories of hegemony, Foucault’s analysis of power accentuates its productive capacity, rather than necessarily its function of oppression or repression. Rather than repressing sexuality, as had been hitherto argued, Foucault (1978) demonstrated for instance in his *History of Sexuality* how the modernist period in fact constituted and produced sexuality through increased scientific measures of surveillance: construction of school dormitories and bathrooms to monitor boys’

masturbation, medical management of women's moods and humors as they might impact future procreation, demographic studies of fertility and population growth, propagation of scientific taxonomies of "perverse" (non-procreative) sexuality, and psychoanalytic confessions of sexual fantasies and behaviors. Thus, despite its efforts to silence and efface sexual behaviors, the modernist period's near compulsive obsession with sex and sexuality in fact served to foreground sexuality as a subject of study, causing a proliferation of discourses around sexuality and a multitude of new sexualities which previously had not even been identified (Foucault, 1972).

Drawing from the discursive processes Foucault observed, other poststructuralist theorists have in turn examined sex/ gender and homo/heterosexual binaries as artificial dichotomies (Butler, 1990, 1993; Sedgwick, 1990). According to liberal feminist theory, sex has been defined as the biological differentiation of "male"/ "female" bodies; while, gender has been noted as the manifestations of socially inscribed meaning on those sexed bodies (Butler, 1990, 1993). However, that presumes a pre-discursive body with particular physical configurations, constituted as sex, upon which a socially defined gender imposes meaning. In this way, gender becomes situated as an active negotiator of culture, while sex remains a passive, indeterminate entity of nature. This suggests and constitutes gender as metaphorically a male agent acting and controlling a female landscape (Butler, 1993).

A caveat to poststructural theory is required here. Contrary to critics, poststructuralists do not deny a physical reality. Thus, when Butler argues for discursively produced construct of "sex" as well as "gender," she is not arguing that

bodies are not imbued with distinguishing characteristics, genitalia, or even specific chromosomal matter. Likewise, she is not saying that sexed bodies are not real and actual. Rather, like Foucault, poststructuralists underscore the social meanings ascribed to real objects, as dependent on discursive systems of power/knowledge-- not that they do not exist (Mills, 1997). John Frow (1985) asserts, "The discursive is a socially constructed reality which constructs both the real and the symbolic & the distinction between them. It assigns structure to the real at the same time as it is a product and a moment of real structures" (p. 200). The discursive, as noted before, establishes and delimits a "field of vision" through which we understand "reality" and excludes other objects "from being considered real, worthy of attention, or even existing" (Mills, p. 51). Thus, through scientific taxonomies and religious institutional force, in Western society, we came to accept a male/female binary of sex, despite other cultural possibilities that denoted multiple sexes (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1978). Furthermore, fixation with strictly two sexes remains obstinate even despite current investigation and awareness of intersex individuals that openly defy this persistent binary (Fausto-Sterling, 2000).

If discourses establish a way of perceiving and understanding objects and persons, these same discursive components structure our understanding of gendered and sexual identities as well. Consider 20<sup>th</sup> century technology that allows parents to discern the "sex" of a fetus. With this *knowledge*, parents, family, and friends, paint nurseries, buy clothes, toys and stuffed animals considered gender appropriate, that *match* the "sex" of the child. Even before the child is born, she is made into a male or female in a heterosexually defined society. The child is not his gender, but the gender makes the

child. In this way, the performances of the child's significant others establish her identity, which she then enacts. Accordingly, gender is a "repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time, to produce the *appearance* of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler, 1990, pp. 43-44, emphasis added). It is through such processes that gender comes to be assumed as a naturalized given.

But, the prospect of a child's "gender" is likewise constrained by society's compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality (Rich, 1986; Butler, 1990). That is, proper femininity and masculinity are evoked, enacted, and made intelligible through the heterosexualization of desire.

To the extent the gender norms (ideal dimorphism, heterosexual complementarity of bodies, ideals and rules of proper and improper masculinity and femininity, many of which are underwritten by racial codes of purity and taboos against miscegenation) establish what will and will not be intelligibly human, what will and will not be considered to be 'real,' they establish the ontological fold in which bodies may be given legitimate expression (Butler, 1990, p. xxiii).

In other words, to be constituted as 'real' - a real woman or a real man, one also must perform as a heterosexual (Butler, 1990). Only because "certain kinds of 'gendered identities' fail to conform to those norms of cultural intelligibility, [do] they appear as deviant failures or logical impossibilities" - not because they are essentially so (p. 24).

Thus, through this intersection of gender and sexuality, the male/female binary is reified and homosexuality deemed culturally unintelligible.

*A queer identity?*

The critique of the male/female binary and of the “unintelligibility” of sexualities, alternate to a compulsory heterosexuality, compels much of queer theory; but clarifying queer theory is troublesome, as its very tenets flout explication. To elaborate, the term queer originally meant strange, “eccentric,” or “unconventional” (Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1988) and used to be a common homophobic slur. Regardless, many gay, lesbian, and queer individuals have reclaimed the designation for themselves.

I want to construct ‘queer’ as something other than lesbian, ‘gay,’ or ‘bisexual’; but I can’t say that they aren’t also ‘queer.’ I would like to maintain the integrity of ‘lesbian,’ ‘gay,’ and ‘bisexual’ as concepts that have specific historical, cultural, and personal meanings; but I would also like ‘lesbian,’ ‘gay,’ and ‘bisexual’ culture, history, theory, and politics to have some bearing on the articulation of queerness (Doty, as quoted by Morris, 1998, pp. 275-276).

Thus, claiming queer identity is inherently a political act, contesting normalization and regulating forces of sexuality. “Queer suggests a self-naming that stands outside the dominant cultural codes; queer opposes sex-policing, gender-policing, heteronormativity, and assimilationist politics” (Morris, 1998, p. 276). “Gay identity, then, is not simply a discussion about rights, but also about how identity and power

intersect, how institutions control and legitimate certain discourses” (Tierney & Dilley, 1998, p. 62).

The essence of queer began with the gay rights movement in the 1970s after Stonewall riots, in which police brutally assaulted patrons at a Greenwich gay bar. As a result, gays and lesbians demanded greater recognition of and protection of their civil rights. Through frames of identity politics gay and lesbian organizations predominantly conveyed the overarching message that gays and lesbians are “just like everyone else” (Pinar, 1998). As gays and lesbians began “coming out of the closet,” they wanted to the public to know “We’re queer and we’re here,” seeking acknowledgement of their very presence. As such, the terms *lesbian* and *gay* dominated concerns in the 1980s for political and social recognition (Tierney & Dilley, 1998).

Queer theorists, however, subvert both traditional deviant and assimilationist models in dominant discourses. For instance, queer theorists re-present themselves in opposition to *homosexual*- terminology prevalent in medical discourses and *lesbian* and *gay*- terms considered assimilationist by “queers.” “Queer,” on the contrary seeks to assert a collective voice & power. Radical gay and lesbian organizations in the 1980s, such as Act Up and Lesbian Avengers, sought to garner public attention and promote critical political agenda through frequently outrageous, staged events (Pinar, 1998). In its attempts for recognition, Mendelsohn suggests that the gay lifestyle has gone too mainstream and “straight” (Pinar, 1998). “The gay culture today is suffering from a classic assimilationist ailment: You can’t take away what was most difficult about being gay without losing what made gay culture interesting in the first place” (as quoted by

Pinar, 1998, p. 5). Likewise resisting the falsehoods of assimilationist perspectives, Stephen Murray contends that structures of heterosexism differently shape experiences of queer individuals from heterosexuals. “Those of us who came of age estranged (sexually or otherwise) from the heterosexist culture do in fact experience the world differently from those who (especially from a gender point of view) easily fit into it” (Pinar, 1998, p. 5).

Additionally, queer theorists contest impositions of artificial boundaries of sexuality, traditionally conceived as the dualism heterosexual/ homosexual on several counts. For one, they assert that sexuality is mediated through specific historical and cultural contexts. Sears (1999) acknowledges the powerful interaction of biology and environment:

Although sexual identity is constructed within a cultural context, the predisposition for sexual behavior is biologically based... Sexual identity is constructed from cultural materials; sexual orientation is conditioned on biological factors. The degree to which this predisposition is conditioned on (homo)sexual behavior is realized, in fact, a measure of social coercion and personal resolve (p.7).

As Sears poignantly observes, those with nonheterosexual predispositions must engage in ongoing negotiation of heteronormative and heterosexist structures, attitudes, and behaviors.

Secondly, queer theorists affirm sexuality as in a constant state of flux: fluid, dynamic, and ever changing. In his seminal study on homosexuality, Alfred Kinsey

(1948) especially noted the elusive and variable nature of sexuality and sexual behaviors. For instance, he noted that some men might engage in anonymous sex with another man, they may self-identify as heterosexual and maintain primary relationship(s) with women/ a woman. Although the study has aroused immense controversy, Kinsey posited ten percent of the population as strictly homosexual with significant portions of the population between the homosexual/heterosexual poles.

This extended discussion of identities- personal, social, and discursively defined- is important in regards to how sexual minority and transgender characters are represented in young adult literature. We see how these specific identities have been constructed by many as unintelligible and indeed perverse. In this way inclusion of such identities in young adult fiction may be tantamount to ideological indoctrination of the so-called “homosexual agenda” or it indeed may be subversive, challenging ongoing discourses of “normal” gendered and sexual behaviors and identities.

### **Constructions of Childhood**

In the previous section, I examined the culturally regulated identities, particularly in regards to sexual and gender identity, given that ‘identity’ arguably remains one of the most ubiquitous elements of young adult literature (Cart, 2001, 2004). The notion of identity foregrounds common assumptions we hold about ourselves as unitary and unified beings, separate from other likewise (adult) beings. In the modern era, however, children have occupied a special quasi status separate from adults. Their ‘identities’ have been subjugated to adult authority and power. That is to say that young people have not been able to define, create, or determine their identities, but rather, they have primarily been

filtered through the adult lens. In this section, I explore dominant conceptualizations of children and childhood as they have changed over time, particularly highlighting and problematizing the modernist developmental model infused throughout U.S. history. It is this model that continues to bolster censor assertions of age appropriateness related to GBLTQ characters and themes in children's and young adult literature (Karolides, 2002).

### ***Evolving constructions of children and childhood***

Prior to industrialization and ensuing modernization, children maintained a highly ambiguous identity. Childhood lacked the nostalgic representations commonly attributed to it by contemporary adults; rather, childhood was to be endured, not enjoyed (Tucker, 1974). Although younger people were relegated to the bottom of the social stratum, they were not segregated from the adult world as is common today. "Certainly there was no separate world of childhood. Children shared the same games with adults, the same toys, the same fairy stories. They lived their lives together, never apart" (Plumb, 1971, p. 7). This conception of children as "miniature adults" was related to the economic function children provided the family: they were additional bodies to work on the farm and in cottage industries. Moreover, their labor served as compensation for expenses incurred in their upbringing (Silin, 1995).

Additionally, the Puritans constructed very specific conceptualizations of children based on their strict religious beliefs. Not only were children conceived as miniature adults, but also innately sinful and savage. Ministers encouraged the frequent use of harsh discipline to maintain conformity to strict moral codes of behavior, lest the Devil take the children. Thus, discipline and punishment were exacted as coercive

forces for self-control, molding children into adult standards of righteousness (Illick, 2002).

However, with the advent of industrialization, conceptions of childhood began to drastically change. For example, Rousseau believed in the innate goodness of children and that children should be isolated from worldly corruptions for as long as possible (Braun & Edwards, 1972). “[A child] should not be treated as an irrational animal, nor as a man; but simply as a child; he should be made sensible of his weakness, but not abandoned to suffer by it” (Rousseau, as quoted by Braun & Edwards, 1972, p. 41). For the first time in history, the “child” became an entity unto him/herself (Silin, 1995).

With industrialization came increasing immigration and urbanization with poor people and immigrants converging in new urban slums (Burman, 1994). Like Rousseau, Swiss educationalist Pestalozzi was gravely troubled by the effects of industrialization on children (Weems, 1999). He also believed that children were innately good and the gentle mother, centered in the home, nurtured that goodness. Industrialization, however, inappropriately moved the family out of the home and into the public realm, which served to corrupt children. As a result, he advocated elementary education as settings modeled after the “home”- warm, comforting, safe and early elementary teachers as surrogate mothers- gentle, kind, and morally righteous (Weems, 1999). In this fashion, “childhood” came to be constructed as an insular stage in life development requiring special protection from caring adults.

### *Childhood studies in the modern era*

During the mid- to late nineteenth century, a new field- psychology- arose to understand and study the human condition. Concerned about the spread of social contaminants- disease and moral decay, the upper class sought ways to contain and alleviate such burdens. "...[T]he fact that poorer sections of the population were reproducing at a faster rate than the educated middle classes provoked fears of contamination and upheaval" (Burman, 1994, p. 13). Darwin's biological theories related to genetic attributes and environmental influences quickly heralded him as one of society's foremost thinkers. He suggested ways in which society could study, and *know* children and individuals, so that institutions could in turn be created to mold the masses appropriately. Thus, the beginnings of psychology cannot be disconnected from the social movements of the Victorian era (Charlesworth, 1994).

Although Darwin's 'Biographical study of an infant' provided the first research in child study (Burman, 1994; Charlesworth, 1994), G. Stanley Hall provided the strongest direction early in the child study movement (White, 1994). He emphasized methods of direct observation and questionnaire surveys to better understand how best to structure educational environments for proper development of children. He sought to examine the "inborn predispositions of childhood" (White, 1994, p. 113), such as early vocalization patterns, common characteristics, and humor and play. "Such questionnaires generally tried to trace the movement of the developing child from the spontaneous to the voluntary, from instinct to reason, and from simple sociality to the development of scientific and ethical reasoning" (p. 114). Thus, Hall's newly designed quantitative

studies initiated the long-standing precedence and predilection in developmental psychology for quantifiable, empirically measurable research.

Possibly more than any other psychologist or educational theorist, Jean Piaget helped solidify modern constructions of children and childhood through his developmental stages of cognitive development (Beilin, 1994; Burman, 1994). “He is credited with the recognition that children’s thinking is qualitatively different from that of adults, that different ways of thinking predominate at different ages and that these correspond with progressively more adequate ways of organising knowledge” (Burman, 1994, p. 152). Thus, according to Piaget, children progress through intellectual stages, and cannot, nor should not, be rushed prematurely (Athey & Rubadeau, 1970). Children were no longer miniature adults; no longer were they innately good and morally pure; rather, children came to be “incomplete beings” (Silin, 1995), progressing from lesser-developed stages to more highly developed stages of cognitive reasoning.

As a result, Piaget’s theories dominated progressive reform movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Burman, 1994). His developmental theories prompted extensive responses about educational readiness, child-centeredness, and developmentally appropriate practices that came to dominate educational language about children (Burman, 1994). Partly, as a result of Piagetian theories of childhood and learning, adults in recent decades have conceptualized childhood as a unique stage in life development, in which children’s autonomy needs to be encouraged in secure, regulated environments.. In this way, “the child became an object of respect, a special creature with a different nature and different needs, which required separation and protection from the adult world”

(Plumb, 1971, p. 9). Moreover, the emerging disciplines and discourses around childhood reified these images of children and childhood, which persist unto today.

*Critique of myth of “innocence”*

Prevailing constructions of children as innocent and needy (Cannella, 2001; Silin, 1995) pervade educational institutions, curricula, and both children’s and young adult literature. “Debates about sexuality-related education in elementary schools tend to hinge on the problem of children’s vulnerability, their need for protection. Sexuality, and homosexuality, in particular, is generally seen to be unsafe content for young children’s classrooms” (Sears, 1999, p. 21). He adds, “Childhood innocence is a veneer that we as adults impress onto children, enabling us to deny desire comfortably and to silence sexuality” (p. 9). Thus for Sears and other queer theorists in educational institutions, it is the adults who demonstrate distress over issues of sexuality, especially in children, not the children themselves.

Accordant with the developmental model infused throughout early elementary education, many educators argue that children are not developmentally “ready” to handle complex discussions of sexuality. As a result, issues of sexuality are relegated to the “adult world,” the world of the knowledgeable and experienced. Again, implicit in this conception of the knowledgeable/ignorant and autonomous/ needy dichotomies is the correlation of power with knowledge (Cannella, 2001; Sawicki, 1991; Silin, 1995). By restricting and regulating the knowledge children are able to handle adults essentially retain positions of power over younger persons (Cannella, 2001).

Bickmore (1999) argues that inclusion of sexuality in curricula is imperative primarily because it is already present in children's lives. "Given the amount of (mis)information about gender relations and sexuality that flows freely these days in public spaces, media, and peer groups, elementary educators could not prevent children from acquiring sexual information even if we wanted to do so" (p. 15). Multiple studies on violence associated with violations of gender boundaries also demonstrate the importance of integrating issues of sexuality in the classroom. For example, Garvey (1984) documented the practice of teasing other children by mislabeling gender as frequent behavior among three and four year olds. Elementary school students enforce strict regulation of narrow gender through homophobic harassment and name-calling (Renolds, 2000; Rofes, 1995. By middle school, girls and boys have learned the synonymy of their gender identity with heterosexual behavior via seeking or having boyfriend/ girlfriends (Harris and Bliss, 1997; Mac an Ghail, 1994; Renolds, 2003). Obviously then, children and young adults have learned the powerful norms governing gender and sexual identity and in turn impose serious ramifications on those who defy and deviate from those norms.

### **Historical Developments in Children's Literature**

"The assumption that children are too immature and impressionable for certain information, and that adults can and should keep such information away from them, has deep historical roots" (Bickmore, 1999, p.17). Constructions of childhood have accordingly influenced literature published for children and young adults. As a result, the history of children's literature largely mimics historical conceptualizations of young

people. In fact, Lesesne (2004) describes three general phases of children's literature: 1) books to preach, 2) books to teach, and 3) books to reach (or to entertain). These phases closely correspond to changing cultural attitudes towards children and childhood. First, adults considered children innately sinful, needing moral guidance to avoid Satan's temptations; then they considered children incomplete adults, needing training to enter the adult world, and most recently adults considered children innocent beings needing protection from the harshness of the adult world (Lesesne, 2004). Although temporally these phases overlap and the boundaries between them do blur, I will discuss them as they relate to the historical developments in children's literature discussed in the following sections.

### *Children's literature during the 15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries*

Although much of children's literature can be traced back to oral tales transmitted through the centuries, the origin of children's literature per se corresponds with the invention of movable type by Gutenberg in the 1450s and especially the invention of the printing press by William Caxton in 1476 (Avery, 1994; Norton, 2003). The first "books," called hornbooks were actually inscribed onto wooden paddles, covered with a translucent sheet of animal horn, and fastened with brass etchings. In very concise form, the hornbooks included the alphabet, an introduction to syllabary (*ab, eb, ib, ob, ub*), an invocation to the Trinity, and the Lord's Prayer (Arbuthnot, 1964). Thus, these hornbooks provided the essential basics of both reading and of preaching (Avery, 1994).

With the invention of the printing press, Caxton opened a printing business in 1476. Although he occasionally published books for children, he did not gear them

towards children's interests, but rather their presumed needs- books meant to teach and improve their habits of hygiene and deportment. However, three books not intended for young audiences are now considered classics in children's literature: *Reynart the fox*, *Aesop's Fables*, and *Morte d' Arthur* (Norton, 2003; Thwaite, 1963). In the same way that preindustrialized societies did not separate children from adult company and work, the same literature was frequently shared and enjoyed by adults and children alike.

Given the Puritans' propensity for self-control, harsh discipline, and strong religious training, their schools and literature reflected these same values. Children's "literature" exhibited powerful themes of moral upbringing and strong retribution upon those who sin. For example, John Cotton wrote a book entitled *Spiritual Milk for Boston Babes in Either England, Drawn from the Breasts of Both Testaments for their Souls' Nourishment* and James Janeway wrote a fictitious book about children who lived saintly lives, but who died at an early age: *A Token for Children Being an Exact Account of the Conversion, Holy and Exemplary Lives, and Joyful Deaths of Several Young Children* (Avery, 1994; Norton, 2003; Thwaite, 1963).

Two of the most influential books of the time were the ubiquitous *New England Primer* and John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. After its publication around 1690 *The New England Primer* dominated educational curricula for nearly one hundred forty years connecting first religious and then increasingly patriotic themes with the alphabet: "A: In Adam's Fall We Sinned All. B: Thy Life to Mend This Book Attend...F: The Idle Fool is whipt at school" (Avery, 1994; Thwaite, 1963). John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, however, enchanted children with its engaging story, although like many of

Caxton's publications, it was not intended for younger audiences either. Nevertheless, all of these texts demonstrated the constructions by early settlers of children as young heathens, necessitating education to properly mold their lives.

The mid-eighteenth century heralded in a new era for children and children's literature. While expanding middle classes bolstered expanding publishing markets, up until the 1740s no substantial literature targeted especially to children existed- at least not until John Newbery (1713-1767) began doing so (Thwaite, 1963). Newbery published *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* in 1744, the first book for the entertainment, rather than instruction, of children. "Between 1744 and his death in 1767, John Newbery established the young reader's right to have books published regularly- books which are ancestors of the story books of everyday life enjoyed today" (Thwaite, 1963, p. 49). He reciprocally stimulated and catered to children's imagination with the whimsical, reinscribing the relatively radical idea that children have the right to pleasure, humor, and fun. In this way, Newbery pioneered children's literature that sought neither to explicitly preach nor to teach, but to reach children, foster their imagination, and encourage a sense of play.

### *Children's literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century*

In the early part of the nineteenth century, concerns for securing the future of the new republic dominated both political and social arenas. Concern for the future directed adult attention then to children who would inherit this new republic, especially focusing on fashioning of children's moral character (MacLeod, 1994). The Puritan mentality of children as innately deprived had mostly subsided, giving way to a more lenient perspective of children, significantly influenced by Lockian and Roussean perspectives.

Locke described children as *tabula rasas*, upon which adults could etch lessons of proper morality and shape them accordingly. As such, proper education and training became critical to the molding of children's personality and consciences. Moreover, given that women and mothers principally assumed the responsibility of this training of the republic's future, its children, mothers became then responsible for the moral character of the republic itself (Hays, 1998; Kerber, 1980).

As a result of these social and political concerns, the literature of the first half of the nineteenth century emphasized the rationality of children and their ability to discern right from wrong. As such, books e.g., *Self-Willed Susie*, emphasized characters' problem solving and moral reasoning (MacLeod, 1994). The most influential author of the time, Maria Edgeworth, wrote stories of children with morally transparent nomenclatures, like Simple Susan, "the farmer's daughter whose virtue and simplicity triumph over the wiles of a scheming lawyer [and] Lazy Lawrence, who progresses from shiftlessness to crime" (Avery, 1994, p. 67). Through the lessons learned of morality and of the natural world in Edgeworth's stories, it was hoped that children would internalize these values and create a moral self-sufficiency to sustain them despite the social and political uncertainty of a young nation in flux (MacLeod, 1994).

While the literature of the first half of the nineteenth century emphasized a child's rationality, children's literature of the latter half gave rise to romantic conceptions of children and childhood. The construction of children as innocent and helpless, MacLeod (1994) argues, evolved from the social unrest of the Civil War period. As concern increased over the slums and raucous behavior of immigrant children (Takaki, 1993),

authors began to use growing sympathetic attitudes towards children to enact legislation on their behalf. “Sentiment in children’s literature was borne in on a wave of social concern for the children of the urban poor” (MacLeod, 1994, p. 146). If the urban children ran free without adult supervision, the fault lay with the current social system that allowed the corruption of these children. Similar to the arguments for kindergartens, and public playgrounds (Takaki, 1993; Spring, 1990), children’s literature was therefore seen as a vehicle to prick society’s conscience, incite legislation on behalf of needy children, and likewise curtail the perceived corruption of the nation state from swelling immigrant slums (MacLeod, 1994).

In regards to child training, books of this time period preached in fact to two audiences- children and the adults (read women) whose inculcation of proper values resulted in happy endings and moral failings of pride, ambition, and disobedience provoked detrimental consequences. Nevertheless, the books also encouraged adults to take an even-handed approach to child rearing and disciplining, emphasizing a child’s rationality and ability to learn from experience. When children made mistakes, adults were to adopt a nurturing stance, conversing upon their failings, and how they could make it right (MacLeod, 1994).

Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* epitomizes the varied influences of the nineteenth century, including this didactic training, concern for the poor and socially disadvantaged, and early, romanticized approaches to child-rearing. Through the voice of Marmee, “the model rational parent,” Alcott presents both a straightforward lesson, conveying to other mothers how best to rear children, by letting them stray for awhile and

as prodigal children return on their own, now more open to the values bestowed unto them. “I wanted you to see how the comfort of all depends on each doing her share faithfully...” (cited in MacLeod, 1994, p. 150). Not only does Alcott advocate a more tolerant approach to child-rearing, she, like many authors of her day, also sought to incite compassion for the poor, especially through the example of eternally wholesome Beth, who leads by example by remembering the poor family of nine in town, gives up some of her Christmas banquet to share with others, and encourages her sisters to do the same (Alcott, 1915). Because of the convergence of multiple influences of the nineteenth century, *Little Women* serves as a turning point in children’s literature from the highly rational child of Edgeworth’s time to the highly romanticized literature at the end of the century.

While Marmee in *Little Women* believed in experience as children’s natural teacher, she still unequivocally conveyed messages of adult (foremost male here) authority, by which young people learned to shape their behavior and manners. However, by the end of the century, this adult/child hierarchy had in many ways been inverted. More profoundly influenced by Rousseau, literature, such as *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (1903) and *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), posited childhood as a time of innocence and children as purer beings than adults. Both aged eleven at the beginning of the series that would take them into adulthood, as preadolescents, Anne and Rebecca demonstrated their finest, most capricious characteristics: extraordinary vocabularies, youthful exuberance, strong-mindedness, and ubiquitous charm. But as both young women

increase in age so do their womanly responsibilities, dampening those characteristics allowed in children, but not in young ladies.

Both the *Rebecca* and *Anne* series exemplified changing attitudes culturally toward children and childhood. Childhood was now a time to be protected from the corrupting influences of adult life, and through such protection, children could improve the lot of society itself.

Children's innocence, emotionality, and imagination became qualities to be preserved rather than overcome; a child's sojourn in childhood was to be protected, not hastened. By implication, romantic literature made childhood the high point of life. The road to maturity was not an upward progress, but a descent (MacLeod, 1994, p. 156).

In this way, the very understanding of childhood and children had never undergone such a dramatic transformation in the course of one century. Amazingly, the "children of children's fiction, rational, sober, and imperfect at the beginning of the century had become innocent, charming, and perfect [at the end of the century]" (p. 143). Socially driven concerns about stability of the republic, that prompted the gravity of children's literature in the early 1800s, had turned to concerns over children's welfare, essentializing and reveling in the natural and innocent state of childhood.

### *Children's literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century*

With increasing industrialization, the progressive reform movement edified the new cult of the child. As such, children's literature fully came into its own with publishing of picture books by Walter Crane, Kate Greenaway, and Randolph Caldecott (Norton, 2003). "Children were no longer supposed to be 'young persons' whose taste would be much the same whether they were five or fifteen. So long as they pleased children, artists were free..." (Laws, as quoted by Norton, 2003, p. 53). All three artists created fanciful settings with carefree characters with whom children could imagine dancing, running, and playing. But again the right to entertain and to be entertained was a relatively new construction for children altogether.

Themes and story lines in modern children's literature continued to reflect changing cultural attitudes, especially related to children. For instance in the Victorian era, children's literature stressed values of hard work, inner rectitude, and sharply defined gender roles (Norton, 2003). After recovering from the Great Depression, the United States entered a renewed state of optimism, similarly depicted in children's literature of the time. Motifs of happy and secure familial relationships, patriotism, and strong religious values frequently recur through these books. But the upheaval of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, change these standard storylines in children's literature. At the same time researchers observed "an erosion of adult authority," (p.68), picture books and young adult novels began to include more diverse characters, different family formations, and increasing number of female protagonists. Comparing children's literature of the 1930s with the early 1960s, Norton (2003) observes:

Many books still portray strong family ties and stress the importance of personal responsibility and human dignity, but the happy, stable unit of earlier literature is often replaced by a family in turmoil as it adjusts to a new culture, faces the prospects of surviving without one or both parents, handles the disruption resulting from divorce, or deals with an extended family, exemplified by grandparents or a foster home. Later literature also suggests that many acceptable family units do not conform to the traditional American model (p. 68).

Thus, shifts in social mores and attitudes affected changes in children's and young adult literature in terms of what was considered acceptable and appropriate for youth of differing ages. The social changes that especially resulted in the rise of young adult fiction are explored in the following section.

### ***Rise of contemporary young adult fiction***

Just as the publication of children's literature has followed changing social patterns and attitudes toward childhood itself, so too has the subgenre of young adult fiction (MacLeod, 1994). Literature for the young adult (YAL) has likewise developed in correspondence to shifting social conceptions of adolescence as a distinct period of development and transition from childhood to adulthood (Cart, 2004). Several important factors assisted in the lengthening of this transitional period: compulsory education and child labor laws; shifting economic forces from a primarily agrarian to industrial society, and the Great Depression with the commensurate eradication of a significant proportion of the workforce. These factors in fact served to keep young people in school longer,

rather than leaving school to assist with family responsibilities and contribute to household income (MacLeod, 1994). Then the economic upturn of WWII increased the incomes of middle class families and allowed for leisure time and money for teenagers to spend as they pleased. Marketing firms first observed this new phenomenon in the 1940s and began seriously marketing to teenagers as a distinct and separate group (Cart, 2004).

Although publishing companies likewise noticed the increasing market and began publishing novels targeted to teens in the 1940s and 1950s, the books remained formulaic genre fiction that emphasized white, homogenous families with only minor crises. Adolescent rebellion was mild; dates to the prom or getting on the football team provided the greatest angst and worry for these white, middle-class protagonists (MacLeod, 1994). Moreover, the books promoted 'proper' forms of (white, heterosexual) femininity via romance and marriage and masculinity through competition and sport. "Was every teenager white? Did every teenager in American really live in a wholesome small town in a rambling, tree-shaded, two-story house surrounded by a picket fence? Did every teenager really have worries no larger than getting a date to the junior prom or making the team?" Cart (2004, p. 204) questioned, because the publishing companies made it appear so. It wouldn't be until the 1970s and 1980s that greater inclusiveness and diversity infiltrated children's and young adult fiction.

Then, the multiple social movements and cultural unrest of the 1960s and 1970s brought about a revolution in YA fiction in two major ways. First, the Civil Rights Movement and women's movement exposed stereotypical representations of women and people of color in both picture and chapter books. MacLeod (1994) underscored the new

attention focused on children's and YA literature, previously isolated culturally from other public concerns: "Every group working for social and political change suddenly discovered what the nineteenth century had so often proclaimed: that children's reading is a potentially powerful influence on society" (p. 182). Recognizing the potential influences of these books on their readers, such groups sought rounder, more fully developed characters in these books as models of enhanced possibility for their readers (MacLeod, 1994). Second, public scandals related to Watergate, Kent State, and the Vietnam War also considerably disillusioned the younger generation of the time period, provoking disdain for and challenges to both governmental and parental authority. To this new generation, 'Father' no longer knew best. MacLeod attributes the earliest signal of the break-up of the homogeneity of earlier family stories with, interestingly enough, Fitzhough's (1964) *Harriet the Spy*. After the conflict around Harriet's journal and her classmates comes to light, the former housekeeper and nanny Ole Golly tells Harriet that honesty needs to be tempered with compassion, and that sometimes to maintain important relationships, you need to lie. MacLeod (1994) contends that "letting a child, an unambiguous, preadolescent eleven-year-old in on the untidy realities of the adult world with no moral judgment attached" (p. 199) blurs the boundaries of adult/ child and fractures the traditional hierarchy of parental authority, always clearly delineated hitherto.

This is then exacerbated in the literature of the late 1960's and 1970's. Unlike earlier fiction in which young adults always knew they could turn to their compassionate, accessible parents in times of need, or rely on the values they learned growing up, adult characters in the YA fiction of this time period were completely absent or so inextricably

flawed that teen protagonists struggled on their own for the first time in the history of YAL (Lesesne, 2004). In the mid-sixties, the most reliable adult in Harriet's life, Ole Golly, was leaving to get married and move on with her life, but in the end, Harriet could still turn to her in trouble. Regardless, Harriet is still a pre-teen; her adolescent compatriots later found in the same decade could find no such support.

Thus, into this social milieu came such authors as S.E.Hinton, a teen herself at the time, Robert Cormier, Paul Zindel, Judy Blume, John Donovan, and others that indeed transformed the face of YA fiction. S.E. Hinton wrote, "The world is changing, yet the authors of books for teen-agers are still 15 years behind the times. In the fiction they write, romance is still the most popular theme, with horse-and-the-girl-who-loved-it coming in a close second. Nowhere is the drive-in social jungle mentioned. In short, where is the reality?" (Cart, 2004, p. 205). That is what they wrote with a new ferocity. Breaking multiple taboos, Hinton wrote about the different school cliques, Zindel wrote about teen sex, Blume about masturbation and menstruation, Cormier about power, Donovan about homosexuality (Cart, 2004).

Children's and YA literature experts, especially librarians, balked at the sudden influx of complex, controversial issues arising in the literature. Is it really appropriate for youth to be reading of such things, they wondered?

Yet when you say you want to write about a little boy whose mother committed suicide, people sometimes say: but should children know about these things? Is a child that age ready for that kind of experience? But no one asks a child in a real-life situation- are you ready for your mother to

commit suicide, for your parents to get divorced? These things just happened, and the child, the adolescent, adjusts, copes because there is no alternative (Klein, 1977).

Klein reiterates Hinton asserting the need for realism in YA literature of the late 1960s and 1970s, refuting those who would continue to whitewash YA fiction because some aspects of life are too harsh for young people to confront. Furthermore, Klein counters the assumption that controversial aspects of living, especially issues of sexuality, didn't exist prior to this period, despite the newness of inclusion in the literature.

In fact, for decades, even centuries, people have been getting divorced, men and women have been realizing that heterosexuality may not be suitable for them, little children and babies have been lying in their cribs exploring their bodies, girls have been getting periods, boys have been having wet dreams... Today we dare to write about them, though not as openly or as frequently as I would like, but that doesn't mean that before the 1970s children lived in some age of divine innocence. Sexuality begins at birth, not with the first period or the first love affair... (Klein, 1977, p.82).

In this way, Klein asserts both the appropriateness of writing about perceived controversial issues in YA literature and the normalcy of sexuality itself. Furthermore, she disavows the myth of innocence, in the guise of asexuality, as some special state of childhood, but that sexuality and humanity are fully intertwined from the earliest beginnings of one's life.

Klein's discussion of fiction portraying messy, real-life situations illustrates a new genre of young adult literature that came of age with the fiction itself- that of 'new realism' (MacLeod, 1994; Nilsen & Donelsen, 2001). The designation of 'new' particularly distinguishes itself from the realism of the 1930s and 1940s that continued to espouse hope and optimism despite acknowledgement of some external difficulties and good always overcame the bad. New realism involves characters and conflicts embroiled in issues of drug abuse, sex and teen pregnancy, divorce, suicide, mental illness- and sometimes good did not in fact triumph over evil. Given the significant thematic differences of new realism, the characterization and setting differ substantially from earlier fiction. Rather than coming from secure, middle-class families, characters were mostly of low socio-economic status. Their homes and surrounding are frequently set in urban neighborhoods, rife with gangs, drug and alcohol abuse, violence, and death, unlike earlier fiction nearly always set in quiet, rural America (Nilsen & Donelsen, 2001). As appropriate to this harsh lifestyle, authors often infuse profanity and colloquial language into dialogue, again to make the characters sound more realistic, more authentic, rather than idealized by adult construction.

Although the phrases 'problem novel' and 'new realism' are often used synonymously, the problem novels of the 1970s comprised a new form of formulaic fiction that foregrounded contemporary social ills at the expense of literary merit (Lesesne, 2004; Nilsen & Donelson, 2001; Norton, 2003). Authors of problem novels overemphasized the 'problem,' rather than conflict or characterization. The novels generally lacked any substantial development of literary elements- narration or dialogue,

characterization or point of view that characterize powerful literature, young adult or otherwise (Norton, 2003).

After the innovation of contemporary realistic fiction of the 1970s, the 1980s saw literary setbacks to the publishing field of young adult literature from two major arenas. First, publishing companies reverted to publishing for girls romantic books series, epitomized by the series *Sweet Valley High*. Despite the call in the 1970s for spunky, more fully developed female protagonists, characterization harkened back to the romantic period of early twentieth century, emphasizing character traits of chastity, beauty, and loyalty (Lesesne, 2004). The books conveyed traditional messages of ‘proper femininity’ of social conformity and attention to fashion to be popular and secure a boyfriend. However, books for boys, also read by girls, fared better with the popular adventure stories by Gary Paulsen and sports novels by Chris Cutcher, promoting values of resourcefulness and assertiveness (Lesesne, 2004).

The other major setback for young adult literature in the 1980s derived from new external pressure from concerned citizen groups who sought to limit and ban books with controversial content.

With innovation in young adult literature stymied from inside and outside the publishing field, YAL experts all but sounded the death knell in the early 1990s (Cart, 2004; Lesesne, 2004). Previously bookstores shelved YA fiction in the children’s book department, except that teens would not search for books in that section. Young adults tended towards adult fiction, preferring Danielle Steele and Stephen King instead (Lesesne, 2004). Also, labels for YAL were also misleading because the Young Adult

Library Services Association identified young adults as persons aged twelve to 18, but the books were principally geared towards eleven-to-thirteen-year-olds (Cart, 2004).

But then the decline of publishing for young adults halted abruptly, reinvigorated with fresh vibrancy. Declining teen populations reversed their downward trend as they became the fastest growing age demographic until 2011. Booksellers and librarians expanded the audience for young adults, highlighting books for ‘younger’ young adults and ‘older’ young adults. It is notable that the Newbery Medal, historically the most prestigious award for young adult literature is designated by the American Library Association (ALA) as the “most distinguished contribution to American literature for *children*” (ALA, 2007, emphasis added). Aware of the significance of the label, the ALA inaugurated a new young adult literary award in 2000, the Michael L. Printz Award, to recognize outstanding literary works for young adults. The change in labeling of young adult texts allowed increased freedom for YAL authors to address ‘edgier,’ more mature topics in stylistically more sophisticated ways as well. Strong, spunky female protagonists dominated the literature, challenging the status quo, daring to be fully embodied characters (Lesesne, 2004). Young adult literature historians, such as Michael Cart view the 1990s as “one of the most significant and breathtakingly dramatic decades in the history of young adult literature” (Lesesne, 2004, p.218). Literarily, young adult literature had finally arrived.

### *Censorship*

Censoring books considered inappropriate for children to read derives specifically from modernist ideas of childhood. For instance in the medieval period, children after the age of seven lived in the same public sphere as adults. That meant that what adults heard, said, and saw, so too did the children- including what would today be considered vulgar, profane, brutal, or violent (MacLeod, 1994). But beginning in the early part of the seventeenth century, adults increasingly saw childhood as a distinct period from adulthood, facilitated by lengthening intervals of education. As a result, two primary assumptions came to undergird modernist conceptions of childhood. First, children need to be separated, protected from realities of adult life until properly prepared. Second, adults must undertake responsibility of protecting, nurturing, training children (MacLeod, 1994). Saavedra and Demas (2002), however, remind that while MacLeod uses the more general term ‘adults,’ society in fact expected *women* to undertake this role, thus inextricably intertwining modernist conceptions of childhood *and* motherhood. In this way, middle-class society (read men) came to regulate the lives of women and children for the implicit ‘good of the child’ (MacLeod, 1994). Moreover, proper preparation for adulthood in fact meant restriction to knowledge of adult activity and behavior until a time of maturity, which included curtailed access to books. (Anderson, 2005).

Although censorship of literature for young people is grounded in modernist assumptions, the rationale for censorship at all levels has deep historic roots. Nilsen & Donelson (2001) suggest that Plato initiated the first instance of censorship in 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., calling for the ban of plays and poetry, arguing that fiction and drama confused

young people by blurring the lines between reality and fantasy. Many other political and religious rulers through the centuries also demanded the burning and/or banning of books with which they disagreed, including Emperor Chi Huang Ti who burned Confucius' *Analects* in 211 B.C.E., Julius Caesar who burned much of the library in Alexandria, and the Catholic Church which published in 1555 the Catholic Index of Forbidden Works. (Nilsen & Donelson, 2001). Then in 1615, Thomas Hobbes expounded the political reasoning for censorship on behalf of the state. Commensurate with the time period, he argued that people were inherently selfish and prone to violence. As part of its ability to maintain order, the state had the explicit obligation to ban any material for the good of the state (Nilsen & Donelson, 2001).

In the early part of this country's history, censorship existed more in the form of absence. In Puritan America, dissent was simply not tolerated. Roger Williams, who argued for a separation of church and state, was tried by the general court and found "guilty of disseminating 'newe and dangerous opinions' and ordered [him to be] banished"" (he moved to territory now known as Rhode Island) (cited in Karolides, 2002, p. xiii). Furthermore, children's literature of seventeenth and eighteenth century America supported this idea by providing children books that would preach God's will and teach proper moral values. As a result, censorship for young people in the U.S. arose in the mid-to-late 1800s with the production of dime and domestic novels. As aforementioned, at that time authors of established children's literature used their novels to provoke society's conscience on behalf of children and the state (MacLeod, 1994). However, dime novels were pocket-size, fast-paced adventure stories that sold between five and twenty-

five cents in the late 1800s, which provided escapist literature of frontier life (Anderson, 2004). These books' lack of moral persuasion, however, elicited considerable controversy and contempt by citizen groups anxious about the expansion of urbanization of immigrants and the increase of social corruption.

For this very reason, Anthony Comstock instigated one of the most extensive campaigns to censor young adult literature, purportedly on behalf of the nation's children (Beisel, 1997; Nilsen & Donelson, 2001). Spearheading a powerful anti-vice association, Comstock sought to protect children from the "disastrous" effects of obscene literature. He contended that obscenity in children's literature led to "laziness, immorality, lustfulness, criminality, and sometimes death among youth" (Beisel, 1997, p. 53). Furthermore, in the third annual report to the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, Comstock asserted that obscene literature provoked corruption in school and in homes by "exciting the imagination...and passions of the youth into whose hands they may come" (cited in Beisel, 1997, p. 53).

During the nineteenth century, well into the twentieth century, overt censorship, however, was nonexistent. The primary organizations and personnel in charge of publishing and distributing children's literature, librarians, children's literature editors and reviewers, were a homogenous group. They did not purchase or promote books that they deemed inappropriate for young children. As such, they served as significant gatekeepers and regulators of children's literature, determining what was 'good' for children to read (Simmons, 2000). As some researchers have noted, adults have always controlled access to children's literature, mediating what is accessible for children to

even read (Anderson, 2004; MacLeod, 1994; Simmons, 2000). “Books that were bought were those the grown-ups thought the child *should* read; later, toward the end of the nineteenth century, that sentence would become ‘what the grown-ups thought the child *liked* to read” (Anderson, 2004, p. 3). In this romanticized era, domestic stories dominated the literature, conveying messages of industriousness, generosity, and character, providing little fuel for would-be censors until late twentieth century.

As suggested, blatant censorship of children’s literature in the twentieth century remained largely absent. Novels that drew the most attention for censorship challenges included, however, classics, such as J.D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*, and Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five*. To this day, *Of Mice and Men* ranks as sixth highest of the 100 most challenged books (ALA, 2007). However, beginning in the mid 1960s, cultural shifts in the educational system and in young adult literature increasingly drew public attention to the literature young people read in and out of school, and likewise increasingly drew censor’s ire about the ‘appropriateness’ of those reading materials.

First, during the 1970s and 1980s progressive education dominated curricular development and educational restructuring. Educational innovations such as open classrooms, whole language movements, multicultural education, and revamping of middle grades instruction all underscored personal relevance and child-centered education (Spring, 1990). For example, many school districts reorganized junior highs, formerly modeled after content-driven secondary schools, into middle schools, applying some elementary educational constructs of child-centered and holistic, thematic education

to pre-adolescent education. Given the changing focus of curriculum, the choice of materials correspondingly shifted also, replacing “golden oldie” texts such as, *Treasure Island* and *Ivanhoe* to more contemporary novels, realistic young adult literature (Simmons, 2000).

Next, riding the wave of the civil rights movement, many critical educators demanded educational reform via inclusive, pluralistic multicultural curriculum (McLaren, 1998; Powell, 1999). Emphasizing ongoing demographic shifts in the nation and in the schools, critical educators demanded that the education ethically and responsively present the histories and contributions of African Americans, Latinos, Jews, and Native Americans to U.S. society. Critical educators also called for replacing some of the traditional White Western canon with realistic, relevant novels, especially by nonwhite authors that more accurately represented experiences of minorities. Ironically, this movement instigated censor challenges from both the political left and right. On the one hand, liberals wanted to rid the schools and libraries of any ‘racist’ materials, including classic novels like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *The Adventures of Huck Finn*. On the other hand, conservatives insisted on a return to the ‘basics’ of reading, writing, and arithmetic, grounded in classic (white male) Western canon, challenging books deemed ‘offensive’ or ‘disparaging of family values’ (MacLeod, 1994; Simmons, 2000).

Whilst these educational battles raged, a revolution in young adult literature ensued. Beginning in the late 1960s, coinciding with the publication of S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* (1967), young adult literature authors began introducing contemporary issues and realism into their novels. Prior to this, literature for young adults was, as English

educator Stephen Dunning remarked, “consistently wholesome and insistent didactic” (cited in Simmons, 2000, p. 45). Now, authors felt free to write about death, suicide, divorce, sexuality- all the ‘unsavory’ aspects of life considered inappropriate for young people to know about let alone read about with pleasure (Blume, 1999).

Most recently, books with gay or lesbian content are increasingly coming under fire by censors. Of the 100 most frequently challenged books between 1990-2000, *Daddy’s Roommate* (1990) by Michael Willhoite, a picture book about a child and his two dads, ranked second. *Heather has Two Mommies* just missed the top ten list, ranking the eleventh most challenged book of the decade. Of the 6364 challenges during the years 1990-2000, twenty-five percent were attributed to “sexually explicit” material, twenty-two percent were attributed to “offensive language,” while eight percent of the challenges were directed towards books with homosexual themes or “promoting homosexuality” (ALA, 2007). Regardless, the ALA also reported that of the ten most challenged books of 2004, three titles were challenged for homosexual themes, the highest number in a decade (ALA, 2007). Furthermore, when the former school chancellor of the New York City public school system proposed a multicultural curriculum, *Children of the Rainbow Curriculum*, which included texts with children in gay and lesbian-headed household, immediately a furor broke out claiming that children would be learning about sodomy. Consequently, the curriculum was quickly repealed (Finnessy, 2002).

Corresponding to the increasing challenges based on homosexual content reported to the ALA and People for the American Way (PFAW), in recent months several other protests have provoked retraction of specific episodes of children’s public programming

and calls for bans in public and public school libraries of books by gay authors, with homosexual content, or homosexual characters.<sup>3</sup> For instance, Republican Alabama lawmaker Gerald Allen claimed, “I don't look at it as censorship. I look at it as protecting the hearts and souls and minds of our children” (CBS, 2005). Similarly, Louisiana Representative A.G. Crowe, R-Slidell filed a house bill requesting all public libraries relocate books with homosexual content from children’s book sections and confine them to areas “exclusively for adult access and distribution” (Anderson, E., 2005, p. 1). Rep. Crowe continued, “I’d prefer to get them out of the library. Somebody should be held accountable for allowing this to get into the hands of our children.” Despite the claim, like Allen, that he is “not espousing censorship,” Crowe upholds “there should be a way these types of books should be kept away from children and keep children from picking out these types of books” (Anderson, E., 2005, p. 1). Whilst the public debate around gay rights continues to boil heatedly and the number of books with GBLBQ characters continues to increase, the susceptibility for censorship challenges on this basis is likely to continue to intensify.

### **Sexual Minority Characters in Young Adult Fiction**

Literature with gay and lesbian characters has increased substantially during the twentieth century, beginning with the number of adult titles increasing and then spreading to young adult and children’s literature. Clyde and Lobban (2001) reported only two books explicitly for young people published with gay characters before 1970: *The Chinese Garden* (1962, 1999) by Rosemary Manning and *I’ll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip* (1969) by John Donovan. Although most researchers of young adult

literature highlight Donovan's work as the first to explicitly confront issues of homosexuality, Manning's British novel actually preceded it.

Regardless, the contrast between the two is quite striking. First, Manning's novel is a quintessential boarding school story, a common subgenre of fiction especially among the British. In this context, Manning explores the rampant homoeroticism in an all girls' boarding school during the 1920's. Striking is the equanimity and normalcy with which the topic is treated. For example, the novel opens with the main character Rachel turning sixteen. She is waxing melancholy on her birthday, such that a gift from her lover is even tiresome: "The faithful Bistro (so called from her likeness to the advertisement), who loved me and whose love was a burden..." (Manning, 1962, 1999, p. 11). While the narrator discusses at length Miss Burnett, an intellectually inspiring teacher, the narrator shrugs off the potential extraordinariness of Rachel's love affair. It is precisely that lesbian relationships are understood as commonplace in this boarding school, that little attention is brought to it in the beginning. Moreover, recognizing the effect of introductions to introduce readers to characters, setting, and conflict, in this story, Rachel is certainly not in conflict with her sexuality, anyone else's sexuality, or even with society's standards concerning sexuality (because again in this subset of society, homosexuality as lesbianism, rather than heterosexuality, is normal, commonplace), but rather she demonstrates conflict with the very tediousness and monotony of her life.

While Clyde and Lobban (2001) argue that Manning's (1962) feminist tale *The Chinese Garden* was the first "young adult" novel to explicitly address homosexuality ala lesbianism, most YA literature historians, including Michael Cart (2004) contend that

Donovan's (1969) *I'll Get There; It Better Be Worth the Trip* is the first 'real' young adult novel. In literary style, tone, and characterization Donovan's novel indeed represents the quintessential YA novel: first person narration, quick moving action with short descriptive chapters. Moreover, while Manning's novel treats homosexuality unapologetically, Donovan reproduces cultural assertions that homosexual attraction is just a phase towards mature heterosexual relationships and that homosexual behavior must incur retribution, in that Davy's cherished dog dies, according to Davy because he was "fooling around" with another boy (Cart, 2004; Donovan, 1969).

Despite the slow initial advance of novels with GLBTQ characters and themes, the number of children's and young adult titles has expanded exponentially since the early 1970s, especially in recent years. Up until 1991, 120 titles with gay or lesbian characters, or books dealing with homosexuality had been published worldwide. By 1995, another 77 had been added. Then between 1995-2001, another 110 titles had been published,<sup>4</sup> bringing the total of books published with gay, lesbian, or bisexual characters to 307<sup>5</sup> (Clyde & Lobban, 2001). Over two hundred titles have been published in the United States alone (Cart & Jenkins, 2006).

Just as young adult literature in general has evolved over the last few decades demonstrating enhanced literary sophistication in the last decade specifically, so too has the young adult literature incorporating GLBTQ characters. Researchers in this area documented the overwhelmingly negative portrayals of homosexuality and homosexuals in young adult literature prior to 1982 (Cuseo, 1992; Goodman, 1983; Hanckel & Cunningham, 1980). Goodman (1983) reviewed twenty-two books of children's literature

published between 1969 and 1983 with lesbian or gay characters, finding that most involved negative messages or stereotypes, “loneliness and bleakness of homosexual life; or adult characters depicted as homosexual recruiters or predators” (as cited in Sears, 1999, p. 11). Having examined sixty-nine books published between 1969-1982 for thematic messages regarding homosexuality, Cuseo (1992) likewise observed pervasive negative representations of homosexual characters. He noted that the majority of the novels offered no positive references to homosexuality and the characters largely reflected societal stereotypes in which gay men are unusually effeminate and lesbians overly masculine. Characteristic of problem novels, discussion of a character’s homosexuality merely provided impetus for other characters to deal with the ‘problem.’ Moreover, whether ‘coming out’ or being ‘outed,’ authors often inflicted retribution upon the homosexual character through physical violence, including death, ostracism from the community, or the dissolution of a homosexual relationship (Cuseo, 1992). Hanckel & Cunningham’s (1980) reviewed four books emphasizing characters’ homosexuality published between 1969 and 1974 and questioned the excessive retribution in these books alone:

Despite the tendency towards melodrama [of problem novels,]... one wonders, however, whether any random selection of four YA novels could produce eight central characters w/ five sets of divorced parents (two of whom are alcoholic) and have plots with three natural deaths and one by violence- plus four car crashes resulting in one mutilation, one head injury, and five fatalities!” (Hanckel & Cunningham, 1980 p. 211).

Author of *Sticks and Stones* (1972), Lynn Hall reiterates these findings, emphasizing coercion from her editor and publishers to change the original ending in which the two major characters Ward and Tom remained together despite social pressure.

I had begun writing the book [*Sticks and Stones*] to show the destructive potential of gossip, but by the time I got well into it, I'm afraid I lost sight of that theme. I wanted Ward and Tom to love each other, to live happily ever after, and that was the way I ended it. But the publishers would not let me do it. In their words, this was showing a homosexual relationship as a possible happy ending and this might be dangerous to young people teetering on the brink..." (Hanckel & Cunningham, 1980, p. 211).

Thus, to be or even be perceived as homosexual in these books was first and foremost a problem, exacting social recrimination and personal approbation through short, unfulfilling relationships. To consider otherwise would be to refute social mores around homosexuality, which publishers of YA literature were unwilling to do.

Beginning in 1982 (the last year of Cuseo's study and the publication of *Annie on My Mind*), authors have created more sympathetic characterizations and portrayals of gays and lesbians. That is, books have tended to treat homosexuality less as a 'problem,' but rather accepting it as one aspect of humanity's diversity (Clyde & Lobban, 2001). Indeed, homophobia has replaced homosexuality as the preeminent social problem addressed in these books (Kidd, 1998). Two major effects demonstrate these changes. First, the number of secondary gay or lesbian characters rose substantially during the 1990s as compared to books with gay or lesbian major characters. This seems to support

progressive assumptions of gays and lesbians as normal individuals and present in families, communities, schools and workplaces throughout society. A starred review for Chris Crutcher's recent release *The sledding hill* (2005) acknowledges these changes and the concomitant discomfort for censors that see the change towards emotionally stable, healthy characters that are still alive at the end as precarious to society's morals. "[*The sledding hill*] has no profanity, sexual acts, drug or alcohol use, or bloody violences but takes deadly aim to censors who can't get past counting swear words or the notion of the gay character who is still alive at the end of the book" (Shoemaker, J., 2005). Secondly, depictions of gay and lesbian adults have shifted from emotionally bereft, stereotypical caricatures of the 1970s to emotionally stable and mentally healthy individuals. As such, "[adult characters] are often idealized individuals, loving, perceptive, sensitive, and supportive. Lesbians tend to be depicted in warm, stable relationships or as well-adjusted individuals. Gay men...are mentors and role models" (Clyde & Lobban, 2001, p. 23). Furthermore, they are characterized more conservatively, just as 'regular' individuals who happen to love someone of the same gender (Clyde & Lobban, 2001).

While depictions of gay and lesbian adult characters have improved, authors in recent years have not diminished the difficulties of being a gay or lesbian teen. GLBTQ characters frequently struggle with both internal and external conflict as they come to accept their sexuality or transgender identity. Harris in *Keesha's House* is thrown out of his house; Cece in *Keeping You a Secret* is thrown up against her locker and beat up for being 'out and proud;' Orphea in *Orphea Proud* is beaten up by her brother when he discovers her having sex with her best friend. Sometimes, major characters themselves

inflict violence upon others as they struggle with fears and uncertainties about their sexuality, as with Fred in *Target* or John in *Eight Seconds*. The emotional turmoil in many novels underscores the anxiety that most GLBTQ youth still confront in a largely homophobic and heterosexist society (Cart & Jenkins, 2006; Sears, 1999; Greene, 1993).

While attitudes towards gays and lesbians have improved in the literature for young people, research continues to show important gender and racial/ethnic limitations of these books. Studies of children's literature have noted that white gay characters appeared in only one out of 97 children's picture books, and one of 144 juvenile literature books, published in Canada, with no lesbian characters at all (Bickmore, 1999). Clyde and Lobban observed a similar tendency in young adult fiction with gay male characters outnumbering lesbian characters nearly 2:1. Evidence of gay or lesbian characters racialized other than white Anglo remains rare, with one notable exception in Orphea, an African American lesbian, in *Orphea Proud* (Wyeth, 2004). As such, this research is indicative of and supports longstanding critiques of gay identity or of 'queer' as synonymous with whiteness and male (Barnard, 2004; Sullivan, 2003), such that the portrayals of characters in YA fiction negotiating complex intersections of race, gender, and sexuality remain largely absent to this day.

Cart and Jenkins (2006) recent work denotes the most extensive study of young adult fiction with GLBTQ content to date, chronicling the course of novels from 1969-2004. In it, they "chart the evolution of the field and...identify titles that are remarkable either for their excellence or for their failures" (p. xviii). They do so by revising a tripartite model originally used for categorizing African-Americans in children's

literature. Their categories include: a) homosexual visibility, b) gay assimilation, and c) queer consciousness/ community. The first category, homosexual visibility, refers to narratives in which characters' coming out (voluntarily or involuntarily) drives most of the storyline and the "dramatic tension arising from what *might* happen when the invisible is made visible" (p. xx, italics in original). The second category, "gay assimilation" identifies stories in which characters are depicted as regular individuals who "just happen to be gay." In both of these first two categories though, GLBTQ characters are demonstrated generally isolated from a broader GLBTQ community. In texts falling into the third category, "queer consciousness/community," however, readers observe GLBTQ characters connect to a broader community via libraries, social networks, the world wide web, and resource centers. Although publication of YA fiction with GLBTQ content is increasing, the texts by and large still emphasize the concern of "homosexual visibility," demonstrating young adult characters in various circumstances and contexts struggling with the ramifications of being GLBTQ.

Even though there is clearly more visible support for GLBTQ teens in the twenty-first century than previously, discovering one's sexual identity, agonizing over whether or not to come out and suffering the slings and arrows of outrageous homophobia remain as central to current YA fiction as they have been from the earliest days of the genre (Cart & Jenkins, 2006, p. 134).

Although queer theorizing of YA fiction is limited, there are a couple of exceptions. Most notably, Trites (1998) demonstrates the way YA fiction with gay

content simultaneously appears both liberated and repressed using four texts with gay male adolescents as case studies. At the same time that it seeks to validate homosexuality itself, the books elude physical expressions of that sexuality, imitating cultural discourses around homosexuality. Nevertheless, she contends the novels demonstrate a complex matrix of pain and pleasure indicative in human sexuality in general and so affirm gay sexuality (Trites, 1998). Then, reminiscent of U.S. novels from the 1970s and 1980s, Lefebvre (2005) examines two Canadian problem novels that foreground homophobic responses of their respective male heterosexual protagonists to the coming out of secondary gay characters (one of which ends up dead at the end of the novel). In it, Lefebvre explores the production of the male heterosexual subject in these texts through the oppositional framing “not gay.” He also questions the privileging of the homophobia in these texts by the authors, given the primacy given their protagonists: they are allowed growth, forgiveness, and healing, while as Lefebvre (2005) notes “the dead boy remains dead” (p. 309).

The focus in this section has largely centered on questions of sexual identity, principally because few novels have addressed the issue of transgender identity explicitly or implicitly. For instance, Flanagan (2004) discusses the nuanced presentation of cross-dressing in two internationally published novels, *Touch Me* (Pohl, 1991) and *Johnny, My Friend* (Maloney, 2000), implying possible transgender behavior. Although the characters in these novels neither claim a transgender identity nor seek to “validate transgendered behavior as a viable gender existence,” Flanagan contends that the female cross-dressers Johnny and Nuala offer “a portrayal of cross-dressing that deals with the

alienation, psychological anguish, and social intolerance that are inseparable from contemporary transsexualism but are not usually acknowledged in children's fiction" (Flanagan, 2004, pp. 65, 62). One other recent novel, *The Flip Side* (Matthews, 2003) also challenges the assumptions of gender identity through cross-dressing and approaches questions of homoerotic fantasy; but like Shakespeare's comedy upon which the novel draws, it firmly resolves and resituates all gender and sexual ambiguity in traditional gendered and heterosexual constraints. Julie Ann Peters' novel, *Luna* (2004 National Book Award finalist), however, explicitly confronts issues of transgender identity powerfully and poignantly. Employing the metaphor of a lunar moth, Peters tells two stories- one of Liam/ Luna, a girl who can only be seen by the light of the moon, and the other of, Regan, Luna's sister, the only one who knows.

‘Luna,’ she repeated softly, more to herself than me. ‘Appropriate, wouldn't you say? A girl who can only be seen by moonlight?’

...As I heard her slog across the floor toward my desk- where she'd unveiled her makeup caddy in all its glory- a sigh of resignation escaped my lips. Yeah, I loved her. I couldn't help it. She was my brother (Peters, 2004, pp. 2-3).

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have reviewed four key theoretical and historical aspects related to young adult fiction with GLBTQ characters and images: 1) constructions of sexual and gender identities, 2) constructions of childhood and children, 3) historical developments

in children's literature, and 4) the increasing incorporation of sexual minority characters in young adult fiction.

First, I explored constructions of sexual and gender identities as culturally regulated constructs. Postmodernists and poststructuralists have underscored the ways in which networks of power have combined to naturalize and normalize our understandings of who we are as sexual and gendered beings. For instance, Judith Butler (1990) documented how both gender and 'sex' have been socially constituted through ritualized performances of gender, which in turn obscures the origins of the constructions of 'proper' femininity and masculinity- or what we consider is a 'real woman' or 'real man.' Narratively-defined identities extend these arguments by emphasizing the cultural stories around sexuality and gender told and retold that become internalized and then enacted (Sfard & Prusak, 2005).

The discussion of identity, as culturally constituted and culturally regulated, was further developed in the section on cultural conceptions of childhood. While children of the medieval culture lived, worked, and played alongside- hearing and seeing the same things as adults, the modernist period, beginning around the fourteenth century, began demarcating boundaries between adulthood and childhood. In this modernist period, adults had alternately constructed children as innately sinful beings who needed the devil beaten out of them, children as little, incomplete adults who needed proper moral training before participating in the adult world, to pure, innocent beings who needed adult protection from the corruption of the adult world. Nevertheless, all the while, it had been adults who have dictated, managed, and regulated the identities of children (and men who

have dictated, managed, and regulated the identities of women as proper mothers and educators of these children).

Corresponding to the changing cultural attitudes towards childhood and children, children's literature likewise shifted over the centuries to keep pace- at first preaching, teaching, and then reaching children. During the early part of this nation's history, children's literature did not exist per se. The few books that existed, e.g., *Pilgrim's Progress*, sought to inculcate clear religious values into children. Then by the nineteenth century, authors of children's literature diminished the religious doctrine in favor of teaching proper moral and social values that would ensure the continuance of the republic. Books by Maria Edgeworth and Louisa May Alcott inculcated, however, proper modes of femininity as surely as Cotton sought to instill his religiosity into books read by children. Then the early part of the twentieth century saw a romanticized childhood, epitomized in book series as *Anne of Green Gables* and *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*. Prior to the 1960's, children's literature demonstrated stable, affectionate (white) nuclear families, set in rural America in which the conflicts of young people were minimalized, resolved by reifying parental values. Social movements and unrest of the 1960s and 1970s caused significant shifts in children's literature with a disruption of this parent/child hierarchy, while introducing realistic elements of the contemporary world- divorce, depression, and death into children's literature. Furthermore, children's literature began to more accurately represent the diversity of the U.S. population. In reaction to specific criticism of children's literature's depictions of girls and minorities positive portrayals began to be incorporated in the 1980s and 1990s.

The late 1960s and 1970s also saw the inauguration of young adult fiction, per se. Prior to the 1960's several books, e.g., *Seventeen Summer* had been published, but literarily, stylistically they were still *children's* literature. Then with the publication of *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton and others, young adult fiction took on the gritty, messiness of young adult lives. Contemporary realistic fiction, described as 'new realism,' incorporated contemporary social issues as described above, but also teen issues such as sex, masturbation, and menstruation.

Although recent decades have witnessed many advances in young adult fiction, character portrayals of GLBTQ youth in the fiction have been minimal. The literature of the 1970s and 1980s that did incorporate gay or lesbian characters in major or supporting roles largely portrayed them largely stereotypically and in fleeting, unfulfilling relationships. Moreover, authors felt compelled to inflict harsh retribution on these characters through violence, ostracism, or death, in this way mimicking continued negative cultural mores regarding homosexuality. Recent works including GLBTQ characters, however, suggest a shift in the messages conveyed through the literature that appear to regard GLBTQ individuals and homosexuality as a natural part of human diversity and homophobia as the pervasive problem instead.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Normalize here and throughout this literature review refers to positing a act or identity in binary opposition to “abnormal,” rather than a statistical norm.

<sup>2</sup> *Lawrence v. Texas (2003)* overturned sodomy laws still existent in thirteen states.

<sup>3</sup> An episode of the public television broadcast “Postcards from Buster,” included a visit by Buster to a family in Vermont with lesbian parents. After first previewing the episode himself, and Education Secretary Margaret Spellings then denounced the program, Wayne Godwin, chief operating officer of PBS “The presence of a couple headed by two mothers would not be appropriate curricular purpose that PBS should provide” (Salamon, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Clyde and Lobban (2001) report difficulty finding a publisher for a third edition of *Out of the Closet and Into the Classroom* (1996, 1992). As a result, to my knowledge no other article or bibliography has attempted to identify all the titles with GLBTQ characters or references since then.

<sup>5</sup> Given that Clyde and Lobban have not published their updated list, it is unclear whether transgender or transsexual characters are included in their list. The first U.S. novel to address transgender issues *Luna* was not published until 2004. Flanagan (2004), however, discusses two international novels *Touch Me* (Maloney, 2000) and *Johnny, My Friend* (Pohl, 1991) that address issues of female cross-dressing and potentially transsexuals- although transgender identity is explicitly elaborated in either.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Overview**

The purpose of this study is to explore characterizations of sexual minority characters, images, and references in contemporary realistic young adult fiction published between the years 2000-2005. Specifically, I ask: Within the character representation of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning individuals as part of the broad genre of contemporary realistic fiction for young adults, 1) What are the networks or systems of power that are unveiled as inhibiting the identities of the characters? 2) How are the identities of these characters constructed? 3) What messages do the texts convey regarding nonconforming sexual and gender identities? In this chapter, I more fully explicate the process by which I sought to answer these questions reviewing my data sources and criteria for book selection, the analytic approaches utilized, and efforts to establish trustworthiness.

#### **Procedures**

To examine issues of power, constructions of nonconforming sexual and gender identities, and messages conveyed about these identities in young adult fiction, I analyzed seventeen GLBTQ-themed contemporary young adult novels, attending to textual references that corresponded to these concepts. I analyzed these books utilizing a tripartite approach comprising interpretivist, textual discursive, and literary analytic methods. This combination of approaches enabled me to look at recurring themes

emerging from the data, specific linguistic choices and potential meanings suggested therein, and finally possible themes or messages conveyed through the texts themselves.

### *Data sources*

#### *2000-2005*

Current literature recording the evolution of young adult fiction with GLBTQ content has documented increased publication of GLBTQ texts, especially among mainstream publishers. In addition, more of these texts have been receiving starred reviews, major award nominations, or awards for young adult literature. At the same time, television executive Howard Buford described the time period, at least prior to the presidential election in November 2004 and the forward thrust of strongly conservative Christian organizations, as a “gay moment” (Mendoza, 2003). During this time, prime time shows, such as *Will and Grace*, and several cable channels began spotlighting gay and lesbian characters, including “*Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*,” “*The L Word*,” and “*Boy Meets Boy*,” as well as other take-off shows. In June 2003, the Supreme Court denounced the homosexual sodomy law in Texas as well as sodomy laws in twelve other states (Greenhouse, 2003). Also in that same summer, Canada passed federal legislation legalizing gay marriage (Kraus, 2003), while several states in the United States debated that same issue: Vermont passed civil union legislation (“Vermont governor,” 2000); San Francisco allowed same-sex marriages in their jurisdiction and then later declared unconstitutional (Dolan & Romney, 2006) and Pennsylvania’s state supreme court upheld the rights of same sex couples to marry (Reston, 2003). Following the narrow defeat in 1996 of “*Employment Non-Discrimination Act*,” which would have added sexual

orientation to all workplace non-discrimination clauses, many Fortune 500 companies, including the nation's largest- Wal-mart, have made changes to their non-discrimination clauses and/or benefit packages to protect GLBTQ individuals from institutionally protected discrimination and to allow same-sex partners take advantages of insurance coverage and other benefits (Mendoza, 2003). Finally, some studies have indicated shifts in children's literature following historical and social movements (Sutherland and Arbuthnot, 1991), which would suggest that as visibility in popular culture and national legislation increases for GLBTQ individuals that visibility in children's and young adult literature would likely increase as well.

#### *Criteria for book selection*

The criteria by which I have chosen books are as follows:

- Given the importance of issues of burgeoning sexuality and identity exploration during adolescence, all the books must be geared and published for young adults, namely 13-17 years of age.
- As issues of sexuality, especially homosexuality, are addressed more in contemporary realistic fiction for young adults, selection of books will likewise draw from that genre.
- Characterization and conflict development must center on GLBTQ themed issues.
- The books must have received significant positive literary acclaim, denoted through a starred review or was named a major young adult book award winner/honor.

- Drawing from several bibliographic sources, previous studies of books with gay and lesbian characters, and the Comprehensive Children’s Literature Database, I amassed a significant list of books with GLBTQ characters between the years 2000-2005 with a total number of 93 titles. Eliminating books that did not meet my criteria (contemporary realistic fiction, GLBTQ themed, and literarily significant), I compiled a list of seventeen novels. Figure 1 documents that finalized list of novels.

<i>The Bermudez Triangle</i> (Johnson, 2004)	<i>Love Rules</i> (Reynolds, 2001)
<i>Boy Meets Boy</i> (Levithan, 2003)	<i>Luna</i> (Peters, 2004)
<i>Eight Seconds</i> (Ferris, 2000)	<i>My Heartbeat</i> (Freyman-Weyr, 2002)
<i>Empress of the World</i> (Ryan, 2001)	<i>Orphea Proud</i> (Wyeth, 2004)
<i>Finding H.F.</i> (Watts, 2001)	<i>Rainbow Boys</i> (Sanchez, 2001)
<i>Geography Club</i> (Hartinger, 2003)	<i>Rainbow High</i> (Sanchez, 2003)
<i>Gravel Queen</i> (Benduhn, 2003)	<i>The Rainbow Kite</i> (Shyer, 2002)
<i>Keeping You a Secret</i> (Peters, 2003)	<i>So Hard to Say</i> (Sanchez, 2004)
<i>Kissing Kate</i> (Myracle, 2003)	

Figure 1 Finalized Book List

### Analytic Methods

To understand the critical interplay between texts and contemporary discourses (Fairclough, 2003) around GLBTQ issues, I utilized a dynamic and multi-faceted analytic approach, drawing from interpretivist research methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lofland & Lofland, 1995), textual discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003), and literary analysis (Vandergrift, 1990). While all three originate from a common understanding of “text” as written texts not derived through the intervention of a researcher/ interviewer (Silverman,

2001), they vary significantly in emphasis. Traditional thematic analysis uses inductive reasoning to discern reiterating patterns found in texts (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Forms of discursive text analysis emphasize linguistic elements through which themes are mediated (Fairclough, 1995; Mills, 1997). Finally, conventional literary analysis focuses on literary structures, such as character, setting, tone, and author style (Norton, 2003); Vandergrift, 1990).

### ***Interpretivist methods***

In order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this field and genre, and thus more effectively analyze these texts, I first began by reading nearly fifty GLBTQ themed and non-themed novels. I then utilized the criteria stated above to narrow my focus to the seventeen themed novels highlighted in this study. As I reread these texts, I employed constant comparative methods to discern central and recurring themes and motifs. First, I “unitized” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) the data by identifying with adhesive “post-its” points in the narratives that related specifically to my research questions, i.e. instances that demonstrated systems or networks of power, constructions of GLBTQ identity, and messages the texts appeared to convey regarding sexual or gender nonconforming individuals. Figure 2, shown on the following page, provides an example of this initial unitizing from the novel *Rainbow High* (Sanchez, 2003).

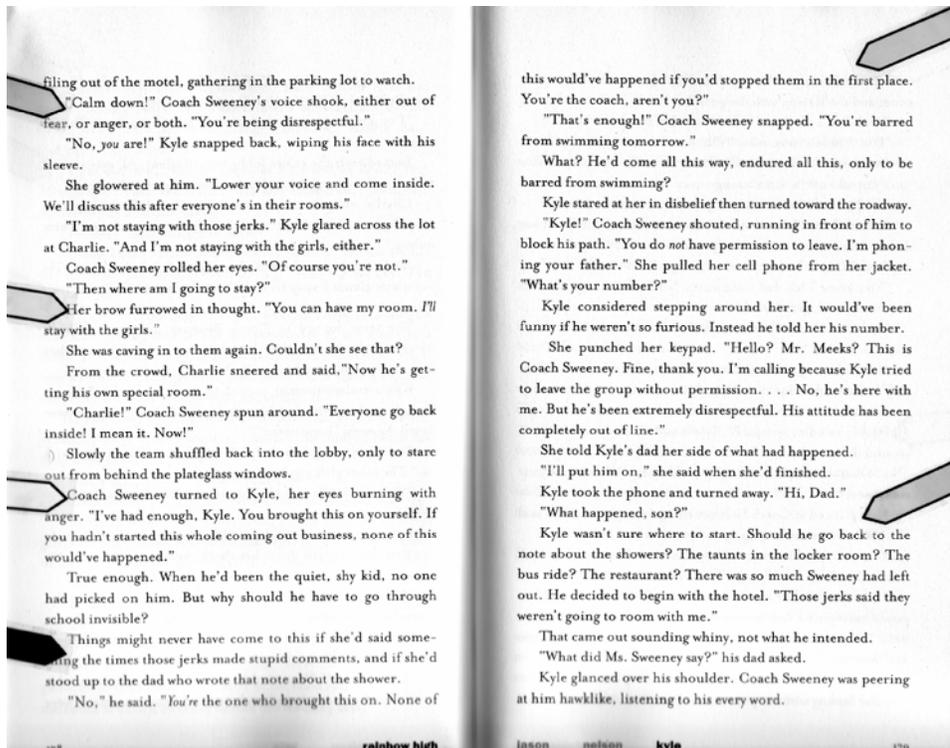


Figure 2 Example of Initial Unitizing

Although Lincoln and Guba (1985) define a “unit” as the “smallest piece of information about something that can stand by itself,” constituted as a sentence or as much as a paragraph (p. 345), narrative description and dialogue may require multiple paragraphs to convey a particular idea, and so I unitized the data onto index cards as such, which is represented on the next page in Figure 3. For clarity of organization, I have labeled each card first with the novel’s title, author’s last name, year of publication, and page number for that excerpt. In the bottom right hand corner, I numbered the data index cards as well.

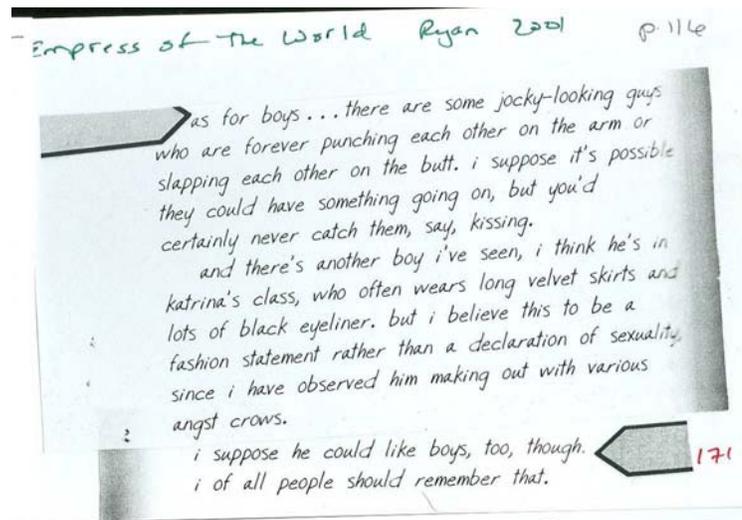


Figure 3 Sample Data Card

Next, I scanned these data cards into expanding files that could then be more easily manipulated. In order to better organize and manage the data, I modified the content literacy strategy “double-entry journal” (Vacca & Vacca, 2005; Young, 2000) to create an “analytic triple-entry journal” (analytic TEJ). In the first column, I labeled key concepts or ideas illustrated in the text; in the second column I either typed or “copy and pasted” scanned data cards; and in the third, I reflected on the particular narrative units. In this column, depending on the text and the specific narrative passage, I might reflect on thematic elements, specific linguistic elements, or authorial messages potentially being conveyed in that narrative passage. Figure 4 on the following page provides an example of these analytic TEJs, which an expanded example may be found in Appendix A.

Topic/ Thematic Category	Text Sources	Analysis/ Reflection
Denouncing assumptions	<p>Eight Seconds Ferris 2000 pp. 91-92</p> <p>“That’s one way of putting it,” Bobby said. “Hey, Kit,” he added, giving Kit a quick glance and then looking away, reminding me of Gwen’s clumsy performance at the funnel-cakes booth.</p> <p>I wondered if Kit and Matt were more than friends now. Could you tell by looking? At this point I felt like I couldn’t tell <i>anything</i> by looking.</p> <p>“Pretty sharp,” Kit said to Bobby, admiring his new black-and-white shirt.</p> <p>Bobby looked startled. I knew exactly what he was thinking. Quickly turning to Matt, he asked, “You think so? You think it’s too much?”</p> <p>Matt laughed. “Are you kidding? You know what peacocks rodeo cowboys are. ‘Too much’ is a difficult concept for us.”</p> <p>Bobby looked relieved.</p>	<p>John asks, “Could you tell by looking?” Given Kit’s character description, Ferris vehemently seems to be answering her own character’s question with NO. As such, she seems to seek to denounce common stereotypes and assumptions many people hold about gays.</p>

Figure 4 Sample Analytic TEJ

Notably, the third column served as both a cognitive and self-reflexive heuristic, particularly facilitating critical interpretive connections between textual excerpts and ongoing discourses around GLBTQ issues. As such, these analytic TEJs served as a principle analytic tool, facilitating the organization of similar data units and development of emerging categories and themes. Finally, I grouped these analytic TEJs together to discern and form broadly encompassing categories and metacategories.

### ***Textual discourse analysis***

In addition to broad, emerging patterns, I also attended to various linguistic elements and phrasing. This analysis comprised three major components: grammatical structure, attribution of word meaning, and coded language. Analysis of grammatical structures included, but was not limited to, nominative and predicative phrasing, use of

ellipses, descriptors, and word collocation (frequent word associations that causes them to appear synonymous) (Fairclough, 2003). Levithan's (2003) novel *Boy Meets Boy* particularly provided numerous instances for such grammatical analysis, which I highlight as an individual case study in Chapter VI. For example Levithan playfully interchanges medial vowels in the excerpt: "At first, [Joni] wanted the slogan [for third-grade class president] to be VOTE FOR ME...I'M A GAY, but I pointed out that this could easily be misread as VOTE FOR ME...I'M A GUY, which would certainly lose me votes" (p. 11). In another episode, Levithan plays on the phrase "a Freudian Slip," which generally refers to an "accidental mistake, usually the use of the wrong word in a sentence, that is thought to betray somebody's subconscious preoccupations" (Encarta World English Dictionary, 1999).

‘Look, I say, ‘you know as well as I do what Chuck did after Infinite Darlene rejected him. He trashed her locker and badmouthed her to the whole school.’

‘He was hurt.’

‘He was psycho, Joni.’ (I don’t mean to say that; it just comes out.

A Friendian Slip) (p. 38).

Here again Levithan exchanges a few medial letters to alter the common phrase "A Freudian Slip" to "A Friendian Slip," meant to refer to a subconscious phrase that "slips" out speaking a personal truth to a friend. This is a common motif of Levithan's, in which he plays with or challenges a concept by switching a few letters. Therefore, this level of

detail prompts textual discursive analysis, as it purposefully attends to the interplay of various linguistic elements with ideological stances.

Another important linguistic component is attribution of word meaning. Word meaning can vary significantly based on contextual factors, connotations, or inflection. Attending to the interaction of specific word choices and its textual surroundings facilitate the reader's comprehension of the text and author's intended meaning (Smith, 1995). For instance, in the following excerpt from *Empress of the World* (Ryan, 2001). The main character Nic is talking to her friend Isaac about his parents' impending divorce. His younger sister has suggested that she and Isaac live with their aunt and her girlfriend, rather than either of their parents.

“I’m not worried about her. She really digs Aunt Mim and Laura.”

“Laura?”

“Yeah, she’s my aunt’s girlfriend.”

“Girlfriend?” I squeak before I can stop myself.

... Yep, that’s right! My aunt’s a big old dyke! Does that *bother* you?” (Ryan, 2001, pp. 101-102)

While in most of the novels, the use of the term “dyke” is commonly used to slander and degrade presumed lesbian characters, here it is framed from a point of affection. The italicized font of “bother” indicates a tone of challenge and a readying defensive stance. Moreover though, it is through careful attention to such linguistic and textual elements that facilitates comprehension of intended meaning thereof.

Consideration of word collocations is especially important in GLBTQ themed texts, given the historicity of collocations around the homosexual/heterosexual bifurcation: heterosexuality as “natural” and “normal” and homosexuality as “unnatural” and “abnormal,” as well as other collocations with homosexuality, such as “sin,” “immoral,” “disease,” and “sick” (Foucault, 1972). Such collocations can be seen within individual texts or *intertextually*. Intertextuality basically refers to allusions or references in one text to that of another, although it can also relate to associations between a given text and its prevailing genre or discourse (Fairclough, 2003). In the novel *Love Rules* (Reynolds, 2001), one particular set of collocations around homosexuality engenders discourses of perversion, which is extended here to also indicate “anti-American.” At one point in the novel the high school principal argues, “You can’t have students flaunting their total disregard for tried and true mainstream values without getting a reaction from those who uphold our American way of life”(p. 143). Then later the school newspaper reported:

*...the spokesperson for demonstrators stated that, GSA’s inclusion of a GLSEN (Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network) representative at tonight’s meeting shows their contempt for values Americans hold dear.’ Weiss also claimed that GLSEN blatantly promotes aberrant lifestyles, and recruits innocent youth into a life of sexual perversion (Reynolds, 2001, p. 218).*

We can observe repeated references or collocations that occur across various texts, such as those below, which invoke notions of homosexuality as sickness. In Watts’

(2001) novel, H.F. fears attending a church that considers homosexuality a sickness that needs curing: “But I’d rather roll naked in a bed of poison ivy than go to church with her. Besides, what if it’s one of them churches that tries to ‘cure’ people like us?” (p. 117). Then in Shyer’s (2002) novel *Rainbow Kite*, Bennett complains about his friend’s dad prohibiting Jeremy from visiting anymore, based on the same idea: “‘I’m contagious, see? Mr. DeWitt thinks what I’ve got is *catching*. And I don’t mean a *virus*.’” (Shyer, 2002, p. 155). Significant are the ways that these references invoke intertextual allusions to Biblical or scriptural discussions of homosexuality and historical psychiatric writings, without ever mentioning them by name. As such, these intertextual references also serve as *interdiscursive* elements, “in terms of the different discourses, genres and styles they draw upon and articulate together” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 3).

To enable the identification of such intertextual and interdiscursive collocations, I created another table, a portion of which is demonstrated below in Figure 5 that included textual excerpts, its source, and a discursive classification. The expanded table is included in Appendix B.

<b>Text excerpt</b>	<b>Source</b>	<b>Classification</b>
“I’m all hooray for gay. It’s not a problem”	Johnson, 2004, p. 159	As no big deal
“I think it’s cool that you’re open to stuff.”	Johnson, 2004, p. 193	As no big deal
Quickest, surest way to become least popular person is have people <i>think</i> you might be gay.	Harteringer, 2003, pp. 3-4	As pariah/ outcast
Brian [who is an outcast] didn’t seem so different to me. Because I knew that’s how people might treat me if they ever learned the truth.	Harteringer, 2003, p. 11	As pariah/ outcast

Figure 5 Portrayals of Homosexuality

Lastly, I utilized textual discursive analysis as a means to examine and discuss linguistic elements that demonstrated forms of “coded language.” Historically the hegemony of heteronormativity has compelled GLBTQ communities to create linguistic codes that have served as passwords providing entrance and familiarity among those within the communities and exclusion from distrusted outsiders (Chauncey, 1994; Howard, 1999). Communities often used metaphors or roundabout phrases to discuss themselves, as in the following example from the novel *Finding H.F.* (Watts, 2001). H.F. comments how her best friend Bo had never directly “come out,” but spoke about himself in couched phrases:

Come to think of it, Bo has never come right out and told me he likes boys. He’ll say things like, ‘bein’ the way I am’ or ‘not bein’ a real masculine type of person,’ but he’s never plainly said he likes boys (Watts, 2001, p. 14).

Then in *Eight Seconds* (Ferris, 2000), John’s comment that he is “off women” prompts a similar response from Kit, who the reader quickly learns is gay.

‘Yeah. Can you believe it? Are you bringing somebody [to the barn dance]?’

‘Not this time,’ I said. ‘I’m taking a break from women for a while.’ I didn’t know why, but it made me uneasy to say that in front of Kit.

‘You have a date?’ Bobby asked him.

‘No,’ Kit said. ‘I’m off women, too’ (Ferris, 2000, p. 80).

John has recently broken off a long-term heterosexual relationship, so is not questioned when he comments that he is “taking a break from women for a while.” Knowing that Bobby does not know about his gay sexuality, Kit mimics John’s words, but with weighted meaning. Given the indirectness of word choice, it appears as a form of code, only understood by those “in the know.” While such coded language was not widespread, it did appear in a couple of novels, as demonstrated above, and the analysis of these words and phrases is facilitated by textual discursive analysis.

### *Literary analysis*

In addition to attending to recurring patterns that emerged in the data via interpretivist methods and specific linguistic elements via textual discursive analysis, the textual genre of contemporary realistic fiction also required utilization of aspects of literary analysis especially in regards to character, plot, and thematic development. Continuing to employ analytic TEJs, I would make note of the introduction of new characters and significant narrative shifts. I particularly observed the author’s use of description that served to draw in the reader’s attention that acted as a camera lens, especially as a “close-up,” as in the following example in Figure 6. Introduction of new characters might indicate a potential love interest or a “helper character” (Kress, 2004) that would facilitate the resolution of the major narrative conflict. Further analysis of character development, e.g. rounded versus flat, often served to indicate potential authorial perspectives and underlying textual messages.

Topic/ Thematic Category	Text Sources	Analysis/ Reflection
Narrative description	<p>Empress of the World Ryan 2001 p. 7</p> <p>But I just keep seeing this girl. She has her index finger in her mouth. I can't quite tell, but it looks like she's peeling off her skin around her cuticle with her teeth.</p> <p>I didn't think anyone else did that.</p> <p>I know I'm drawing too quickly and sloppily now, but I want to have evidence that someone else damages herself in the same subtle way. She takes her finger out of her mouth too fast for me to capture it on paper, but when she does, I see spot of blood. Beautiful Hair Girl has messed up fingers like mine.</p>	<p>If you imagine this scene from a camera's point of view, you can imagine the camera zooming in on Beautiful Hair Girl. The focused attention already paid here informs the reader that she is going to be a significant character.</p>

Figure 6 Example of Literary Analysis

Furthermore, attention to the plot conflict highlighted key elements around which the narrative centered: struggles with parents or peers (person v. person conflicts), struggles with personal identity (person v. self conflicts), struggles with societal structures (person v. society conflicts) (Norton, 2003). Notably, these different conflicts frequently intertwined throughout the narratives, powerfully demonstrating in these novels the complex interplay of personal, social, and societal influences. Together, these different literary elements reinforced the underlying development of a novel's theme(s) still inherent to young adult fiction (Cart, 2001; Norton, 2003).

### **Trustworthiness**

As mentioned earlier, all three analytic methods, interpretivist, textual discourse, and literary analysis, derive from a mutual understanding of “text” as written texts. As such, they have different aspects in common. First and foremost, the analytic process is inductive in nature. That is, its analytic process derives from its epistemological base that humans are inherently meaning-makers, and attempts to ‘know’ a reality external to ourselves typifies a false proposition. Thus, I do not provide claims for reliability, validity, or generalizability, but do suggest means for establishing trustworthiness, following some of the established protocols of interpretivist research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I asked critical friends to “peer debrief” ongoing analyses (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993) and used extended quotes as a form of “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) as a means for revealing recurring themes and authorial messages. Furthermore, the use of the multiple methods is intended to provide an additional source of trustworthiness, creating some inherent redundancy and overlap (Freeman, deMarrais, Preissle, Roulston, & St. Pierre, 2007).

### **Conclusion**

Based on the primary data sources being young adult fiction, the use of these multiple methods indeed entails some intentional overlap, although their emphases differ. For instance, in this case interpretivist methods and literary analysis both involve the discernment of themes, in the form of recurring patterns on the one hand and underlying messages on the other. Likewise, the analysis of the linguistic elements of the texts via textual discursive analysis methodologically coincides with literary analysis with

particular points of focus including: a) genre structure, b) word choice, c) literary devices (in this study, specifically characterization and conflict), and d) authorial perspective or point of view (Fairclough, 2003; Vandergrift, 1990). Literary analysis tends to decontextualize texts from larger contemporary discourses, however, while critical forms of discursive analysis take for granted that texts are constructed under specific and varying social contexts within larger societal discourses (Ifversen, 2003). Textual discursive analysis also underscores power relations within different social contexts, specifically how they privilege and sanction certain discourses to the exclusion of others, significant to this study (Fairclough, 1989; Foucault, 1972; Mills, 1997). In this way, analyzing these texts involved an ongoing shifting between specific linguistic elements, emerging themes, and contemporary discourses at work (and play) in the texts.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **CULTURALLY MEDIATED FACTORS**

#### **Cultural Institutions and Practices**

In examining the nature of GLBTQ characterizations in contemporary realistic fiction for young adults, I have found six overarching thematic categories, three that relate to larger social structures- cultural institutions and practices, persecution, and social networks- and three that relate to individual characterizations- identity, desire, and agency. By the phrase cultural institutions and practices, I refer to discursive ways of being that have come to be infused throughout U.S. culture, taken for granted, institutionalized, and sanctioned in varying ways. Specifically in this broader category, I examine three subset categories: heteronormativity, homophobia, and institutions of schooling. For instance, regarding heteronormativity, I analyze the ways in which social norms around femininity and masculinity impact GLBTQ characters and the internal and external conflicts it places upon them. For homophobia, I examine the different reasons accounting for homophobia, by and large conservative Christian beliefs, and the range of homophobic reactions represented in the sampled books. Lastly, I explore the ways secondary school institutions- including administration, faculty, and social hierarchies among young adults- respond and react to calls for fair and equitable treatment for GLBTQ youth in these books.

### ***Heteronormativity***

The cultural institutionalized practices of heteronormativity serve to shape and regulate both sexuality and gender. It assumes that proper sexuality is defined as heterosexual and proper gender is made manifest through properly sanctioned sexuality. In other words, to be constituted as a ‘real’ man or woman, one must be heterosexual. As a result, it provides the overarching context for these themed books in which main characters engage various structural agents via school institutions and social relationships, as well as (re)define identities, explore differing shades of desire, and negotiate personal agency.

First and foremost, heteronormativity delimits properly accepted forms of masculinity and femininity. In these themed books, sexuality interweaves with gender. As characters question and struggle with issues of sexual identity and desire, they also struggle with heteronormative constraints regarding gender. Strictures around masculinity tend to dominate these books more so than proper forms of femininity, despite nearly equal gender representations in main characters (eight male, eight female, and one male-to-female transgender character). As such, numerous excerpts from these books deal with gendered expectations of appropriate masculine behavior. These assumptions are generally challenged through the unfolding of conflicts – both internal and external- that main characters face, such that the reader comes to question these assumptions as well.

### *Hegemonic masculinity*

Moreover, 'real' men are constituted in these themed books in multiple ways both through what guys are supposed to do: e.g., drink beer, play sports, demonstrate heterosexual desire; and through what guys are *not* supposed to do: maintain full eye contact, wear nail polish, talk about personal hopes and desires. At any given time, not behaving as expected always seems to provide sufficient reason for questioning a character's sexuality. For example, a supporting character Bo, from the novel *Finding H.F.*, is considered circumspect because he doesn't drink beer, which automatically constitutes him as a 'fag' (Watts, 2001, p. 147). John the main character and narrator of the novel *Eight Seconds* (Ferris, 2000) juxtaposes himself against the novel's antagonist Russ and his buddies, as they perform masculinity in a small southwestern ranching community:

I'd just sat down at one of the booths when Russ came in with a couple of his pals. They all had construction jobs for the summer at the shopping center that was going up at the edge of town. They were tan and sweaty and muscular, and full of swagger that guys get when they spend a lot of time doing things they think of as extramanly (Ferris, 2000, p. 149).

It is clear from the language that John considers masculinity something that is perceived and conceived, because the guys act, based on what they *think* is extramanly, not that it necessarily is.

Early in the novel, John describes the features of socially accepted masculinity in this setting, especially that of drinking beer and getting into a fight now and then. He admits to not liking either, but performing as expected, when need be:

I still fought, when I couldn't get out of it, and I did it as hard as I could. You kind of have to if you didn't want to get totally creamed.

Around here getting in a fight now and then is part of the territory of being a guy- along with riding spirited horses, being able to castrate fifty calves in an afternoon, and burping the alphabet after chugging a long-neck beer.

I like riding the horses. I can do the rest- and I do- but I don't call it a good time. Sometimes I wonder about myself (Ferris, 2000, pp, 1-2).

John highlights the difference he experiences, precisely because he does not enjoy these presumed masculine behaviors, such that “he wonders about himself.” This sense of discrepancy between himself and normal heteronormative practices repeatedly resurfaces in these novels, causing him and other characters to question what is wrong with them.

Getting into occasional fights, as appropriately masculine behavior, also appears in the novel *Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001), in which Kyle's dad beams when his son comes home all bruised and battered from a recent fight. It in fact serves as a bonding moment between father and son, because the father sees the son as being able to defend himself and act “like a man.” When Kyle's mother gets home, she of course asks what happens and then gets into an argument with his dad about the appropriateness of this behavior:

His dad puffed out his chest. 'He got into a fight.'

'You're happy about that?'

'No.' He gave Kyle's neck a gentle squeeze. 'But I like knowing he can defend himself.'

The remark seemed to annoy his mom. 'I hope you're taking him to the hospital.' She examined the ice pack. 'Does it hurt?' she asked Kyle. 'I'll go with you.'

His dad raised his hand to calm her down. 'We've got it under control. Relax.'

'Oh, is this some guy thing? Your son's first fight?' (Sanchez, 2001, p. 203).

While the mother performs as socially expected, as the nurturing, sometimes overprotective caretaker, the father also performs his gender roles expertly, praising his son for "acting like a man."

The male propensity towards fighting also serves to align men together, against women. As John comments to his sister in *Eight Seconds*, "I was defending my good name," explaining a recent altercation with the local bully Russ Millard. "'Women never understand about fighting,' I said, echoing my father and the male party line" (Ferris, 2000, p. 7). Although fighting is not something John favors or endorses, he mimics his father to reinforce the distinction between men and women, again because he knows it is expected of him. Although John understands to be a "man" he must act like a man (get into the occasional fights) and talk like a man (distinguishing men from women), he

never really feels like *that* kind of man. Significantly, he performs the expected role, while never really claiming it.

More than drinking beer and fighting, the desire for heterosexual sex is considered so fundamentally characteristic of masculine behavior that when male characters demonstrate any manner of reluctance, their sexuality is immediately questioned. For instance, in the novel *Rainbow Boys*, Jason begins questioning his sexuality, but seeks to stridently deny his increasing desire and attraction to other guys by maintaining sexual relations with his girlfriend of two years. However, he displaces his reticence about doing so, by objecting to his sanctioned gender role as the expected initiator of sexual activity between them. She retorts by referencing those standards of gendered behavior, accepted by her as a given.

‘Did I do something wrong?’ Debra asked.

Jason looked up at her. ‘No.’

‘Then what is it?’ Her blue eyes stared at him. ‘Tell me.’

Jason shrugged. ‘I’m just tired of this routine.’ He knew that wasn’t really it, but it was part of it. ‘W- why do I always have to make the moves?’

Debra laughed, but she sounded offended. ‘Cause I’m the girl.

Would you rather have sex with a guy?’ (Sanchez, 2001, p. 31)

Debra’s comment feeds into historical and cultural associations of masculinity as active agents of conquests over women’s passive bodies and sexuality. Traditionally, according to western socialization, Jason, as the ‘guy’ is supposed to desire and initiate

sex with the girl, while the girl, Debra, waits and resists his sexual advances. His stated wish to change those traditional gender roles compels Debra to question his sexuality: “Would you rather have sex with a guy?” In this way, the presumption of challenging conventional gender roles also leads to the questioning and assertion of an unconventional sexuality.

Similarly, in *So Hard to Say* (Sanchez, 2004), the presumption of a guy’s pronounced desire for heterosexual sex is so taken for granted, that any indication suggesting otherwise causes others to question the character’s sexuality. The novel alternates between two main characters and their perspectives: Xio, who is attracted to a new guy at school named Frederick, and Frederick himself, who is beginning to question whether he might be gay. In the following excerpt, Xio talks with her girlfriends about Frederick and how to find out if he might be attracted to her as well:

‘Your butt’s fine,’ Nora assured me. ‘If you want, *I’ll* tell Frederick to invite you to the movie.’

‘Don’t you dare!’ I spun around from the mirror. ‘That would be *so* elementary school. Besides...what if he only likes me as a friend?’

‘Then he’s gay,’ Carmen said, brushing polish onto her nails.

‘You’ve got gay on the brain,’ José scowled at her (Sanchez, 2004, p. 48).

If Frederick doesn’t like Xio as potentially girlfriend material, then by definition, according to Carmen, he must be gay- because all guys want to get with a girl- to have sex.

Because of the collusions of manhood and heterosexual desire, indications of such desire facilitate masculine solidarity. Frederick wins the respect of a soccer buddy named Victor after (reluctantly) holding hands at a movie with Xio. “‘You and Xio. Holding hands.’ He kept grinning at me. It was sort of annoying, but then he swung his arm around my shoulder- not in a headlock this time, instead like he admired me” (Sanchez, 2004, p. 68). Similarly, at a birthday party, Xio and her girlfriends plan a spin-off game of musical chairs, in which (heterosexual) pairs enter a closet and are to remain in the closet for a full minute, and are presumably supposed to kiss. This prompts much hurrahs and cheers as each couple returns to the group from the closet. Frederick doesn’t feel such excitement however, but dread. The concomitant of fear of being called gay and losing Victor’s esteem compels Frederick to participate in this heterosexual performance.

While the countdown proceeded, sweat trickled down my forehead. As Pepe and José [short for Josephina] emerged from the closet, everybody cheered. Everyone except me.

Once again the music started. When it stopped, Xio was left standing. What a huge surprise.

Her bright brown eyes smiled at me. ‘Frederick?’

As I tried to return her smile, everyone else whooped and whistled.

Victor pushed me out of my seat, proudly clapping me on the back.

But why wasn’t I feeling proud?

Outside the muffled countdown had begun, but all I heard was the pounding of my heart. I waited, legs trembling, thinking: *Maybe if I don't do anything, Xio won't either.*

But then her clean-smelling hair tickled my ear and I knew she was bending down to me. Instinctively I tilted my head up. Her skin brushed my cheek. And then her lips touched mine, pressing gently. Every nerve in my mouth tingled.

*If only Victor could see me now, I thought, he'd proudly pat my back and put his arm around me* (Sanchez, 2004, p. 113).

This excerpt particularly highlights the performativity of heteronormative practices. Although the couples remove themselves ironically into a closet, their sexuality is on stage, for all to witness and substantiate. The other teens collude in the overall performance as well, serving as the audience, applauding and cheering, and even goading a reluctant Frederick into his expected role as need be. It is this social acceptance, especially Victor's approval, which means most to Frederick.

### ***Breaking codes of heteronormativity***

Not only do the novels characterize proper masculinity through what guys presumably do or desire to do, but also what they do not do. For instance in *The Rainbow Kite* (Shyer, 2002), Bennett's (the main character) dad questions the gendered behavior, and by default, the sexuality of a competing swimmer in Bennett's swim meet.

...While we were waiting for our order, Dad remembered something. 'Did you see that kid with the painted toenails? They allow that?'

Mom said, 'The girls are allowed, why not the boys?'

'Real boys don't wear nail polish, that's why,' Dad answered, and

I guess no one was in the mood to argue with him (Shyer, 2002, p. 47).

Later on, the newspaper reported a sexually-based hate crime perpetrated against that very same swimmer, which leads Bennett's father to follow-up on his earlier comments, 'But I'll tell you one thing, boys. I spotted that kid in the water right away, didn't I? Painted toenails! I knew there was something funny about him right away'" (Shyer, 2002, p. 50).

In addition to not wearing typical girlish accoutrements, like nail polish, heteronormative proscriptions curtail inappropriate decorations and language use by men. Again, violating such parameters nearly guarantees the incurrence of negative sanctions. At various times in the novel *So Hard to Say* (Sanchez, 2004) the main character Frederick comments on different incongruities based on gender. For instance, he notes:

But if I agreed that a boy was cute I'd never say it aloud. Although it's okay for girls to say other girls are cute, everyone knows that guys can't say stuff like that about other guys. I'd made that mistake once in fourth grade- and got called gay for a month afterward (Sanchez, 2004, p. 26).

He also highlights these unwritten rules in context of a minor character named Iggy, who is presumed to be gay.

The walls of his [Iggy's] room were covered with posters of boy bands- some of the same ones I liked. But I would never put posters of them on my walls. Guys weren't supposed to do that. No wonder people thought Iggy was gay (Sanchez, 2004, p. 73).

When characters do break heteronormative rules, it provides a unique lens to illuminate those practices that delimit and constrain properly sanctioned gendered behavior, as demonstrated in these themed books. For example, the character John from *Eight Seconds* (Ferris, 2000) repeatedly describes not acting as men are 'supposed' to act, as he increasingly grows more attracted to another bull rider named Kit. First he describes talking differently with Kit than he ever had with any other guy, including his close friend Bobby.

The way I was talking to Kit wasn't a way I'd ever talked to Bobby, and he was my best friend. This was something new and personal and daring, like driving too fast on an unfamiliar road. Like getting on a bull's back (Ferris, 2000, p. 53).

Then John describes watching Kit too closely, "in a way that I didn't think guys should watch each other."

'You looked good out there yesterday,' I said. I wasn't being polite. I'd watched him harder even than I'd wanted to, and could only admire his

grace and strength and construction. I'd watched him in a way that I didn't think guys should watch each other, but I couldn't help it (p. 57).

Both excerpts suggest an intimacy that hegemonic masculinity disdains and prohibits among heterosexual men. Norah Vincent (2006) describes in the book *Self-made man* about her experiences living as a man and discusses the rules regarding the sense of male territory. Close physical proximity or full eye contact often imply a trespassing of a man's personal spatial boundaries, which in Vincent's words leads to either 'getting fucked or getting killed' (p. 237). Men generally respect each other's spaces, so infringements upon those break the codes of masculinity, which the character John describes breaking, "because he couldn't help it."

As suggested above, breaking the rules of heteronormativity does not come without substantial risk however. Based on the codes of hegemonic masculinity that defines proper masculinity as heterosexual, guys who express their attraction to another guy must tread carefully. If they were to "come on" to a straight guy, they might be assaulted, possibly even killed. For this reason, Kenney's suggestions and responses in the novel *Gravel Queen* (Benduhn, 2003) that her friend Fred should just talk to a guy he's never met is peculiar.

'Why don't you just talk to him?' Kenney asks.

Fred's eyes are glazed over. This happens from time to time. He just gets really sad about not being able to date anyone, when everyone else gets to...

'What's he going to say?' I ask Kenney.

‘What could be the worst that happens?’ she asks, innocent.

Fred and I both stare at her.

Her eyes open wide, Marilyn Monroe. ‘What?’ she asks, her voice small, surprised, soft. Of course she wouldn’t understand (Benduhn, 2003, p. 20).

In another excerpt the same question arises, this time supported by the character Fred in a conversation with the main character Aurin:

‘Half the time I can’t tell if she’s kidding anymore, or if she really just hates me, or is uncomfortable or something,’ he says.

‘I think she goes too far sometimes,’ I say.

Fred lifts his head forward and shakes it. ‘That’s what I’ve been telling myself. It’s too much. This afternoon we were on Tate Street and some guys come walking by, and she elbows me in the ribs, and says, ‘Did you see that dude? He was looking at you.’ So they turn around and one of them says, ‘I ain’t no fuckin’ pansy-ass faggot.’ He’s this tough redneck. And he says, ‘If I was lookin’ at you, it’s ‘cause I think you’re queer.’ So Kenney opens her big mouth and says, ‘You got a problem with it if he is?’ And surprise, surprise, the guy says, ‘Yeah, I got a problem with it.’ But his friend saves the situation by saying, ‘Come on, dude, let’s go.’ So they leave. But Kenney could have gotten us killed, you know? She just doesn’t think’ (Benduhn, 2003, p. 115).

The author, via Fred, suggests that Kenney ‘just doesn’t think.’ However, the ever-present nature of hegemonic masculinity and the need to defend or protect against from possible incursions against that masculinity has indeed led to self-defense claims of “homosexual panic” (Comstock, 1989; Suffrendi, 2001). In fact, it has been used as effective defense in various hate crime cases, based on the predatory myth of homosexual men. If, as all the other themed novels suggest, the rules of heteronormativity are so taken for granted, Kenney’s incredulity about the possible ramifications of Fred talking to strange men or challenging the tough redneck is suspect. ‘*Could she really be that dumb?*’ the reader wonders. This very real threat is specifically reinforced in *Rainbow Boys*, (Sanchez, 2001) as Kyle talks to Jason about his experiences of being gay and staying in the ‘closet’:

Jason stared at him, feeling silly for ever worrying that Kyle would make a move on him. He wiped his palms across his pants.

Kyle twirled his cap. ‘I never know what to say.’ The cap spun out of his hands and Jason tossed it back to him.

‘Thanks.’ Kyle smiled. ‘I’m always afraid that, I don’t know, if I told a guy I liked him, he’d punch me out or something’ (Sanchez, 2001, p. 66).

### ***Policing masculinity***

Despite the very real possibility of assault, homophobic slurs serve as the most common method of male characters policing other characters’ masculinity. While I review the various ways homophobia is discussed and demonstrated in these themed

books later in this chapter, a brief discussion is relevant here as it relates to technologies of heteronormativity, especially in defining and demarcating properly evinced masculinity. As stated earlier, socially sanctioned masculinity is demonstrated through heterosexual desire. Thus, those who claim, or are simply perceived to defy these norms, are frequent targets of homophobic innuendos and slurs. For example, in *Eight Seconds* (Ferris, 2000), the antagonist Russ confronts John about his friend Kit's sexuality:

‘I’m telling you this for your own good. We may not always see eye to eye, but us guys need to stick together on this...’

‘Temper, temper,’ he said. ‘The point is, your good buddy Kit Crowe is a card-carrying faggot. Not the kind of guy you want to be getting too friendly with (Ferris, 2000, p. 86).

Then when, John realizes his attraction to Kit and begins to hang out with him more often, he is again confronted by Russ, this time being included in the verbal haranguing:

‘Such a picture I have in my mind,’ he went on, ‘the two of you pretty boys going at it. It must break the hearts of many local girls, knowing that they’re out of the running with you counterfeit guys. How’d you fool Kelsey for so long? She must be even dumber than I thought (Ferris, 2000, p. 150).

Russ claims that John's homosexual desire makes him ‘counterfeit,’ a male impostor, because “real” guys date girls. In turn, Russ claims that Kelsey must be really dumb for not realizing that John wasn't a ‘real’ man. “Guys like you are an insult to the male race,” sneers Russ (p. 151). Interestingly, in an earlier excerpt John referenced the

sensibility of “us guys” to define men as not women; then Russ invokes this notion as “us guys” to distinguish proper “guy-hood” as not homosexuality. But when John begins to spend too much time with Kit, his manhood is denounced as an “insult to the male race.”

While homophobic slurs are common ways of regulating masculine behavior, in high school homosocial arenas such as sports it tends to be ever-present (Renolds, 2000;. In the novel *Rainbow High* (Sanchez, 2003) Jason, a basketball athlete, struggles with the pervasiveness of the homophobia, while struggling with the question of coming out as gay to his coach and teammates.

Three lockers down, Dwayne Smith was spouting off about how tonight he was going to kick Chesapeake’s asses.

‘And you faggoty fairies better not foul all over the place, like last game.’

The jerk hassled everyone, then claimed he was only joking (Sanchez, 2003, pp. 30-31).

Although Jason can dismiss Dwayne as a ‘jerk’ that harassed everyone, he has a harder time ignoring the homophobic slurs, slung about as easily as a towel, in the locker rooms and on the court, because of the camaraderie he feels with his teammates. “These were Jason’s ‘boys,’ like family to one another. And yet, in the very midst of their closest friendship, erupted the pervasive fag jokes and constant innuendo. Even now, as Jason closed his locker, Odell reached into Andre’s shorts, snapping his jockstrap” (Sanchez, 2003, p. 32). The banter continues:

‘Hey honey. Gonna score another heart tonight?’

‘Fag.’ Andre burped, grabbing for Odell’s crouch in return.

‘Homo.’ Odell laughed, pulling away.

It was like this all the time- as if they were all afraid of getting too close, so they had to make fun of it (Sanchez, 2003, p. 33).

As can be seen from these young adult books, even in fiction the disciplinary practices surrounding heteronormative masculinity demonstrate significant influence and dominance. They are generally assumed and taken for granted until a character breaches these guidelines. It is this pervasiveness of power that restricts and curtails other possible forms of masculinities that characterizes hegemonic masculinity. As such, characters in turn regulate and monitor social behavior to prevent such breaches. This frequently instigates conflict- both external and internal- as characters struggle with issues of identity and desire that differs from these social norms.

### *Contextually emphasized forms of masculinity*

In books such as *Eight Seconds* (Ferris, 2000), *Finding H.F.* (Watts, 2001), and *Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001), hegemonic masculinity is additionally underscored through specific cultural contexts: the west/southwest, rural Kentucky, and Latin machismo, respectively. For instance, in *Eight Seconds*, the western/ southwestern backdrop of cattle ranching and bull riding help define true masculine behavior.

‘Hey, son! How was rodeo school? Didn’t break anything, did you?’

‘No, but I almost got gored by a bull.’

‘Great!’ he said. ‘Stuff like that makes a man out of you.’

‘It almost made a hamburger out of me.’

Clemmie [John’s little sister] giggled, and Dad whacked me on the back again. ‘It’s the bull who’ll get to be the hamburger,’ he said. ‘Don’t you forget it’ (Ferris, 2000, p. 75)

Then again later, John’s father chastises John’s reluctance to perform in an upcoming rodeo.

‘Don’t tell me you’re afraid of a little mud,’ he said. ‘You’re no pansy, John. You’ve paid your entry fee. Now you have to cowboy up.’

Arguing with Dad was pointless. And the last thing I wanted to be was a pansy. I knew I’d have to go, even though the arena would be hip-deep in mud...

Dad put his hand on my shoulder. ‘That’s my boy. Nothing stops him. And I guarantee you, all the real cowboys will be there’” (Ferris, 2000, p. 118).

As previously mentioned, John characterizes “being a guy” by riding spirited horses, castrating fifty calves in an afternoon, and burping the alphabet after drinking a long-neck beer (Ferris, 2000, pp. 1-2). However, this notion of being a “real cowboy” establishes the standard by which masculine behavior in this context is really measured. And John cannot stand the thought of not measuring up because it would mean disappointing his father and all that he hoped/ expected his son to be.

Then, in *Finding H.F.* (Watts, 2001), the geographical backdrop of rural Kentucky rigidly structures gender and sexual norms in that book.

For Bo, [being found out that he's gay], the trouble he'd get in would be deep. Like I said, Bo's dad is a tough guy, and I'm sure he wasn't thinking he had a sissy on his hands when he named his firstborn son Pierre Beauregard, after his favorite Confederate general. Bo's younger brother, Nathan, is just like Bo's daddy. He's just in the eighth grade, but he already wears a 'Confederate States of America' belt buckle (Watts, 2001, pp. 9-10).

Finally, Latin machismo influences expectations of masculine behavior in the books *Love Rules* (Reynolds, 2001) and *Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001).

For instance Frankie, a supporting character in *Love Rules*, admits to being too afraid to go to school, because of the persistent harassment he experiences there, but for cultural reasons, he is also too afraid of his dad to tell him why:

My parents kept asking why, why, why, hadn't I been attending school. I couldn't tell them. Mexican boys don't tell their Mexican dads guess what- I'm getting beat up because I'm gay. I mean I'm the son my dad waited for, after three girls. He's this macho construction crew boss and I'm going to tell him I'm too cowardly to go to school?'

'You weren't a coward. You were being ganged up on,' I say.

Frankie shakes his head. 'Even if there'd only been one little guy, I still would have been afraid. That's how I am. I'll never fight. And if I'd

run away from TEN guys, my dad would still have thought I was a coward” (Reynolds, 2001, p. 170).

In *Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001), Jason also struggles with his father’s Latin machismo, but in his case it is exacerbated by alcoholism:

Jason had tried, but there seemed to be no pleasing his father. Even when he did what his dad told him- take out the trash, clean out the truck, turn down the stereo, his dad still called him names: Stupid, Dummy, Fairy-Boy, Pansy. His anger seemed more than just a ‘Latin temper,’ as his mom called it (p. 27).

In these cases, hegemonic masculinity becomes culturally and contextually inflated, such that it becomes even more oppressive.

### ***Emphasized femininity***

While issues of hegemonic masculinity arise much more frequently in the male-oriented books than does its corollary of “emphasized femininity” in female-oriented books (Connell, 1995), female characters do not avoid pressures of socially sanctioned forms of femininity either. Similar to fathers regulating their sons’ masculinity, mother figures in these books also reinforce heteronormative assumptions related to gender identity. For instance in *Kissing Kate* (Myracle, 2003), Kate’s mother chastises Kate and Lissa for not dressing more like “ladies.” ““You two have such darling figures,” she chided. ‘You need to accentuate them. Boys like to see a girl’s curves” (Myracle, 2003, p. 14). Then in *Orphea Proud* (Wyeth, 2004), Orphea’s sister-in-law Ruby serves partially *in loco parentis* along her husband, Orphea’s older brother, after their mother

dies. Ruby reinforces proper feminine manners and behaviors, rather than appearance, as in the following excerpt:

‘Orphea, please make less noise. This isn’t a barnyard.’

Or else she’d say something less direct like: ‘What are little girls made of?’

That was my cue to close my mouth when I chewed.

‘Sugar and spice and everything nice,’ she’d answer for me

(Wyeth, 2004, p. 33).

Likewise, H.F., the main character of the novel *Finding H.F.* (Watts, 2001), at one point bemoans her inability to be a properly fashioned ‘girl.’ She wishes she could just be like other girls, so that life would be easier.

Big tears roll down my cheeks and plop into the bathwater, and I wish I was a girl who could needlepoint Bible verses and believe them, who thought about things like matching her eye shadow to her sweaters, who wanted a boy to ask her to the junior-senior prom. It must be so easy to be a girl like that- to just naturally be what other people want you to be (Watts, 2001, p. 66).

This conflict with what is deemed ‘natural’ and thus appropriate continually reoccurs in these novels, placing characters at odds with themselves, other characters, and societal institutions, based primarily on these codes of heteronormativity. Nevertheless, the ramifications thereof differ significantly also based on gender, as H.F. emphasizes below:

I guess I'm lucky, though, because I'm not the only one in school who's different. I don't have to be a lonely gazelle limping along while the lions stalk me. I've got Bo for a friend, and bless his heart, he's got it a lot rougher than I do. The sissy boys always have it harder than the tomboys. If you're a boyish girl, other girls just snub you, but if you're a girlish boy, other boys beat the living hell out of you. Believe me, I've picked Bo up off the pavement more times than I can count (Watts, 2001, p. 8).

### ***The gender binary***

While authors in these themed books frequently challenge through their characters heteronormative assumptions of sexuality and gender, they rarely problematize the sexual and gender binaries constituted through heteronormativity. Even *Luna* (Peters, 2004), the novel describing the transition of a male-to-female transgender character, does not challenge the authority of this binary, but reinforces it by proclaiming Luna's 'authentic' psychological gender as it defies her biological sex. However, one instance in *Boy Meets Boy* (Levithan, 2003) subtly, but powerfully, suggests a performative nature of gender, rather than subscribing to common cultural gender scripts. Paul, the main character/ narrator at one point empathetically discusses his friend Infinite Darlene, interestingly both football quarterback and homecoming queen. Levithan writes:

This close, I can see through all her layers. Beneath the mascara and the lipstick and the chicken pox scar on her lower lip, beneath the girl

and the boy to the person within, who is concerned and confused and sincere (Levithan, 2003, p. 106).

At least here, the concept of gender is destabilized. The reader doesn't know how Infinite Darlene would constitute her gender or sexual identity. Is she gay? Is she transgender? The use of the female pronoun here is thought to refer only to Infinite Darlene's usual presentation of self rather than any absolute defining or categorizing of gender. Furthermore, the omission of any specific label leaves the ambiguity of her identity intact, thus challenging the notion of an essential and stable gender. Instead, gender becomes something that one 'puts on,' but does not define, restrict, or anyway characterize the genderless 'person within.'

### ***Homophobia***

As mentioned in the previous section, homophobic slurs comprise one of the most significant ways that individuals police sexual and gender norms. In this section, I look more closely at the multitude of ways that homophobia is discussed and described in these themed books.

#### ***Homophobia and religion***

Out of the seventeen themed books, six novels, or over a third, connect homophobic attitudes with religious beliefs. In several books, religious affiliation is in fact presumed to correspond with negative attitudes toward homosexuality. For instance, in *Empress of the World* (Ryan, 2001), the characters Battle and Nic meet at an academic summer camp and quickly fall for each other. While hanging out together one evening,

their friend Katrina jokes with Battle about her father, who is a minister, assuming that he would look negatively upon their lesbian relationship.

‘And come on, Nic, Battle lives in the South. Ho-mo-sex-shuality is probably still, like illegal there, right?’

Battle shakes her head. ‘No.’

‘Yeah, but your dad’s a minister! Wouldn’t he shit bricks?’ asks Katrina (Ryan, 2001, p.120).

It is interesting to note here that Battle neither confirms nor denies Katrina’s assertion about her dad- and by leaving that unstated, allows the negative association to remain.<sup>1</sup> In the novel *Geography Club* (Hartinger, 2003), several gay teens discuss the possibility of creating a gay-student alliance (GSA), so that they could have a safe space in schools to talk about issues pertinent to them. However, they know that a local minister would ensure that the GSA would never make, again reinforcing the negative connections between religion- including religious figures- and homosexuality:

If Reverend Blowhard [Bowd] could get so worked up over something as innocent as a teacher talking about contraceptives in a health class, it wasn’t hard to imagine what he and his cadre of concerned parents would do over the existence of a gay-straight alliance at the local high school.

The mushroom cloud would be visible for miles around (Hartinger, 2003, pp. 60-61).

However, the narrator and main character Paul in *Boy Meets Boy* (Levithan, 2003), is even more explicit in regards to the correlation of religion with negative attitudes towards homosexuality:

9 P.M. on a November Saturday. Joni, Tony, and I are out on the town.

Tony is from the next town over and he needs to get out. His parents are extremely religious. It doesn't even matter which religion- they're all the same at a certain point, and few of them want a gay boy cruising around with his friends on a Saturday night (Levithan, 2003, p. 1).

He contends that all religions are the same in their dismissal and disregard of homosexuality and gay teens specifically. As a result, the three of them collude in deceiving Tony's parents, so that Tony can get out for a little while:

So every week Tony feeds us bible stories, then on Saturday we show up at his doorstep well versed in parables and earnestness, dazzling his parents with our blinding purity. They slip him a twenty and tell him to enjoy our study group. We go spend the money on romantic comedies, dimestore toys, and diner jukeboxes. Our happiness is the closest we'll ever come to a generous God, so we figure Tony's parents would understand, if only they weren't set on misunderstanding so many things (Levithan, 2003, p. 1).

By the statement, "our happiness is the closest we'll ever come to a generous God," Paul insinuates the only God he has been aware of is one of condemnation and judgment, thus rejecting God and religion altogether.

Then in the novel *Orphea Proud* (Wyeth, 2004), Orphea attends an annual church revival with her two great-aunts, who have become substitute parent figures for her. However, her homophobic older brother Rupert is in attendance as well. During an altar call, Rupert calls out to the preacher to save his sister. Ashamed and embarrassed, Orphea runs out of the service, addressing the reader directly, “I don’t know about you, but I think a person has the right to decide for herself if she needs to be saved” (Wyeth, 2004, p. 182).

Given the setting of rural Kentucky, the condemnation of homosexuality and gays is more vividly described in the novel *Finding H.F.* (Watts, 2001). Bo and H.F. joke about hell and brimstone sermons they have heard all their lives:

Bo laughs. ‘You’re awful, H.F. You’re the one who’s gonna burn in hell.’

‘If you’re gonna start preachin’ hellfire and brimstone, you might as well drive me home. Memaw’s the one that’s stuck with the job of savin’ my soul. And besides, if what them church people say is right, you’ll be right next to me in hell, shovelin’ coal and complainin’ about how the heat makes your clothes wrinkle’ (Watts, 2001, p. 13).

Although most of the books negatively associate religion with homosexuality, frequently citing the reason for homophobic attitudes and comments, the author Marilyn Reynolds takes the heaviest stance against religious affiliation and homophobia. While in the book *Geography Club*, (Hartinger, 2003) characters discuss the possibility of organizing a GSA, several characters in the novel *Love Rules* (Reynolds, 2001), do

actively organize a GSA in their high school. Not unexpected however, the movement to do so is met with significant resistance from other students and community members.

On the way out of class I hear Eric say to Tiffany, 'Homosexuality is as much of a sin as murder.'

Conan asks him, 'How do you figure?'

'It's all in the Bible.'

'Lots of stuff's in the Bible,' Conan says.

'Yeah. And it's all the word of God. And people like those fags and dykes and that other pervert had better start facing up' (Reynolds, 2001, p. 59).

As the novel continues, the conflict escalates as homophobic harassment intensifies with vandalism and even assault, targeted against a couple of out gay teens, such that GSA members organize to protect them. After concluding one GSA meeting, the members, entering the hall as one mass, confront another group of students:

Guy walks to the door and looks out into the hallway, then says to Emmy, 'You might want to call security.'

It's the guys from the jock table, plus Douglas, and about ten other students.

'Christ First,' Felicia mutters.

I wonder if she's trying to tell me something about how to live my life, but then I realize that the non-jocks are members of the campus Christian group. They are standing just outside the door, holding hands,

heads bowed. As soon as we walk through the door, they start chanting in unison, 'No to perversion! Yes to Jesus!' (Reynolds, 2001, p.231).

Emmy, the librarian and GSA advisor, helps thwart another potential assault and spearheads a "No room for homophobia" campaign among the faculty. As most young adult novels conclude optimistically, the positive campaign wins out in the end, but not before one last challenge is directed at anti-gay conservative Christian groups that try to eliminate and censor students' right to information. Hoping to increase access of books dealing with sexual orientation to teens, the librarian and a few students identify these books with rainbow decorated upside-down triangle stickers. I question Reynolds' characterization of Emma the librarian here: *Hasn't she read multiple reports about these books going missing or conservative Christian groups checking these books out and never returning them? Labeling the books this way would just make it that much easier for the books to be removed or permanently lost.* In fact, that is what happens: the librarian eventually realizes that most of the books with the triangle stickers had been checked out by members of the Christ First group. "They were all legally checked out, but not one returned" (Reynolds, 2001, p. 267). When the librarian called to inquire about the books, she was always politely told they would be returned, but never were. As a result one GSA member wrote an editorial for the newspaper claiming:

such tactics were dishonest- the sneakiest form of censorship. We took turns writing letters to the editor of the *Hamilton Heights Daily News*, so there would be at least one a week. We pointed to the hypocrisy of so-

called Christians who stole school property. We questioned where theft fit into the ideals of 'Americans for Family Values' (Reynolds, 2001, p. 267).

Although Reynolds provides an unusually heavy-handed attack on anti-gay conservative Christian groups, the sentiment among these books repeatedly reinforces negative correlations of religious beliefs and homosexuality, which likewise creates an underpinning connection of homophobia to religion. While this portrayal of religion and homosexuality/ homophobia, dominate, in a few instances, authors present alternate depictions of religiosity and homosexuality. Levithan (2003) for instance provides a more balanced, sympathetic perspective to conservative Christians, rather than necessarily vilifying them as Reynolds (2001) seems to do. Instead, Levithan demonstrates how as parents, they just want what is best for their children too. In the following excerpt, Paul is trying to convince Tony to escape the rigid oppressiveness of his parents and come live with Paul and his parents:

'I can't, Paul. I can't just leave. I know you wouldn't understand this, but they love me. It would be much easier if they didn't. But in their own way, they love me. They honestly believe that if I don't straighten out, I will lose my soul. It's not just that they don't want me kissing other guys- they think if I do it, I will be damned. *Damned*, Paul. And I know that doesn't mean anything to you. It really doesn't mean anything to me.

To them, though, it's everything (Levithan, 2003, p. 152).

While Paul argues with Tony claiming if they really loved him, they would accept him as he is, Tony underscores his parents' struggle between trying to be supportive parents

and fearing such acceptance would condemn his everlasting soul. Unlike Reynolds especially, the level-headed characterization of Tony helps put conservative Christians into a different light that might facilitate some communication and understanding on this issue, rather than ongoing divisiveness.

Then in *The Rainbow Kite* (Shyer, 2002), after Bennett comes out as gay and has been targeted with hate language, his parents depict contrasting perspectives about homosexuality, religion, and homophobia. The discussion in the following excerpt centers around the symbol of the ‘rainbow,’ which in Judeo-Christian traditions represents God’s covenant with his chosen people of Israel that through His wrath would never destroy the world again. However, in contemporary queer communities, the ‘rainbow’ symbol represents diversity and spaces welcome to GLBTQ individuals. Bennett and his neighbor friend Jeremy have been constructing a rainbow kite that they intend to fly over their junior high school graduation ceremony.

‘I thought you meant, God had put it [the rainbow] there as a sign for gay people-’ I [Bennett’s younger brother Matthew] think I was sounding even more dodo, the way my brother’s eyes rolled under his eyebrows.

‘Matthew- are you KIDDING?’

But Mom smiled a little smile. ‘Maybe yes. Who knows what God intended?’

At that point, Dad’s eyes popped out. His cool was gone. His voice went *boom*. ‘Oh, for heaven’s sake, Lydia, what are you *saying*?’

‘I’ll tell you what I’m saying!’ Mom had pulled a pair of kitchen scissors out of the drawer- probably what’d she’d been looking for all along- and pointed them at Dad. Her voice went up and up too. ‘I’m saying God is not a homophobe! That’s what I’m saying!’ (Shyer, 2002, p. 156).

This comparison regarding the symbolism of the rainbow comes up in the novel *Finding H.F.* (Watts, 2001) as well. H.F. and Bo are journeying from Kentucky to Florida to find and meet H.F.’s mother, who ran off when H.F. was an infant. Along the way they stop for a few days in Atlanta, Georgia, surprised and amazed by the freedom of individuals and the discovery of stores and churches specifically designated for GLBTQ individuals. One bookstore is identified by a rainbow flag flying over it.

‘The rainbow sign...’ The last time I heard the words ‘the rainbow sign,’ they were coming out of Memaw’s mouth...there was this song Memaw used to sing to me when I was a little girl: ‘God Gave Noah the Rainbow Sign.’ It was about the rainbow God sent to tell Noah He would never destroy the world by flood again. It’s funny: I had loved that song when I was little, but I had forgot all about it till just now (Watts, 2001, pp. 109-110).

In *So Hard to Say* (Sanchez, 2004), Frederick, who continues to struggle with the possibility that he might be gay, discusses the issue with Iggy, who is thought to be gay by his peers at school. Iggy admits to being gay, but that he hasn’t ‘come out’ to his parents who are devout Catholics and believe that homosexuality is a sin. Iggy, however

disagrees with them and the religious doctrine noting his own experience with God and wrongfulness.

‘But I know God loves me.’ Iggy tapped his chest, turning serious again. ‘I don’t care what anyone says.’

‘So you don’t think it’s something bad?’ I asked.

‘Think about it,’ Iggy said firmly. ‘People have been picking on me ever since grade school- making fun of how I talk or walk- before I even knew what *gay* meant. I used to come home crying every day because of them. And they have the nerve to tell me that *I’m* bad?’  
(Sanchez, 2004, p. 199).

The message of condemnation and perversion commonly associated with conservative religions is juxtaposed in the novel *Finding H.F.*, when H.F. and Bo encounter the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), cathedral-sized churches specifically geared to the needs of queer communities.

It’s hard for me to say how I feel seeing these two signs [a rainbow flag and a cross] mixed together. All my life I’ve heard gay people preached against as perverts, and now finding out that there’s such a thing as a church for gay people...well, it’s awful to say, but it feels like I just found out that the Ku Klux Klan started accepting black members and working for racial equality (Watts, 2001, p. 118).

H.F. is further surprised to learn that the preacher is a woman and a lesbian.

The woman preacher's pretty too...I can't stop staring at her, and I can't stop thinking, *She's a woman, she's a preacher, and she likes girls just the same as me.*

We sing a hymn, which isn't as peppy as the jumping-Jesus music at Memaw's church, and then the preacher woman starts talking. And do you know what? Nothing she says makes me mad or hurts my feelings. She reads from the Bible about how Jesus helped the woman at the well even though everybody else thought they were too good to have anything to do with her. She talks about how people in the church help people with AIDS and cancer, and teen runaways, which I know is true because I'm sitting next to three of them. She says it's important that we follow Jesus' example and help all the people we can. Now, it seems to me whether you believe in Jesus or not, there'd have to be something wrong with you if you disagreed with the idea that you ought to help folks (Watts, 2001, p. 119).

As can be seen from these multiple examples, the connection between homophobia and religious beliefs is often portrayed in young adult contemporary realistic fiction. Authors frequently cite religious convictions as bases for negative attitudes towards and prejudices against GLBTQ individuals. In contemporary society, the debate between religious-based intolerance and positive acceptance of queer individuals has intensified during the span of publication of these books. For instance, several communities (e.g. San Francisco, CA), states (e.g. Massachusetts), and even

nations, (e.g. Canada) have moved to legalize same-sex marriages, providing equal protection under the law for same-sex couples as opposite sex couples. Likewise, the recent ordination of the first openly gay Episcopal bishop has caused international strife and rupture in the Anglican community due to differing interpretations of Christian scriptures. Although different Christian denominations disagree about the interpretation of Biblical scriptures mentioning homosexuality, most of the young adult books reference negative, homophobic religious attitudes, generally originating from literalist interpretations. Only in a few occasions do authors include references to religion and homosexuality that affirm queer individuals. As such, these books largely maintain and perpetuate correlations between religious affiliation and beliefs with homophobic prejudices.

***Homophobia as behavioral and systemic***

While homophobic attitudes in these themed books have largely been attributed to and connected with conservative Christian beliefs, the books in fact suggest multiple reasons underlying these attitudes. In some cases, the book ascribe homophobia to personal ignorance, as with *My Heartbeat* (Freyman-Wehr, 2002), *The Bermudez Triangle* (Johnson, 2004), or *The Rainbow Kite* (Shyer, 2002). In other circumstances, these books, especially *Love Rules* (Reynolds, 2001) and *Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001) accentuate homophobia's systemic association with heteronormativity.

In the book *My Heartbeat* (Freyman-Weyr, 2002), the character Ellen researches the topic of homosexuality to understand the insinuation that her older brother and his best friend are a 'couple.' In doing so, she comes to align homophobic attitudes

and behavior with ignorance, uncharacteristic of intelligent, reasonable people. Because of this, she claims that being gay in contemporary society is ‘no big deal.’

Now it’s not a big deal. There’s AIDS to worry about or getting attacked by a redneck, but that’s about it. Only people who don’t know better still think it’s shameful or wrong to be gay, but not people we know. Not smart people (Freyman-Weyr, 2002, p. 52).

If this is the case, she cannot comprehend why her intelligent brother Link is so concerned and afraid that he might be gay.

Which makes me think there’s something seriously wrong with Link. Why the nuclear meltdown at my asking if he and James were a couple? James said Link was afraid. Afraid of what? Link’s too smart to think like the people I’ve read about. The religious zealots and other people who don’t know better (Freyman-Weyr, 2002, p. 52).

Ellen may associate religious zealots with ignorance because in their religious zeal, they seem to blindly follow religious doctrine and leaders, than purportedly listening to reason about homosexuality. She continues this discussion by noting the change in widespread psychiatric opinion which no longer deems homosexuality as a mental illness, as was classified in earlier DSM manuals.

People used to think that being gay was a mental illness, but doctors (*especially* psychiatrists) no longer believe that. Even if Mr. and Mrs. Wentworth aren’t fit to be parents, I’ve never heard Mom call them stupid.

I ask James if his parents know that reasonable people don't think being gay is a mental illness (p. 57).

James responds, "'They do know,' he says. 'They send me so I can make my own choices without being influenced by their deep desire that I be straight'" (Freyman-Weyr, 2002, p.57). In this way, James acknowledges a powerful tension that may in fact epitomize the postmodern era- the tension between conscious, rational thought and the deep unconscious. Modernist ideals have underscored the human capacity for rational thought, while postmodern philosophies highlight the significance of the irrational, unconscious, and complex emotional desires that also substantially influence human behavior. As James explains to Ellen, no matter how intelligent the person- because of the power of heteronormative forces on the personal psyche- "no one wants their kid to be gay" (p. 58).

While agreeing with the idea that "only people who don't know better still think [homosexuality's] shameful," the novels *The Bermudez Triangle* (Johnson, 2004) and *The Rainbow Kite* (Shyer, 2002) also demonstrate how difficult it is for gay individuals to live in face of these heteronormative pressures. In both cases the major characters, Mel and Bennett, respectively, struggle with and against the internalization of shame that accompanies homophobic attacks- verbally and/ or physically. Also in both cases, friends/ allies seek to redirect this focus away from them personally and onto the perpetrators themselves. In *The Bermudez Triangle* (Johnson, 2004), a few guys verbally accost Mel at the restaurant where she works.

'What did they say?' [Parker asks.]

She shook her head. She couldn't repeat it. It was vile. They had tried to make her disgusting. Parker stopped what he was doing for a minute and leaned over the trash.

'It's okay,' he said. 'You can't blame them for being inbred' (p. 271).

Then in *The Rainbow Kite* (Shyer, 2002), an old friend of Bennett's named Shearon stops by his house to encourage him to go to their junior high school graduation. Bennett had shut himself off from the rest of the world after a suicide attempt, resulting from deep internalized shame about being gay. Shearon, an African American youth and subject to years of racism, confronts Bennett with a personal truth, "You know what, Bennett? If people don't like you, hey, it's *their* problem, not yours, so GET OVER IT!" (Shyer, 2002, p. 194).

In order to bolster their friends' esteem, Parker and Shearon argue from an individualistic perspective that homophobia is 'someone else's problem.' Nevertheless, as suggested by James, homophobia derives from a systemic structure of heteronormativity that presumes and privileges heterosexuality and creates a climate permissive of homophobic attitudes and behaviors. This is particularly demonstrated in the books *Love Rules* (Reynolds, 2001) and *Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001), in which several characters challenge the systemic nature of homophobia. In *Love Rules* (Reynolds, 2001), Woodsy, an English teacher, former administrator, and supporter of the student GSA, comments on negative reactions generated from the increasing support for the GSA:

‘Look. We don’t know how any of this is going to turn out,’ Woodsy says. ‘What we do know is there is a lot of emotion and controversy over how things should be handled right now. Seeing the added bracelets on campus is wonderful. GSA is gaining support. But...’

Woodsy points to another anti-gay sticker on a table in the reference section, and on a shelf that contains a number of books with rainbow triangle stickers.

‘Those four boys aren’t the only ones who are hateful and intolerant’ (Reynolds, 2001, p. 255).

Although four teens spearheaded the attacks against gay and lesbian youth, Woodsy reminds GSA members, that those four aren’t the only ones who hold anti-gay beliefs, and that such beliefs are widely accepted.

One of the main characters, Kyle, from *Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001), is even more explicit about the structural facet to homophobia. He avoids personal confrontations with the antagonist/ bully in that book, noting, “What good would it do? For every Jack Ransom, there’s ten more. He’s not the problem, homophobia’s the problem.” However, his best friend Nelson reminds him of the complexity of homophobia: that it’s both systemic and personal. “And you know what your problem is, Kyle? You’re too damn rational. I can just see you standing there while Jack punches you out, and you say, ‘That’s okay, Jack, you’re not the problem, homophobia’s the problem’” (Sanchez, 2001, p. 38).

***Range of homophobic reactions and assertions***

While the themed books foreground religious beliefs for negative and homophobic attitudes towards gays and lesbians, other reasons for such attitudes are included as discussed above. Possibly more significant is the extent to which homophobic insinuations, slurs, and disparaging comments towards GLBTQ characters pervades these books. It is this pervasiveness that helps create a climate largely permissive of homophobic attitudes and behaviors, including that of harassment and persecution, which is discussed later.

The least direct homophobic depictions of homosexuality is manifested as innuendo and insinuations, in which characters skirt around the language of sexuality. In this way, they presume cultural “knowledge” about gay and lesbian individuals to discuss and characterize them without outright debasing them. For instance in the novel *Eight Seconds* (Ferris, 2000), John’s older sister Caroline comments how surprised she is for “somebody like him [John’s new friend from rodeo school, Kit]” to be interested in rodeos (p. 72). “‘I mean, I just thought, he was more *political*. He’s pretty active on campus.’ She gave Mom a sideways look. ‘In the Lambda Society’” (Ferris, 2000, p. 72). John fails to understand the cultural significance of the reference of ‘lambda’ that frequently signifies GLBTQ groups and so fails to understand the import of the allusion itself.

A fine line distinguishes insinuation from homophobic slur, which occurs in every GLBTQ themed book as a conflict for these characters, although to differing degrees. On the one hand, connotatively, insinuations as in the above example, seek to

appear more neutral, the use of indirect language implies a cultural mores and boundary around socially (in)appropriate or (in)decent topics, and so in fact defies such implied neutrality. On the other hand, homophobic slurs tend to be more direct, more openly condemning and derisive, although they too frequently employ cultural allusions to create meaning. For example, in *Finding H.F.* (Watts, 2001), H.F. and her best friend Bo journey to rediscover H.F.'s mother. When they do meet her, she contemptuously asks about Bo: "'Speakin' of men, who's your boyfriend there?' Bo's been standing there the whole time, and I had plum forgot about him. 'This is Bo, but he ain't my boyfriend.' 'No,' she says, 'he don't look like boyfriend material'" (Watts, 2001, p. 144).

Frequently, homophobic slurs are not directed towards a major character, but a supporting or backdrop character. Nevertheless, this form of homophobia helps maintain a hostile environment for principal GLBTQ characters struggling to come out and struggling to be affirmed.

'Here comes Iggy!' Nora interrupted.

I followed her gaze across the lunchroom to the Mexican boy I'd noticed in the hall my first day- the one who smiled like he knew me. Dimple Guy.

'You mean *icky*,' Carmen murmured, making a sour face. 'I think *maricónes* are so gross.'

'*En serio?*' María put down her yogurt. 'You really think he's a gay?' (Sanchez, 2004, p. 39).

Then later in the same novel, Frederick cruises his hometown mall with his old friends, when another character calls the attention of the group to two guys, saying, “Fag alert!”

Ahead of us two men in jeans and designer jackets pointed in a store window, discussing clothes. They looked nice enough. How could Jim tell they were gay? And why did he care if they were?

I would’ve asked Jim that, but what if he challenged me in return? I imagined Janice, William, and Marcie eyeing me as if I were some sort of freak- just like they were staring at these two guys (Sanchez, 2004, pp. 131-132).

Similarly, in *Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001), Jason and his girlfriend Debra join up with their best friends Cindy and Corey for lunch, when they see two guys dressed in polo shirts.

...Debra dangled her wrist limply, and silently mouthed the word  
‘Homos.’

Cindy and Corey burst out laughing. Jason didn’t.

Debra’s smile sagged. ‘Jason? What’s the matter?’

‘Nothing,’ he lied. ‘Let’s order.’

While they sipped their drinks, they talked about school.

Eventually the conversation turned to Nelson’s green hair. Cindy laughed.

‘He’s such a freak’ (Sanchez, 2001, p. 29).

Then in *Keeping You a Secret* (Peters, 2003), even a character from the ancient classic *Beowulf* suddenly becomes a point for homophobic slurs, when an English teacher requires students to write a character sketch. This causes angst for the main character Holland, when one student asks:

‘Can we pick the fact that Wulfie is gay?’

My spine fused. People twisted their heads to gawk at Marcus.

They swiveled back to catch Arbuthnot’s reaction. She said, ‘And how did you come to *that* conclusion?’

‘The scene with him and his merry men, splashing around in the water. Seems pretty swishy to me.’ He wagged a limp wrist.

Everyone laughed...

Any other time I might’ve found him slightly amusing. Today I wanted to stand and scream, ‘What is this? National Gay Bashing Week?’ But I couldn’t. I couldn’t command my muscles to move. Couldn’t get out of my chair. Couldn’t bring myself to do what I knew was right (Peters, 2003, p. 72).

Research has demonstrated that a common way of producing group solidarity and ‘community’ is by deriding outsiders, in this case, gays and lesbians (Connell, 1995; Plummer, 2001). In the above excerpts, different characters target homophobic slurs towards individuals outside the group: be it characters from classic literature, unnamed backdrop characters, or specific marginalized supporting characters. Rather than being questioned or challenged, the typical reaction is laughter, forming a social bond for that

in-group, whether a group of friends or classmates. Then, when one member fails to play the expected role by joining in and appreciating the humor, as with Jason, he too is questioned and his behavior challenged.

Although in all these cases, the main character feels some emotional distance from the projected targets of the homophobic slurs, the main characters- Frederick, Jason, Holland- respond personally nevertheless. Jason grows uncomfortable; Frederick worries about what his friends would think about him; Holland silently screams against the intolerance, but stays glued to her seat. As each begins to increasingly question their sexual identity, the prevalence of the homophobic language also becomes increasingly disturbing, making it more difficult to withstand.

The power of such homophobic language, however, to create hostile environments for major characters in these books appears to intensify in direct correlation to the social proximity of the targets to the main characters in these books. In the earlier instances, the targets were constituted as either unspecified backdrop characters or social outcasts. As such, this social distance also allowed for some emotional distance for main characters. But as the targets become relationally closer, the intensity of that language to create hostile environment significantly increases. For example in the novel *Empress of the World* (Ryan, 2001), after Battle has broken up with Nic, two of Nic's classmates at the academic camp taunt her:

‘Oooh, Little Miss Bleeding Heart Lesbian’s by herself today,’  
says Ben. ‘Did China Girl turn you down?’

‘What the hell are you talking about?’ I demand.

Ben grins. He says, 'You know what I'm talking about. I know about you.- I've seen you around with that other girl, the skinhead. Well, she ditched you, so now you wanna put some Chinese food on your menu.'

'Moo goo *gay* pan,' Alex chimes in (Ryan, 2001, p. 167).

Nic can largely ignore their homophobic teasing because of the short time period of the camp itself. However, in the novel *Keeping You a Secret* (Peters, 2003), Holland repeatedly has to deal with homophobic animosity of an old friend named Kirsten while she develops a "crush" on a new girl named Cece. While Holland slowly begins to understand the significance of this "crush" as something much more important, her old friend Kirsten continues to repeatedly hurl about homophobic slurs. For instance in the following scene, Cece has turned in an application to the student council- of which Holland is president, Seth, Holland's boyfriend is vice-president, and Kirsten also a member- for a LGBT club.

'The queers want a club? Forget it?'

Who said that? My head whipped around. Kirsten?

'Let me see.' She snatched the app [application] out of my hand.

'Ms. Marenko agreed to be their faculty rep?' She clucked her tongue. 'I always figured her for a big dyke...'

'Wait a minute-' my voice rose.

Seth reached across the table and squeezed my wrist. 'Don't we come off looking like a bunch of intolerant bigots if we turn them down?'

'Thank you,' I said to him.

Kirsten quipped, 'What do you think Zero Tolerance Policy means?' (Peters, 2003, pp. 62-63).

Then later, while Holland is out to eat with her friends, Kirsten brings back up the issue of the gay club. Although Holland, her boyfriend Seth, and other friend Leah show empathy towards Cece and other gay teens at school, Kirsten and Coop engage in a homophobic repartee.

'So is your lezzie friend going to reapply for a Gay Straight Alliance?' she asked.

'No,' I answered, a slow burn spreading through my gut. 'Don't call her that, okay? Her name is Cece.' I lifted my Big Mac to my mouth. 'She doesn't want a GSA. Just a gay club.' I took a bite.

'See?' Kirsten bent over to sip her soda. 'Agenda...'

Leah added, 'I imagine it's pretty lonely being the only out person in school. I think she's incredibly brave. I don't know how they find each other if they're not out.'

Coop said, 'They list their phone numbers in the john. For a good time, call Bruce. 1-800-222-'

Kirsten snorted. Coop smirked. He said. 'You know what gay means, don't you? Got AIDS Yet?'

Seth pre-empted my explosion. 'Shut up, Coop. That isn't funny. You going to eat that?' He indicated my Big Mac.

I shoved it over to him.

Kirsten dipped a Chicken McNugget into a cup of barbecue sauce and popped into her mouth. ‘She’s just trolling for meat,’ she said with her mouth full. Turning to Coop, she added, ‘And not the Oscar Mayer weiner variety’ (Peters, 2003, pp. 91-92).

What is unusual in the above scene is that despite three out of the five characters denouncing the homophobic comments, Kirsten and Coop still feel permitted to speak against gays so blatantly. Although Seth for example doesn’t agree with his best friend Coop and in fact chides him for being such a jerk, he is more interested in food than truly making a stand. It isn’t until Holland gets up and leaves the table, declaring that she’s had enough, that Coop at least later apologizes. Because of Holland’s strong negative response to their ongoing homophobic remarks, however, the attention is directed towards her, not the issue of their homophobia- just as when Debra questioned Jason in the earlier excerpt asking, ‘what’s wrong?’ when he didn’t join in their laughter and fun.

Beyond innuendo and insinuation, beyond rude and insensitive comments, homophobia is also represented as virulent scorn and disgust. In *Rainbow High* (Sanchez, 2003), Kyle, a member of the high school swim team, endures ongoing harassment for being gay and when a father of a teammate complains to the coach, he is eventually asked to stop taking showers in the boys’ locker room after swim practices. However, the homophobia becomes more pronounced during an away swim meet, and hotel room assignments are given.

‘Room three-thirteen!’ She [the boys’ swim coach] held up a key and read from her clipboard. ‘Charlie, Vin, Frank, and Kyle.’

‘I’m not sleeping in the same room with no fag,’ Charlie hissed.

Immediately the entire lobby turned silent. All eyes turned to Kyle. Blood surged into his face, burning with shame.

Charlie nudged an elbow at Vin, who shifted his glance from Kyle to Coach Sweeney. ‘Um, I’m not rooming with him either.’

At that, everyone looked to see what Frank would say. He nervously glanced away from Kyle and echoed, ‘Um, me neither’ (p. 177).

In this excerpt, we see the unabashed disgust Charlie feels regarding gays, let alone sharing a room with one. This again draws upon the presumed predatory nature of gays and lesbians- that they will try to ‘recruit’ straight people to be gay. Not only that, we see Charlie’s leadership, coercing other teammates, to choose sides with him, and take a stance also against gays.

Similar to the exchange between Kirsten and Coop, in the novel *Love Rules* (Reynolds, 2001), two characters, Brian and Eric, keep reiterating their open disgust for GLBT individuals. When one teacher brings in a panel to enlighten her students about queer issues, the two become even more vociferous. “‘There shouldn’t *be* any fags and then we wouldn’t have to have names for them,’ Brian says, prompting more laughter from Eric and a few others” (Reynolds, 2001, p. 52). This statement suggests that Brian would encourage the elimination of all GLBT people, decrying their very existence.

In *Keeping You a Secret* (Peters, 2003), Holland's mother speaks in cool tones, but nevertheless, conveys clear disgust towards gays and lesbians, and specifically Cece when she meets her.

'Where did you pick up this Cece?'

My head raised to meet Mom's eyes. Her tone of voice annoyed me. 'You make her sound like a disease.'

Mom lifted a college catalog off my dresser and flipped through it.

'What do you see in this girl?'

If she only knew. 'She's cool. I like her.'

Mom set the catalog down and said, 'I don't really want you hanging out with people like her. After tonight, tell her to look elsewhere for friends.'

My jaw unhinged.

Mom added, 'And be home by eleven.'

Since when did I have a curfew? And since when did my mother choose my friends? I waited until I heard her footsteps on the stairs, then murmured, 'Go to hell,' and flipped her the bird (Peters, 2003, p. 135).

While Holland maintains a heterosexual façade, dating (and then pretending to date) her boyfriend Seth, she is free to come and go as she pleases. However, as soon as Holland's mother simply meets Cece, she starts instilling restrictions- a curfew and her choice of friends. Her mother's disgust becomes even more painful later when she discovers

Holland to be in fact dating Cece: she kicks Holland out of the house and refuses to let Holland see her baby sister Hannah.

Mom yelled at me, ‘I didn’t raise you to be a lesbian!’ She made it sound like the filthiest word in the English language. ‘It’s sick. Perverted. *You’re* perverted.’ Neal [Holland’s step-father] held [Holland’s mother] in a death grip.

‘It’s not like that.’ I reached for Mom, trying to calm her, explain. ‘It’s beautiful. We love each other.’

She broke free of Neal and charged me. Hit me again; just started slapping and punching my face and arms and anyplace her hands connected. Neal wedged between us, palming off her blows. Trying to. ‘You disgust me!’ she screamed...

Her face was so purple I thought she’d explode. ‘Two minutes.’ To Neal she said, ‘I want her out of this house in two minutes,’

He widened his eyes at me. Hannah howled and hiccupped. ‘Oh, Hannie.’ I paused to comfort her. Mom ripped me away and screeched, ‘Don’t you *touch* my baby! Don’t you ever touch her again’ (Peters, 2003, p. 181).

Likewise in the novel *Orphea Proud* (Wyeth, 2004), Orphea must deal with her brother’s disgust and condemnation of gays. She first witnesses this as a young girl when they go out for ice cream and she learns a new meaning for the word “fairies.”

‘I’m not sitting across from a couple of fairies.’

I turned and looked through the window. All I could see were the two men. Their sundae was almost finished. One of them was saying something and the other was laughing. 'What fairies?'

Rupert glared. 'Them. Stay away from those kind of people.'

The man who had been laughing noticed us staring and quickly turned away.

I got the message. There was a new kind of fairy- they were bad and also scary. I could feel the fear in Ruby's body as she led me to the car. And the disgust on Rupert's face- as if he swallowed a rat. I never forgot it. So, when my hormones began to rage and my best friend became the object, you bet I felt panic (Wyeth, 2004, pp. 85-86).

After the scene at the ice cream parlor, Orpheus becomes quite aware of her brother's strong prejudices against gays, and as mentioned, fears what might happen if he found out about her. Those fears become justified when she suffers his wrath, when he catches her in bed with her best friend Lissa.

As if he could read my thoughts, my brother stared up at me with that look that, even from down on the street, told me that as far as he was concerned I was an insect. I had been squashed, I was bleeding and tasting my own blood; my arm was shooting with pain. I found it hard to walk, but when I heard his footsteps on the stairs again, I ran (Wyeth, 2004, pp. 24-25).

Rupert confronts Lissa and she drives wildly off. However, the roads are slick from a night of snow and ice and she dies in a car wreck. When Orphea's sister-in-law Ruby informs Orphea of Lissa's tragedy, Orphea retaliates in anger, denial, and despair:

Rupert grabbed me by the collar and slapped me.

'I wanted to give you the benefit of the doubt, but now I see that you are incorrigible. Your friend just died and you're cursing at your mother!'

'My friend didn't die! She's not my mother!'

'We don't have your kind of people in our family. Thank your lucky stars that we're willing to forgive you.'

'Forgive me!'

'To forget what I saw. It's unacceptable! But I'm willing to forget, now that she's dead.'

'Stop saying that! You asshole! I hate you!' (Wyeth, 2004, p. 40).

In both novels *Keeping You a Secret* (Peters, 2003) and *Orphea Proud* (Wyeth, 2004), the main characters face the significant challenge of virulent homophobia from family members that turns from scorn and disgust to assault. In none of these above cases does the reader get a clear sense or reason that explains or justifies the characters' homophobia however. In the earlier examples, homophobia seems to be a way of reinforcing group solidarity by targeting a marginalized group. While contemporary society has moved to sanction *overt* acts of anti-Semitism, racism, sexism, homophobic comments remains largely permitted and frequently praised (Fone, 2000). Thus,

teenagers generally feel free for the most part to insult GLBT individuals without fear of social sanctioning from peers or authority figures- and may in fact feel encouraged to do so. However, the characterizations of Kirsten (*Keeping You a Secret*) and Brian (*Love Rules*) suggest a maliciousness towards GLBT individuals that remains unexplained in the novels. So too is the case with Holland's mother and Orphea's brother. While in all of these cases the characters demonstrate deep-seated animosity towards GLBT individuals, making frequent references to homosexuality as sick and perverted, the authors provide nothing in the character development to explain why these characters feel and behave as they do. Their flat characterizations seem to simply provide foils for the novels' protagonists. Unlike the other depictions of homophobia at least as religiously-based, these representations lack any clear rationale for the intense negative responses. In this way, homophobia comes to be portrayed less as a tool to police heteronormativity, but rather as a childhood monster in the closet, grown enormous, with no clear reason for being; other than just because the characters believe it to be so.

### ***School institutions***

One of the most powerful cultural institutions is that of schooling. As has been demonstrated by significant research, schools most frequently reproduce cultural norms and injustices (Harber, 2004; Weis & Fine, 2005; Willis, 1981). Although schools can be sites of resistance and change, the heteronormative shape of schooling has largely held fast, providing significant conflict for GLBTQ youth (Sears, 1999). From early grades, gender and sexually non-conforming youth suffer name-calling, harassment, and

persecution, forcing most to remain closeted throughout their K-12 years (Bickmore, 1999).

### *Schools as homophobic environments*

In these GLBTQ themed novels, the authors harshly criticize faculties and administrators that permit and encourage-explicitly or otherwise- harassment of these teens. While at least eight of the seventeen novels present negative portrayals of schools, as institutionalized sites that condone homophobia and fraternity through their authoritative power, three novels, *Love Rules* (Reynolds, 2001), *Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001), and *Rainbow High* (Sanchez, 2003) especially foreground this issue as a primary conflict for characters. For instance in the novel *Rainbow Boys*, two main characters Nelson and Kyle seek school approval for a GSA, which when contested is brought before the local school board. Nelson's mother highlights the painful experiences of her son in connection to schooling from as early as kindergarten.

Nelson's mom was called next. She walked to the front and sat at the microphone. 'It's said a picture is worth a thousand words. Since I have only one minute...' She opened her pocketbook and passed the photo of six-year-old Nelson to the board president.

Nelson squirmed with embarrassment as his mom continued: 'That's my son, taken his first morning of kindergarten. Smiling. Happy. When I picked him up that afternoon, however, you would see a very different picture of him. Crying. Hurt. Sad. You see, his very first day of

school he learned a new word: 'sissy.' The next morning he begged me not to make him go back...'

'I promised him school would get better. I believed it then. Now I realize I lied. For the past twelve years, every single school day he's been called names and obscenities, while most teachers have stood by silently. Some school officials even told him he brought it upon himself.'

She looked at Mr. Mueller [the high school principal], who turned away from her gaze.

'Simply because he walks and talks differently from other boys, he's been hit, kicked, beat up, spit upon, and received death threats (Sanchez, 2001, pp. 180-181).

This excerpt highlights the social policing discussed earlier surrounding heteronormativity and the painful consequences for the children and youth who do not conform to these norms. Like Iggy from *So Hard to Say* (Sanchez, 2004), she notes how her son has been persecuted- just because he was different. More significantly, she indicts the school system, including teachers and administrators, for failing to positively intervene in this daily persecution, because they believe Nelson to be somehow responsible for walking differently and talking differently from other boys. In fact, earlier in the same novel, the principal Mr. Mueller ignores the fact that Nelson and Kyle were unjustly attacked by two school bullies, placing the blame squarely on the victims, especially Nelson:

...While Nelson argued that it wasn't their fault, Mueller sat behind his huge desk pulling a rubber band between his fingers. 'Nelson, I don't want to hear it. If you'd just stop acting so...'

Nelson faked a yawn, making Mueller madder. 'Can't you just act *normal!*' (Sanchez, 2001, pp. 36-37).

The indictment against administrators and faculty recurs repeatedly and forcefully in these novels. H.F. from *Finding H.F.* (Watts, 2001) comments on the greater likelihood for teachers not to intervene in a fight involving her friend Bo, than to actually do so.

Sometimes a nice teacher comes along and stops the fight- not that you could really call it a fight, because it's always four or more guys against Bo. But most teachers pretend not to notice, because they're just older versions of the boys who are kicking the crap out of the 'faggot.' They also smell that Bo's different, and they think he deserves a good butt whipping because of it (Watts, 2001, p. 8).

As will be demonstrated, this concept of 'blaming the victim' repeatedly recurs in these novels.

The two novels *Rainbow High* (Sanchez, 2003) and *Love Rules* (Reynolds, 2001), however, provide the most pointed portrayals of schooling authorities and institutions, albeit largely negative, but with significant positive representations as well. For this reason, I provide extended excerpts from these two books to help illustrate these depictions of schools in relation to homosexuality and homophobia. Most notably, these

authors reiterate the negative refrain seen in the previous examples of faculty and administrators 'blaming the victim.'

In the novel *Rainbow High* (Sanchez, 2003), Kyle's swimming coach, Coach Sweeney, struggles how to handle negative responses to Kyle coming out. Rather than confronting the homophobia directly, she vacillates, seeking to avoid the issue altogether. In so doing, she displaces responsibility for dealing with the homophobia onto Kyle to avoid taking a definitive stance herself.

She [Coach Sweeney] peered at him across the desk, pressing the palms of her thin, tanned hands together.

'Is something wrong?' Kyle asked.

'I don't how to say this.' Coach Sweeney took a deep breath. 'I'll just say it. One of your teammates objects to having to shower in the same room as someone who proclaims he's gay.' She lifted a sheet of paper off the desk. 'His father sent a rather forceful note.'

Kyle stared at the paper, speechless. Why was this happening to him? He'd never even remotely come on to any guy on the team. In fact, he went out of his way to avoid glancing at his teammates in the shower. They were the ones who yanked down each other's briefs, pretending they were joking.

'Kyle, I'm not sure how to ask you,' Coach Sweeney was saying.

'But I need to know. Is there any reason this boy should be concerned?'

'No!' Kyle snapped. How could she even think that?

‘Okay.’ Coach Sweeney backed off. ‘I believe you. But I’m afraid this is uncharted territory for me. What do you think we should do?’

(Sanchez, 2003, p. 87)

Kyle appreciates Coach Sweeney’s uncomfortable position and agrees to wait until he gets home to shower. However, Coach Sweeney abrogates her authority as coach by seeking advice from Kyle and then allowing him to alter his behavior to ameliorate the situation. Doing so thus simplifies matters greatly for her. Despite ongoing verbal harassment Kyle incurs, Coach Sweeney ignores, avoids, or pretends not to hear the comments.

However, the oppressive homophobia amongst Kyle’s teammates comes to a head during an away swim meet. Coach Sweeney assigns Kyle to room with three other boys, including a boy named Charlie, who instigates the worst of the harassment towards Kyle. Following Charlie’s lead, the other two boys refuse to sleep in the same room with Kyle as well. Regardless, Coach Sweeney still discounts the seriousness of the behavior, demanding the boys “stop being silly” (Sanchez, 2003, p. 177).

Kyle’s embarrassment turned to outrage. Coach Sweeney thought making him feel like a leper was ‘silly’? Had she ever heard the word ‘harassment’?

Doubtless trying to be helpful, Cindy said, ‘He can stay with us.’ The other girls giggled.

‘Yeah,’ Charlie quickly chimed in. ‘He can stay with the *girls!*’ (Sanchez, 2003, p. 177).

Only when Kyle storms out the door does Coach Sweeney strongly react, decrying Kyle's presumed disrespect and insubordination towards her.

Coach Sweeney turned to Kyle, her eyes burning with anger. 'I've had enough, Kyle. You brought this on yourself. If you hadn't started this whole coming out business, none of this would've happened.'

True enough. When he'd been the quiet, shy kid, no one had picked on him. But why should he have to go through school invisible?

Things might never have come to this if she'd said something the times those jerks made stupid comments, and if she'd stood up to the dad who wrote that note about the shower.

'No,' he said. '*You're* the one who brought this on. None of this would've happened if you'd stopped them in the first place. You're the coach, aren't you?'

'That's enough!' Coach Sweeney snapped. 'You're barred from swimming tomorrow' (Sanchez, 2003, pp. 178-179).

In a subsequent phone conversation, Kyle's dad mediates the situation between Kyle and his coach. He demands that Kyle apologize, but also persuades Coach Sweeney to reverse her decision regarding Kyle's participation in the swim meet. They also agree to discuss the matter further the following week.

'But from what I understand this all began because of a note sent from a parent. Is that correct?'

‘Not exactly,’ Coach Sweeney replied. ‘I believe it began because of Kyle’s coming out.’

Kyle sat up to protest but his dad spoke first.

‘If he wants to come out, that’s his right. Isn’t it?’ His dad’s tone made it clear he expected agreement.

‘Mr. Meeks...’ Coach Sweeney drew an audible breath. ‘You have to understand that your son is not the only member of this team. Other parents hold different views.’

‘I appreciate that,’ his dad said firmly. ‘What I don’t agree with is why my son should have to alter his showering simply because someone else feels uncomfortable with him.’

Coach Sweeney massaged her knuckles. ‘What solution do you see, Mr. Meeks?’

‘You’re their coach. It’s up to you to set the rules. But unless my son is doing something wrong, then maybe those boys and their parents are the ones who need to alter *their* behavior.’

Kyle wanted to jump up and cheer as his dad pressed on.

‘How has the basketball team handled their coming-out situation?’

‘I don’t know.’ Coach Sweeney squeezed her hands together nervously. ‘I haven’t heard that it’s been a problem.’

‘Then maybe-’ Kyle’s dad stood up ‘-you should ask their coach how he handled it...’

Later that week, she called a meeting of the team. For an hour, they talked about name-calling and respecting others. Charlie Tuggs huffed, rolled his eyes, and glared at Kyle.

But for the remainder of the season, Kyle had showered together with the other guys, and Charlie left him alone (Sanchez, 2003, pp. 226-227).

In this way, Sanchez (2003) characterizes Coach Sweeney as inept and uncertain about tackling homophobic harassment. However, in her vacillation she becomes complicit in the harassment, even blaming Kyle for his own persecution by coming out, rather than holding the instigators of the harassment responsible themselves.

Marilyn Reynolds (2001), however, reproaches even more forcefully faculty and administrators who 'blame the victim' of harassment through her negative characterization of the principal in her novel *Love Rules*, Mr. Maxwell. When confronted with a clear case of harassment- some football players attach a plastic penis to Kit's locker with the words "You want it!" and "For Kitty's pussy" on her locker and white glue dribbling down with the adjacent words "cum for Kitty"- Mr. Maxwell argues it is Kit's and other students' fault for wanting a GSA on their campus.

My head is spinning. Somehow Maxwell is shifting everything around so it's like *we're* the ones who were out of line!

'I warned Mr. Cordova and Mrs. Saunders we were asking for trouble if we let this homosexual club meet on campus!'

‘In all respect, Mr. Maxwell, it isn’t a homosexual club,’ Woodsy says. ‘It’s a gay, straight student alliance.’

‘Whatever you call it, if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, chances are it’s a duck,’ he says, giving Kit a long look. ‘I understand Frankie Sanchez is the president of the club?’

Woodsy shrugs her shoulders and turns to Kit, who nods her head.

‘Walks like a duck, then,’ Mr. Maxwell, smirking (Reynolds, 2001, p. 142).

When the teacher, Ms. Woods a.k.a. Woodsy, attempts to revert the focus of the conversation to the harassment perpetrated against Kit, Maxwell defames the GSA’s blatant disregard for “tried and true” mainstream American values and cites it as the cause for the ensuing “reaction.”

‘Ms. Woods, girls, let’s be sensible. As I said when I reluctantly, against my better judgment, allowed this group to meet on our campus, we were opening a can of worms. You can’t have students flaunting their total disregard for tried and true mainstream values without getting a reaction from those who uphold our American way of life.’

‘This harassment is *not* our American way of life, Mr. Maxwell,’ Woodsy says, picking up the dildo and slamming it down on the desk in front of him. ‘These acts are against the law! The *American* law!’

‘So is spitting in the street, but let’s face it, it happens. Now think about it. This little group should go back to meeting at Sojourner High

School, and save their outlandish dress for somewhere besides this campus. Then things such as this simply wouldn't happen,' he says, indicating the reports and dildo on his desk top.

'Mr. Maxwell, the *issue* is what these boys have done! It's not about how people dress.'

'I beg to differ. These students call attention to themselves with their extreme dress, bizarre hair styles, flamboyant mannerisms- these things incite...' (Reynolds, 2001, pp. 142-143).

Despite Woodsy's continued assertions about ensuring the safety of all students, regardless of personal appearance, and the need for clear, strong action on behalf of these students, Maxwell in fact suspends Kit and her friend Lynn [the book's main character and narrator], in order to give "things a chance to settle" (p. 143). Then, he requests that Kit wear a hat on Tuesday [she had shaved off all her hair], exempting her from the school 'no hat' rule. At this point, further embarrassed and humiliated by Principal Maxwell's accusations, Kit runs out of the principal's office. Similar to Coach Sweeney's response in *Rainbow High* to Kyle running off, Maxwell claims insubordination.

'Your young friend Katherine just added defiance of authority to her troubles.'

'Maybe she'd had enough humiliation for one day. Really Ben, you want her to wear a hat?' [inquires Woodsy].

'It makes sense.'

‘None of this makes sense. You’ve suspended an innocent victim of sexual harassment, and her friend, and you’re doing nothing about the perpetrators.’

‘Perpetrators? Rather harsh, and legalistic, don’t you think?’

‘They’ve broken the law.’

‘Well...boys will be boys. I’ll talk with them’ (Reynolds, 2001, p. 145).

Reynolds repeatedly portrays the principal as a homophobic ‘good ‘ole boy’ who cares more about football and winning, than about protecting his students. Despite the escalation of harassment against Kit and other gay and lesbian youth, which culminates in physical assault against Kit, Maxwell consistently displaces the blame from the football players who perpetrated the assault onto Kit. It isn’t until near the end of the novel when the legal advisor for the school district confronts the football coach and Principal Maxwell about their actions leaving the school district open to a harassment lawsuit that they capitulate and suspend the football players from a championship game.

The preponderance of these examples demonstrates a powerful condemnation of schools as institutional sites that facilitate and encourage homophobia. As such, students grow cynical about their chances for a fair and appropriate hearing, or for justice being appropriately dispensed. ‘What’s the point?’ the young adult characters repeatedly ask.

After all the cards have been read, Guy [the GSA teacher from Sojourner High School] asks Frankie if he reported yesterday’s incident with the ‘spilled’ milk and garbage in his hair.

‘What’s the point?’ Frankie says. ‘Nothing will happen.’

‘Nothing *can* happen, if it doesn’t get reported.’

‘Look what happened to Kit and Lynn when *they* reported that incident. *They* got suspended and the guys who did it got to be football heroes.’

‘Frankie’s right,’ Star says. ‘This place isn’t like Sojourner [an alternative high school], where people respect each other. Here, if you don’t fit the mold, you’re shit. It’s okay to insult you. Even teachers think it’s your own fault if you’re harassed. You’ve asked for it, because you’re different’ (Reynolds, 2001, p. 229).

Although most of the novels do not address the issue of schools’ responsibility towards students, including GLBTQ youth, to the degree that *Love Rules* and *Rainbow High* do, by and large when they do, they portray schools in negative and disparaging fashions.

### ***Positive portrayals***

However, even in these very same books that come down so hard on schools, they do include positive characterizations of faculty and some administrators that take a clear and strong stance against homophobia and discrimination of any kind. For instance, in the earlier example from *Love Rules*, highlighting the inflammatory response by the principal Mr. Maxwell, Reynolds (2001) provides a contrasting character in ‘Woodsy,’ a former administrator and current personal communications teacher, who consistently serves as an advocate for gay characters in the novel. Before going to the administration, Kit and Lynn first went to Woodsy:

‘Listen, Kit, I know you’re very angry, and you have every right to be. But what we need to do now is try to put together as thorough and factual a report as possible. That will help us treat this incident with the seriousness it deserves’ (Reynolds, 2001, p. 137).

In the meeting with Mr. Maxwell, Woodsy repeatedly focuses attention on the legal implications of failing to address the issue of harassment directly: harassment is against the law; it violates the education code which requires protection of all students, and failure to do so can elicit legal action against the school district. Then as a teacher, outraged at the administration and persistent homophobic remarks in her class, she takes a proactive stance in the GSA’s “No Room for Homophobia” campaign.

The first thing I notice when I enter Woodsy’s class is a bright, multicolored, rainbow sign over the chalkboard. It’s about four feet long and a foot high. Printed across the colorful background, in silver letters, is ‘NO ROOM FOR HOMOPHOBIA.’

‘What happened to ‘Make Lemonade?’ Eric asks.

‘It was time for a change,’ Woodsy says.

‘I like the lemonade poster better,’ Eric says.

‘Fine. When you’re the teacher in this classroom, you can put it back up’ (Reynolds, 2001, p. 205).

When a couple of the students continue to make disparaging, homophobic slurs, she immediately reprimands them by sending them to the assistant principal Mr. Cordova for detention.

Another minor, but significant character that demonstrates a positive authoritative response to homophobia in the book *Love Rules* is the volleyball coach, Coach Terry.

Whereas the football coach in the same book presses for suspension of Kit, because “any girl who was hostile enough to kick a guy you know where was too dangerous to have on campus” (Reynolds, 2001, p. 242), Coach Terry strongly denounces any and all acts of harassment, discrimination, and bigotry.

‘I think by now everyone’s heard of a couple of malicious incidents that have taken place on our campus, but just in case...’

She relates the details of the locker incident, and also of the vandalized display case and the hate message left on the GSA poster.

‘These are serious, disturbing events,’ Coach Terry says, ‘and they must not be tolerated. Anyone who thinks this kind of behavior is a joke needs to adjust her attitudes.’

I glance over at Nicole, who is staring at the ground.

‘Women athletes often are targets of dyke jokes,’ Coach Terry says, looking at each of us individually before she continues. ‘This is unacceptable. No one...NO ONE! ... has the right to ridicule another person.’

Gail, great spiker, slow thinker, says ‘But what if the person really is a...’

‘Dyke? Lesbian? Woman who is attracted to women?’ Coach Terry prompts.

Gail nods.

‘Is it acceptable for a straight male to be taunted and harassed because he is attracted to women?’

All eyes are on Terry, who looks directly at Gail.

‘Is it?’ she asks.

Gail shakes her head no.

‘Listen. We are all creatures of the earth, and as such we are entitled to the utmost respect. On this team, such respect is *mandated*’ (Reynolds, 2001, p.206).

Just as Coach Terry in *Love Rules* clearly states her expectations for behavior on her volleyball team and how homophobic name-calling would not be tolerated, the basketball coach in *Rainbow High* (Sanchez, 2003), Coach Cameron, conveys the same message. Also significant in the following excerpt is his admission to previous use of words such as ‘fag,’ ‘pansy,’ ‘fairy,’ and his modeling of respect and change.

‘Next item,’ Coach bellowed. ‘Carrillo’s got an announcement. It’s something he and I have talked about. I want you all to pay attention. He’s got my respect and I expect you to give him yours. We’ll discuss it afterward...’

Coach scanned the reticent group. ‘One other thing. From now on, I don’t want to hear any more homophobic slurs. That means no ‘fag,’ ‘homo,’ ‘pansy,’ ‘fairy,’ none of that crap.’

He tapped his clipboard against his leg. 'I know I've used them. But will I from now on? No. If I can change, you can change. First time, you get a warning. Second time, suspension. Is that clear?'

A low laugh came from Dwayne. Coach whirled toward him. 'Something to say, Smith?'

Dwayne shifted. 'You're not serious, Coach. I mean, you wouldn't suspend us right before the championship?'

Coach walked directly over to him. 'Go ahead,' he told Dwayne, staring him square in the eye. 'Try me.'

Dwayne stared back, then lowered his gaze.

'That goes for all of you,' Coach bellowed. 'I don't care if you're gay, or blue, or what you are, you're a team. I expect you to act like one. Any differences between you, put them aside? Anyone who can't, is off the team. Understood?' (Sanchez, 2003, pp. 128, 130).

Again the coach's expectations for his student athletes' behavior are clear and insists they be met- or else.

One other character from *Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001) and *Rainbow High* (Sanchez, 2003) deserves mention here- that of the art teacher and GSA advisor, Ms. MacTraugh. Sanchez describes her as a large built woman, earning the nicknames from students "Miss Mac Truck" or "Big Mac;" but that all the students loved her, consistently voting her "Best Teacher." During the controversy surrounding the implementation of a GSA, MacTraugh eloquently argues for the student group, asserting,

“As parents and teachers, we have a responsibility to ensure our children are safe from antigay harassment, intimidation, and violence...If we single out the proposed group, we fuel the fires of ignorance, fear, intolerance, and hatred. Is that the message we want to give our young people?”

(Sanchez, 2001, p. 18).

Throughout both novels, she is characterized as a supportive adult and mentor. When Jason debates coming out to his teammates, MacTraugh reminds him that “coming out is a very personal decision. Only you can determine what’s right for you...” (Sanchez, 2003, p. 68). Then when Kyle struggles over decisions about college, having been accepted to both Tech and Princeton, and feeling immense pressure from his parents to go to the latter, she empathizes.

‘...I have a boyfriend now.’

‘Oh?’ MacTraugh’s expression transformed from glee [over the acceptance to Princeton] to surprise. ‘I see...’

Kyle glanced down, blushing. His legs were swinging nervously off the side of the desk. ‘The problem is...he’s going to Tech.’

‘That *is* a problem,’ Ms. MacTraugh nodded. *Finally*, an adult understood him (Sanchez, 2003, p. 146).

In both cases, she supports and encourages the young adult characters to do what is right for them, regardless of other external pressures. While her characterization as a school figure is indeed positive, it is worth noting also that MacTraugh comes out as lesbian in *Rainbow High* (Sanchez, 2003) to one of the main characters, Jason. “‘I try not to make a

big deal of it, but with so many of you students coming out now...” (p. 68). This facilitates rapport between the characters, but it also may inadvertently suggest that only gay and lesbian teachers can be true advocates for GLBTQ youth- which is problematic at the same time. Nevertheless, her characterization, along with the others, helps reaffirm the idea that schools can be supportive, positive sites of change, not just reactionary institutions, reproducing unjust attitudes and behaviors, as they are chiefly depicted in these books.

### ***Social hierarchies***

Not only do the school settings- the administration and faculty, the laws and curricula, as portrayed in these novels, by and large reinforce the heteronormative institutions, but the social hierarchies and networks among the students do so as well. The students and the social hierarchies therein also help formulate and reinforce these heteronormative structures. S.E. Hinton’s (1969) pioneering work *The Outsiders*, for example, first painted a more accurate portrayal of the social power networks among the different ‘classes’ of students in any given high school. The movie *The Breakfast Club* (Hughes, 1985) did the same thing. All of these different ‘kinds’ of students- the ‘jock,’ the ‘nerd,’ the ‘juvenile delinquent’ come together in a Saturday detention and become friends. But then, come Monday morning, the reality of their social worlds reasserts itself and the boundaries therein, denying association amongst the different groups- lest they be ridiculed for hanging out with the wrong groups of people. Most significantly for GLBTQ youth, being gay constitutes the ‘worst’ of the wrong groups of people and will immediately cause a teen to be shunned.

For instance, in *Rainbow Boys*, Kyle- who hangs out with the ‘flamer’ Nelson- unabashedly approaches Jason, a basketball athlete and Kyle’s significant love interest, in the lunchroom after Christmas break. Kyle momentarily forgets the defining social rules that regulate the associations of different students: which is to say, that it would be completely unacceptable for Kyle, considered gay by association, to broach Jason in the open territory of the school lunchroom. Moreover, it would be considered an even greater breach for Jason to concede the athlete’s territory to Kyle the outsider.

At lunch, he [Jason] sat with Corey and several teammates.

Abruptly Corey motioned to him. ‘Heads up.’

Kyle approached their table, tray in hand. ‘Hi!’ His face was bright and smiling, with an innocent grin that made Jason forget his resolve. He smiled back, glad to see Kyle after what seemed like years.

Corey cleared his throat, bringing Jason back to Earth. ‘Wha’s up?’ he asked Kyle, as if he didn’t recognize him. He hoped Kyle would take the hint and leave quietly.

But Kyle didn’t go away. ‘Mind if I sit with you?’

Corey coughed, and Jason glanced over at him. Corey was shaking his head almost imperceptibly. A darted look at their teammates said the guys were watching. His message to Jason was clear: Don’t do it’ (Sanchez, 2001, p. 159).

Although Kyle swims on the high school swim team- and is thus an athlete, a position frequently of higher social status in schools, the swim team does not rank with

the basketball team, those among the high school social elite.<sup>2</sup> Even if their athletic positions did rank near equivalently, Kyle's association with an out gay, makes him clearly suspect- and Jason as well- if he were to begin publicly associating with Kyle. The social stakes are indeed precariously high—and yet in the above scene, Kyle seems completely oblivious to this social “fact.” Later, Kyle shares what happened with his best friend Nelson.

‘You asked to sit at the B-ball table? That was brazen.’

Kyle shook his head. ‘It was dumb.’

Nelson nearly rolled over laughing. ‘I wish I’d seen their jockstrap faces when mild-mannered you asked to sit at their table. Did you really expect him to say yes?’

He made it sound so comical that even Kyle had to laugh. ‘I was excited to see him! I didn’t think.’ He felt foolish now (Sanchez, 2001, p. 164).

After the fact, Kyle realized his mistake in approaching Jason in front of all of his teammates. Reflecting on the situation during swim practice, Kyle admits to himself that doing so “probably wasn’t the wisest move.” Kyle violated one of the principal “rules” that socially govern high school. As such, he was made to pay- by Jason himself: “It was killing Jason to treat the one person in the world who understood him like this, but he glanced down at the empty seat beside him. ‘Uh...someone’s sitting there’ (p. 159).

The social terrain of the contemporary high school is best illustrated in the novel *Geography Club* (Hartinger, 2003), aptly named for its portrayal of the social dimensions

of peer groups in the fashion of geographical space- each with their own territorial boundaries and dimensions. Just as with sovereign countries, unwelcome incursions into these spaces are prohibited. From the very outset of the novel, Hartinger sets up this metaphor with his main character Russel suggesting that he has infiltrated enemy territory- a closet gay teen in the hypermasculine space of the boys' locker room.

I was deep behind enemy lines, in the very heart of the opposing camp. My adversaries were all around me. For the time being, my disguise was holding, but still I felt exposed, naked, as if my secret was obvious to anyone who took the time to look. I knew that any wrong action, however slight, could expose my deception and reveal my true identity. The thought made my skin prickle. The enemy would not take kindly to my infiltration of their ranks, especially not here, in their inner sanctum (Hartinger, 2003, p.1).

Russel's greatest fear is being found out to be gay, because he knows the inevitable consequences- social ostracism. In the locker room, he feels the most vulnerable, as if anyone would take time to look would know his secret. Although Russel hangs on the fringes of the social hierarchy, a boy named Brian Bund comprises the lowest rung of the social ladder, sitting by himself every day, completely excluded, the target for ongoing harassment by jocks and others looking for a laugh. To be found out to be gay would be to join Brian Bund in the Land of the Outcast. In the following excerpt, some jocks have thrown chili onto Brian, completely marring his white T-shirt, inciting laughter throughout the lunchroom at Brian's expense; however, the significance of the excerpt

derives from Russel's detailing of the social space of teenagers via their "designated" lunchroom tables:

By now, the cafeteria was ringing with laughter. It was coming from every corner of the room. The cheerleaders at the Cheerleaders table. The druggies at the Druggies table. And the Girl Jocks, the Theater Crowd, and the Lefty Radicals at all their tables too. Even some of the kids at the Christians, Orchestra Members, and Computer Geeks tables were laughing. (For the record, Min, Gunnar, and I made up the Nerdy Intellectuals, and no one at our table was laughing) (Hartinger, 2003, p. 8).

Although Russel doesn't like how the 'jocks' and others treat Brian, neither he nor his friends stand up for Brian- because to stand up for the marginalized is to risk marginalization for oneself. And Russel clearly knew that could be his fate as well. "... I knew that's how people might treat me if they ever learned the truth. It scared the hell out of me, because I was certain I could never handle being that completely alone" (Hartinger, 2003, p. 11). H.F., from the novel *Finding H.F.* (Watts, 2001), reinforces the impact of social alienation, noting how she sits with her friend Bo at what is called the "freak table" (Watts, 2001, p.29).

As suggested, the power of these social hierarchies to include or exclude are especially poignant for GLBTQ youth. In the book *Geography Club* (Hartinger, 2003), several different closeted gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth meet for pizza, gaining a sense of shared community and personal affirmation for the first time. However, they too come

from different social groups, and so when they try to maintain their ties at lunch at school, students notice.

We were all having one of those ‘What were we thinking?’ moments. What *had* we been thinking? Why hadn’t we seen this coming? We were all citizens of different countries. Did we really think we could just pull up chairs and sit down together? There was no neutral territory on a high school campus. The land was all claimed, and the borders were solid. We couldn’t just cross them at will (Hartinger, 2003, p. 54).

Hartinger describes the powerful technologies of policing of these social borders amongst and by teenagers. These young adults establish and define a person’s identity by their associations, or more specifically where they sit in the lunch room. Students become labeled and the label becomes the student’s identity. But, as Hartinger notes, the power of these technologies of policing exact a far greater influence than just externally defining one’s social identity; they rigidly demarcate and maintain boundaries of association. One group may not but superficially interact with another without formidable consequences—ex-patriotism. “We were all thinking there were consequences for spending too much time outside the border of your own country. Eventually, they wouldn’t let you back in. In other words, you ended up exiled and alone, like Brian Bund” (Hartinger, 2003, p. 54).

Through the ensuing development of the narrative conflict, Russel joins the baseball team to be close to his love interest Kevin Land (note: even this important supporting character is marked with a geographical metaphor). Although Russel performs inconsistently most of the time, he hits a home run, winning for their team an important

game, and all of a sudden escalates his social status from the fringes in the Borderlands of Respectability to the Land of the Popular. However, as karma would have it, Russel gets labeled the 'Gay Kid' - although for the wrong reasons - and is banished to the Outcast Island.

I took a seat. Over the past few weeks, I'd been exploring the Land of the Popular, and the Landscape of Love, but they weren't the only two places I'd visited. I'd covered the whole terrain of a typical high school. I'd gone from the Borderlands of Respectability, to the Land of the Popular, and now to Outcast Island, also known as Brian's lunch table. I'd made the complete circuit. But Outcast Island was the end of the line. In the world of high school, you could go from Respectable to Popular, or from Popular to Respectable, but you couldn't go anywhere from Outcast. Once you were there, you were stuck (Hartinger, 2003, pp. 195-196).

Fortunately for Russel, due to the good graces of Brian, he is not stuck. Brian submits an application for a gay-straight alliance, not because he is gay and not to increase awareness of alternate sexualities, but to take the heat off of Russel. In this way, Brian becomes labeled as the 'Gay Kid,' and Russel is cleared. "'Why?' I said. He wouldn't look me in the eye, just kept staring at his book. 'There's already one Brian Bund,' he said simply. 'There d-d-doesn't need to be one more'" (Hartinger, 2003, p. 216). At the point of narrative climax, Russel chooses potential marginalization over popularity and returns the favor by purposefully, willingly sitting and becoming friends with Brian thereafter.

Through the examples above, the reader (re)experiences the power dynamics of contemporary teens, as evinced in young adult fiction. The examples particularly underscore the policing of boundaries, as they speak to two important social facets of modern youth- the labeling and enacting of social identities and the regulatory practices amongst teenagers themselves of properly defined heteronormativity. First, teenagers become labeled via their friends- namely with whom they associate in the lunchroom. These associations clearly have significant consequences. For example in another novel *So Hard to Say* (Sanchez, 2004), one of the main characters, Frederick, overhears students tease and mock “Dimple Dude,” a.k.a. Iggy, for being gay. “What if I’d been caught talking to him? That would’ve been suicide, especially my first day at a new school” (p. 10). As has been demonstrated, to be considered gay or be associated with a gay individual is to almost assuredly suffer social ostracism. In *Geography Club* (Hartinger, 2003), Brian comes to be known as The Gay Kid, even though he’s not. Already stigmatized, and aware of the consequence of such a label, he heroically averts further substantive harassment away from Russel, which would derive from being branded as gay. Regardless of the “truth” of the matter, the power of labeling asserts its own reality and consequences therein.

Furthermore, one can also see in the above examples the regulatory practices surrounding properly defined heteronormativity. As has been illustrated, to be gay is to violate the norms of heteronormativity, which compels proper forms of gender via performed heterosexuality. Jason in *Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001) himself feels coerced

to enact these boundaries surrounding heteronormativity- socially distancing himself (in open at least) from one who has violated such norms.

In this way, the social groups as described in *Geography Club* (Hartinger, 2003) also invoke varying forms of masculinities and femininities along a power continuum. The 'jocks,' who best personify hegemonic masculinity, and cheerleaders, who embrace 'emphasized femininity,' are thus positioned at the top (Connell, 1995). However, it is worthy to remind that 'jocks' and 'athletes' are not necessarily the same; the power attributed to each is correlated to the embodiment of masculinity. Kyle and Jason, both major characters in *Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001) and *Rainbow High* (Sanchez, 2003), are both athletes, but only Jason is a "jock," and accorded that distinction. In the words of Nelson: '[S]wimming's different. Besides- nothing personal, but you just don't have that whole spit-and-scratch-your-nuts charisma' (Sanchez, 2003, p. 145). In the middle of the power continuum lie the vast terrain of the 'Borderlands of Respectability,' which would include the 'Theater Crowd,' 'Girl Jocks,' and the 'Nerdy Intellectuals,' among others. At the bottommost rung are the social pariahs- those whose very natures defy established constitutions of masculinity and femininity. While Brian Bund, for instance, stuttered and never stood up for himself, evincing seeming weakness and passivity- considered highly unmasculine traits, even socially worse-off than the Brian Bunds by and large, are out or perceived gays and lesbians in these texts. According to the proscriptions of heteronormativity, to be properly male or female is to be heterosexual; and to be gay or lesbian confounds those strictures. Thus, as Russel notes in the social world of teens, there is no place to go from there.

## **Persecution**

From the hegemonic forces of culturally institutionalized practices derives my second major sociocultural category- persecution. While I demonstrated a few instances of persecution and harassment in the first major category, particularly as related to the range of homophobic responses, here I explore more deeply the pervasiveness of this conflict for GLBTQ characters in these books. In fact, fourteen out of seventeen books depict or discuss some form of discrimination, harassment, or persecution- verbal, physical, or even self-inflicted.

### ***Verbal harassment***

Verbal harassment is the most frequent form of persecution against GLBTQ characters in these novels. It includes homophobic innuendos and slurs that generally serve to mock, disparage, or demean. In the first example from *Eight Seconds* (Ferris, 2000), Russ beleaguers Kit with insults mocking his masculinity, playing off his more feminine name.

It didn't take long for Russ to start making fun of what he himself didn't have. 'Hey, Kitster,' he said, 'you're in the wrong business. You should be taking up ballet dancing. You'd look pretty cute in a tutu.'

'Hey, Kitty Kat,' he yelled, 'you might look good when you're falling, but cats don't always land on their feet. You're overdue for a big crash.'

And again, 'Hey, Alley Kat, aren't you afraid of getting dirty? Or messing up that pretty face?' (Ferris, 2000, p. 49).

In the next example from *So Hard to Say* (Sanchez, 2004), Victor and his friends tease an effeminate secondary character named Iggy. When the main character Frederick, who through most of the novel struggles with his developing sense of a gay sexuality, finally sticks up for Iggy, the boys- notably except for Victor, the leader of the group- turn their taunts onto Frederick as well.

Then Victor called to Iggy and his friend, ‘*Hola, chicas.*’ (Hello, girls.)

The other boys burst into laughter at the dumb joke, flipping their wrists and prancing, imitating girls. Of course, they didn’t seem anything like real girls.

Iggy’s dimples faded and his gaze moved to me, his eyes angry but sad too, as if expecting me to do something.

I tried to be still, like Mom had said, while my heart sank. And in that moment I recalled all the times I’d walked past him, staring blankly in front of me, my heart aching...

Victor and the guys exchanged glances, as if unsure how to react. Then a sarcastic smile snaked onto smart-aleck Pepe’s face.

‘Ohh, they’re *friends!*’ He winked as if implying more than that.

Next Gordo asked, ‘You mean Iggy’s your *girlfriend?*’

‘Xio’s going to be jealous!’ Kiki chimed in.

The other boys started hooting and whistling, making me want to fold myself into a locker and disappear (Sanchez, 2004, p. 222).

The power of the verbal harassment to cause a terrible sense of shame, as shown above, is reiterated in another novel *The Bermudez Triangle* (Johnson, 2004), in which one of the main characters Mel is verbally accosted by two men at her place of work.

‘I have a question,’ one of the guys said. He looked vaguely familiar.

‘Okay.’

‘Do you have a liquor license?’

She stood there, baffled by the question (the answer was obviously yes since they had a bar there). Then she suddenly realized that the two of them were from the day at the lake. Obviously these were the guys who tripped Parker. They were all leering at her.

‘*Liq...uor* license,’ the guy said slowly, with a very deliberate pause in the middle of the word. ‘Don’t you have one of those?’

Mel stared at him for a second, sounding out the syllable in her head. She shuddered as the meaning sank in. A deep feeling of disgust and shame spread all over her, making her body cold and turning her stomach...Never in her life had she felt so useless and small (Johnson, 2004, p. 270).

As can be seen in the few examples above, words carry a painful sting, defying the old adage, “Sticks and stones can break your bones, but words will never hurt you.” Words indeed are shown to be very powerful attempts to hurt and sanction those who violate sexual and gender norms; however, it is character development that determines whether GLBTQ characters feel empowered to withstand the abuse without internalization of shame or wilt underneath feelings of disgrace and humiliation. Possibly

because he is characterized as a college student, older with more experience dealing with homophobic harassment, Kit is portrayed as more adept at ignoring and dismissing the taunts, while the other two characters Mel and Frederick feel more acutely the shame inflicted upon them.

### ***Vandalism***

Although verbal harassment is the most common form of technology of surveillance surrounding the boundaries of sexual and gender norms, it frequently appears in conjunction with other more serious forms of persecution. In fact, seventy percent of the time when authors depict forms of verbal harassment, it is accompanied by other harsher forms of harassment at least at some point in the novel. In four out of the fourteen novels, authors portray instances of vandalism to personal or school property associated with GLBTQ characters, usually school lockers. Kyle's locker in *Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001) is defamed; Bennett's baseball mitt and other personal items are destroyed in *The Rainbow Kite* (Shyer, 2002); Kit and Frankie are targeted with acts of vandalism and other violence in *Love Rules* (Reynolds, 2001). Then in the following scene from *Keeping You a Secret* (Peters, 2003), the reader experiences the main character Holland's shock of discovering the vandalism directed against her eventual girlfriend Cece.

I dropped my duffel. 'Oh, my God.' Both hands rose to cover my mouth. 'My God.' Someone had spray-painted down the length of her locker: DIE DYKE.

‘Not terribly artistic, were they?’ Cece cocked her head upward. ‘I mean, the letters all run together. There’s no style at all. Really amateurish. Not to mention extremely unoriginal...’

I gaped at her locker. How could they? Anger bubbled up from my core. How *could* they?

I found out soon enough she wasn’t the only one targeted. Brandi’s locker had the same message, and three guys got the more obscene: FAGS FUCK OFF (Peters, 2003, p. 79).

Like other forms of persecution, these acts of vandalism rebuke, demean, and curtail demonstrations of nonconforming sexual identities and expressions. Significantly, each case of vandalism was subsequently followed up with even more escalated forms of persecution and assault.

### ***Physical assault***

Through the above examples, I indicated the pervasiveness of verbal harassment depicted against GLBTQ characters, which was frequently accompanied by acts of vandalism against personal or school property associated with GLBTQ characters. While acts of defamation against property are powerfully illustrated in these novels, depictions of physical assault are second to verbal harassment in recurrence. Indeed eight out of the seventeen novels total, or forty-seven percent, describe to some degree physical altercations resulting from homophobic responses. In two of the novels, main characters are assaulted by family members: Orpheia in *Orpheia Proud* (Wyeth, 2004) by her older brother, when he discovers Orpheia in bed with her friend/girlfriend Lissa; and Jason in

*Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001) by his alcoholic father, when Jason comes out to him. In three of the novels, a character is assaulted by another closet gay teen unable to cope with his sexuality. Most frequently however, just for being gay, or hanging out with someone known to be gay, seems to be justification enough for characters to be assaulted. For example in the novel *The Bermudez Triangle* (Johnson, 2004), when Mel and two of her friends Nina and Parker go ice skating, a group of guys begin pelting them with snow-covered rocks.

‘What the hell?’ Nina screamed. ‘You don’t aim for my *head*.

Where’s Parker?’

Parker was no longer on the rock.

Another one, hitting Nina’s hip this time.

‘Did he *run*?’ Nina said. ‘Oh my God...’

Mel dodged one that would have gotten her eye.

‘What are you *doing*?’ Nina screamed up the hill. ‘You’re going to *hurt* us!’

He [one of the guys] was laughing rather spookily now, like he couldn’t stop.

‘Oh my God- they were psychos! You okay, Mel?’

Mel nodded. She pulled up the leg of her pants and saw a slightly green bruise blossoming on her knee.

She had a strong feeling that this all had something to do with her (Johnson, 2004, pp. 252-253).

Similarly, in *Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001), Kyle and Nelson become targets for repeated acts of physical violence, first being assailed by a beer bottle, then beaten up by two antagonists Jack and José.

After helping MacTraugh clean up, Kyle and Nelson walked home together, agreeing how glad they were that MacTraugh was on their side. They didn't notice the pickup truck barreling down the street, until a beer bottle flew out its window. Nelson yanked Kyle aside just in time. The bottle hurled past Kyle's head and smashed onto the concrete walk, shattering into little brown pieces.

The pickup squealed past. 'Faggots!' yelled a voice.

Kyle's heart thundered against his chest. 'Did you see their license plate?'

'I know that truck,' Nelson said. 'It's José's.'

'He could've killed me!'

'Duh!' said Nelson, fumbling for a cigarette (Sanchez, 2001, p108).

What is strikingly poignant from this excerpt is Nelson's nonchalant attitude afterwards. 'He could've killed me!' Kyle cries out indignantly, to which Nelson responds, 'Duh!' and lights a cigarette. This suggests such ordinariness in Nelson's experience that it warrants no additional comment. Then later in the novel, the two characters are again assaulted, personally this time as they walk through a park.

A few blocks later Jason approached Bluemont Park. In the distance he saw the truck pulled over beside two guys on the sidewalk. Jack and the pickup driver got out, gesturing at the guys. Suddenly Jack swung.

Jason cautiously biked closer. He now recognized the driver. José Montero swung at one of the two boys. Jason realized it was Nelson. His heart leapt as he recognized the other boy, being knocked to the ground by Jack. It was Kyle...

Kyle shouted, 'Nelson!' Jason spun around to see José pinning Nelson to the ground, beating the crap out of him.

Kyle ran toward them, and Jack yelled, 'Watch out!'

José jumped up, fists raised. Jason ran over and José swung. But Jason moved back in time to avoid the blow. He jabbed José in the stomach, causing him to double up.

Jack swaggered over and grabbed José by the shoulder. 'Let's go.' He gave Jason a scornful look as he led José to the truck. Once they were safely inside, he leaned out the window and yelled, 'Faggots!'

Jason ignored him and leaned over Nelson, who seemed dazed. 'Hey, you all right?' When Nelson didn't answer, Jason shook his shoulder. 'Hey!'

'Quit shaking me,' Nelson mumbled. 'I'm okay.'

He didn't look it. His face was swollen and his lip gashed. Blood dripped down his chin (Sanchez, 2001, pp. 189-190).

Although described less graphically, one of the most painful episodes of assault comes from the novel *Luna* (Peters, 2004), which describes the transition of a male-to-female transgender youth and the angst of her sister and main character/ narrator Regan. In order to prove to herself that she can endure any potential torment, Liam- now Luna- arrives at school.

A voice ricocheted in the hall, 'Freaking pervert.'

I skidded to a stop. I knew that voice. Hoyt Doucet.

'Freaking fag pervert.'

I turned to see Hoyt reach out and smack Luna's shoulder. He slammed her into the railing.

Luna?

What was she doing here [at school]?

Hoyt screeched, 'You fucking pervert!' Loud. It attracted the attention of a couple of girls who were clomping down the stairs. Hoyt jabbed Luna's shoulder again and yelled, 'Perv! You're a perv! I always knew it.'

Luna spoke quietly. 'Ow. Don't.'

'Don't? Don't what? Do this?' Hoyt raised his arm and ripped off Luna's wig. Clumps of Liam's hair tore out with the bobby pins (Peters, 2004, p. 207).

At this point Regan's prospective boyfriend arrives on the scene, causing Regan to panic in shame and desperation, running away from Luna and leaving Luna with her worst nightmare-Hoyt. In the aftermath, Regan rages an internal battle over her embarrassment and humiliation at Luna's appearance at school, her anger at herself for leaving Luna in such a vulnerable position, and the realization that something had to change: Regan needed a life too, for Luna's consumed both of their lives.

And in that moment when she realized I wasn't there for her, she looked inside of me and known the truth. She'd seen me for the coward I was.

She knew, she knew she was utterly alone in the world.

The tears started slowly, then built until they gushed from my eyes in a torrent. They'd never stop. Never.

I cried for her.

I cried for me.

I cried for a world that wouldn't let her be (Peters, 2004, p. 211).

After Luna returns home, she apologizes for putting Regan in such an awkward position, for not thinking, for being so self-absorbed, for depending too much on Regan all these years. While she reveals a large ugly green bruise on her shoulder, Luna explains that she had been tested- and despite the possible persecution, she needed to transition, she needed to be able face whatever torment came her way. "“This is life or death for me, Re. If I don't transition, I don't want to live...””(p. 213).

While the next two examples epitomize the persistent, daily harassment and abuse GLBTQ characters endure as portrayed in these books, they more significantly depict the multiple forms of persecution exacted against or gender-nonconforming characters. The first example also comes from *Keeping You a Secret* (Peters, 2003), in which Cece describes what she's had to face as an out lesbian. The second is from *Love Rules* (Reynolds, 2001), in which Frankie likewise describes a lifetime of persecution, because he didn't talk or walk like other boys.

‘...You [Holland] don't know what it's like. The locker thing was just a minor incident. Okay, it probably qualified as a full-fledged hate crime, but it didn't cost anything. Not like my slashed tires.’

My jaw unhinged. ‘Somebody slashed your tires? Who? Is that what happened in the school parking lot?’

‘School. The mall. You name it. That kind of stuff you can fix. It's the other things, the whispering behind your back, the laughing at you in your face, like you don't even have feelings. Want to know how many times I get called ‘dyke’ every day? Gee, I don't know,’ she cocked her head, ‘I've lost count. It's the ones who give you the *look*, though...’ She shook her head. ‘There's so much hate in people. It scares me, okay? I'm really afraid of physical violence. That day at the juice machine? God, that totally freaked me. Not that I'm going to let the fear control me, or make me afraid to be who I am. I'm proud of being gay. But it took a long time

for me to get there. I had to put up with a lot of shit....(Peters, 2003, p. 159).

As illustrated in the section on school institutions, harassment towards nonconforming gender youth, especially boys, begins very early. The description of Nelson's negative experiences with school and peers in *Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001) and Iggy's (Sanchez, 2004) from *So Hard to Say* is reiterated by a secondary character named Frankie in *Love Rules* (Reynolds, 2001).

'I'd always been hassled, all through elementary school. I didn't understand why. I wanted to be friends with everybody. The girls would let me jump rope with them at recess. I was good at it, but the boys teased me all the more when they saw me doing 'Double Dutch' and 'Ice Cream Soda Delaware Punch.' Sometimes I'd make friends with another boy, maybe even play with him after school. Then the others would start teasing him too, and he'd stop being my friend...'

'They used to call me names, like Sissy-boy, and Girly-boy and Fag, and sometimes someone would give me a push. But by the time I was in seventh grade, the names were worse and so was the physical stuff.'

'Was it everyone? All the boys?' Kit asks.

'No. But it seemed like it at the time. Once some guys grabbed me and shoved me into a trash can. I was fag-trash, they said, and they kicked the can over with me in it. A custodian came and helped me out, but kids were standing around, laughing.'

‘That sucks,’ Kit says.

‘Yeah, well, most people didn’t think so,’ Frankie says (Reynolds, 2001, pp. 163, 167-168).

He continues below:

‘Every day before I left the house, I armored myself against both pain and joy... I transformed myself into stone.

Because of my wandering mind, it takes me a while to figure out that Frankie is now talking about his freshman year at Hamilton High, but I finally get it.

‘...older guys who lived to hassle me. Fudge-packer, queenie, that stuff. I was stone. My armor was strong. Even so, they kept it up. One day they caught me after school. They shoved me behind a big dumpster, took my shoes off and threw them in the dumpster, took my pants off and...stuff...’ (Reynolds, 2001, p. 169).

In the eight novels that incorporate some form of physical assault upon a GLBTQ character, in three cases the assault is perpetrated by another closet gay teen. As discussed above regarding the novel *Luna*, Liam/ Luna is assaulted by his long-standing nemesis named Hoyt, but this assault is only the latest event in years worth of torment and trouble heaped on Liam by Hoyt, because Hoyt believes Liam to be gay. As Regan comments to the reader, “Funny thing is, I think, if anyone’s gay it’s Hoyt Doucet. He just won’t admit it. He even dates girls” (Peters, 2004, p. 94). While the reader understands the impact heterosexist privilege can have on a gay person’s psyche, she

commiserates with Regan when she says, “I don’t care if he lies to himself; hates himself for being gay. He has no right making Liam’s life a living hell” (p. 94).

The other two novels that address gay bashing by a closet gay are *Eight Seconds* (Ferris, 2000) and *Finding H.F.* (Watts, 2001). In *Eight Seconds* (Ferris, 2000), the main character John finds himself attracted to another bull rider named Kit, which forces John to question his sexuality. In the midst of another verbal attack on Kit by the novel’s primary antagonist Russ, John becomes outraged- but not at Russ, rather at Kit instead.

Without knowing I’d risen, I found myself on my feet. Kit saw and put his hand out, palm toward me, like a traffic cop.

I came at him fast, a red haze behind my eyes. I pushed him. Hard. He stumbled sideways, knocking over a trash can, which spilled all over the floor...Both Kit and Russ looked at me in astonishment.

I was astonished, too, but I couldn’t stop. I pushed Kit again, and he fell back over the trash can and sprawled into the spilled garbage, his dark glasses falling off.

‘You don’t tell me what to do,’ I said. ‘I can decide for myself. Isn’t it enough all these lies about me have started because of you?’ I stood over him, my fists clenched at my sides. ‘Get up, so I can hit you again...’

‘If you weren’t what you are, there wouldn’t *be* any lies.’ I went for him once more, but at the last second, my fists unclenched and I ended up pushing him again, my palms on his shoulders... ‘Why?’ I said,

anguish in my voice. ‘Why?’ I wasn’t even sure what I was asking (Ferris, 2000, pp. 152-153).

John cannot tolerate the questions now constantly turning in his head, due to this attraction to Kit; nor can he tolerate the suggestive talk about him and Kit, so he directs all that anger and confusion to the presumed cause- Kit himself.

In the third novel that includes a case of gay bashing by a closet gay teen, *Finding H.F.* (Watts, 2001), Bo confides to H.F. about kissing the football quarterback Craig Shepherd, and the bashing he got as a result. Craig comes upon Bo near a local market and asks him if he wants to go for a ride.

‘Hey, Bo, how you doin?’ and I say, ‘All right.’ I’m not that surprised he’s actin’ friendly, because Craig’s the only member of the football team who’d be worth pissin’ on if he was set afire. And besides, I had sung at the church he goes to a couple of weeks before, and he was real nice to me then...told me he’d just about trade in his football talent for a voice like mine, which I thought was sweet...

‘But once we’re in the car, he asks me if I want to ride around a few minutes, and I say sure. I know Daddy’ll be madder than a wet hen at me for stayin’ out so long, but Craig’s so good lookin’, and I’m flattered he wants me to ride around with him. We end up by the lake, with the truck parked all hid by these trees, and I start gettin’ scared thinkin’ about how alone we are, and what if the other football players put him up to this

and he tries to hurt me. When he grabs me, I think *Here it comes: He's gonna kill me.*

'But he kisses me instead. Hard. H.F., the stars are comin' out, and we're underneath them, kissin' and touchin' each other. It was perfect. I couldn't have dreamed it better (Watts, 2001, pp. 131-132).

After that, Craig drives Bo home and asks him, "'You won't tell nobody about this, right?' and I said I wouldn't" (p. 132).

'...The next day, after band practice, about half of the football team was waitin' for me. They beat the holy hell out of me, and for the first time, Craig was right there with 'em. He busted the same lip he'd been kissin' the night before' (p. 132).

The frequency of physical assault portrayed in these sampled books is alarming at forty-eight percent. According to the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network's (GLSEN) (2005) most recent national school climate survey, nearly thirty percent of their 1732 sample of GLBT young adults experienced some form of physical assault based on their sexual orientation or gender expression (17.6 % and 11.8%, respectively). While GLSEN stresses the lack of safety that most GLBTQ youth feel at school, these books appear to overemphasize this situation, potentially emphasizing representations of victimization over that of agency or resiliency.

### ***Hate crimes***

According to the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, "anti-gay hate crimes are those in which victims are chosen solely or primarily because of their actual or

presumed sexual/affectional orientation or preference, gender identity, and/or status” (Lambda, 2007). Fourteen percent of all hate crimes in 2005 were based on anti-gay bias (United States Department of Justice, 2006). Further, these bias motivated crimes may include property crimes or physical violence directed towards individuals resulting in injury. Given these definitions, several of the books include instances of hate crimes: *Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001), *Keeping You a Secret* (Peters, 2003), and most especially *Love Rules* (Reynolds, 2001) and *The Rainbow Kite* (Shyer, 2002). For instance in the previous section on negative portrayals of school administration and faculty, I discussed a blatant description of harassment in *Love Rules* (Reynolds, 2001), in which football players are graphically described to have hung a big, plastic penis on Kit’s locker and written in heavy red marker “You want it,” “For Kitty’s pussy,” and “cum for Kitty.” Later Reynolds (2001) describes another scene in which several GSA members come upon a broken display case with a poster from the GSA’s anti-homophobia campaign, which had been defaced.

Kit and I check it out. Nothing in the case is disturbed, except Frankie’s poster. FLATTEN FAGGOT FILTH is written across it, in large, heavy black strokes. In the corner is a stick figure hanging from a gallows, like in the hangman game. Underneath are seven separate lines, with three letters filled in. *F R\_ \_ K\_ \_* (Reynolds, 2001, p. 186).

In this way, the narrative moves from back and forth between generalized and personal instances of harassment and persecution, culminating in the threatening message with the hangman’s gallows and the fill-in-the-blank puzzle that clearly refers to the minor

character Frankie. It is the message's implicit threat that intensifies the nature of persecution to the level of hate crime.

Another novel that explicitly incorporates homophobic hate crimes into the narrative conflict is Shyer's (2002) novel *The Rainbow Kite*. For example, early on in the book Bennett and his family read about a hate crime in the local newspaper targeted against a teen against whom Bennett competed in a recent swim meet. This scene helps develop and reinforce internal conflict within the main character Bennett about his sexuality in relation to his father and society.

#### EAST HADLEY YOUTH VICTIM OF HATE CRIME

'A bat-and-rope-wielding gang attacked Kevin Delaney, a student at Whitney Young Junior High School, as he was rollerblading in a Jefferson park last night. Delaney's father told police that a group of approximately five youths surrounded him, taunting him with homophobic epithets. Two of the youths clubbed the victim and one produced a rope, putting Delaney's head through a noose. A passerby summoned the police and the crowd dispersed at the sound of the police car siren. It was not the first gay-bashing incident in this city; last year similar incidents were reported in and around the area. Police are asking for anyone with information about this attack to come forward (Shyer, 2002, p. 49).

Upon reading the article, Bennett's dad bemoans their behavior, commenting, "Hoodlums, those boys. I hope they don't get away with this! That poor boy must have been scared out of his wits" (p. 49). Nevertheless, he adds, "But I'll tell you one thing,

boys. I spotted that kid in the water right away, didn't I? Painted toenails! I knew there was something funny about him right away" (p. 50). In this way, this scene reinforces a double message for Bennett: being gay isn't normal; and more ominously, others may terrorize him for being gay as well.

Through the progression of the novel, Bennett is unrelentingly harassed with homophobic verbal taunts and notes in his locker, wads of gum and toothpaste in his shoe. The antagonist nicknamed Go-go scrawls queer and homo with fingernail polish on Bennett's baseball glove. Moreover, the persistent persecution culminates in a message of hate, in which Bennett, his family, and the neighbors discover a sack containing a dead rat inside and the word FAGGOT spray-painted on their garage door.

There was a sack within a sack within a sack, but finally, Dad turned the thing upside down, and what fell out was a huge, furry black rat, dead, with one eye closed and one half-open. You could see its pointed teeth even in the dark light, and its paws. It was sort of curled up, almost like it was sleeping. It had a tail that looked like black leather, and it had been half cut off...

'Look!' Shearon saw it first. I suppose we'd missed it because of the rat. Now we stood together in the driveway, all of us, staring at the garage door- and the basketball hoop over it.

They'd hung a ladies' brassiere from the hoop.

And they'd spray painted the word FAGGOT in black letters across the door of the garage that Bennett had painted white just a couple

of months ago. Each letter was almost as big as I am. I think if you stood a mile away and there was poor visibility, you still couldn't miss it (Shyer, 2002, pp. 129-130).

Unfortunately, Bennett's humiliation and shame is particularly intensified by his father's poor response to the incident. While his mother wants to call the police, his dad wants to avoid public attention; and so, literally in the middle of the night he leaves to find hardware to whitewash the garage door and the situation.

Then Dad sat next to Bennett and put his arm around his naked shoulders. 'In fact, I don't really see any reason to call the police about this, I really don't.'

Mom broke in. She'd found a tissue and was squeezing it against one eye. 'What are you *saying*? A dead rat, a hate message and you're going to let whoever did this *get away with it*?'

'Why advertise it, Lydia? It'll be all over the newspapers, everyone in town will know, and then, just think, THINK, Bennett, what it will mean for you in school? And maybe in *life*? Don't you agree, Lydia? Why draw attention to it? Don't you see what I'm saying?' (Shyer, 2002, pp. 137-138).

In both novels, the escalation of homophobic harassment to hate crime comprises significant elements of the narrative conflict leading up to the novels' resolutions. In response to the homophobia in *Love Rules* (Reynolds, 2001), the novel concludes with a targeted campaign against homophobia and perpetrators thereof by GSA members and

faculty allies. They win a momentous victory by the final suspensions of four football players, who instigated the harassment and hate crime, during the season's championship game. In this way, Reynolds emphasizes the need for community support for GLBTQ individuals and the power and affirmation that such support affords. While Reynolds (2001) underscores importance of allies- gay and straight- for GLBT individuals throughout *Love Rules*, Shyer (2002) accentuates Bennett's increasing sense of isolation and despair in her novel *The Rainbow Kite*. Nevertheless, Bennett's conflict is likewise only resolved through a widespread show of support from classmates at his junior high graduation. While the show of support in the conclusion is heartwarming, it strips Bennett of any proactive agency, unlike the main characters in *Love Rules* who enact their agency by garnering support to squelch the institutionalized homophobia in their school.

### ***Self-persecution as attempted suicide***

The internalization of such homophobia for sexually and gender non-conforming individuals can lead some GBLTQ individuals, and in this sample of books three characters, to attempt suicide: *Orphea Proud* (Wyeth, 2004), *Luna* (Peters, 2004), and *The Rainbow Kite* (Shyer, 2002). For instance, in *Orphea Proud* (Wyeth, 2004), Orphea's brother Rupert finds Orphea and her best friend Lissa in bed together. Lissa runs out the door and lurches her car out the driveway onto icy streets, dying in a car accident. In her despondency, Orphea slams some pills down her throat followed by vodka.

After sad and foolish came crazy. I ransacked Ruby's medicine cabinet, took some pills and chased them with vodka, but found myself still standing. So, I took a walk to Icky's diner and put in an order for my very last supper, BLT on a sesame roll. The soup of the day was split pea. To this day, I'm not sure whether it was the pills and vodka or the smell of the simmering kettle that sent me flying to the bathroom. Marilyn held my head over the toilet.

'What did you take? Tell me what you took!'

'Some kind of pills so Ruby could get pregnant,' I said, gagging.

She slammed me on the back. 'They probably won't kill you.'

But by the time I was done being sick, I felt like a ghost. I curled up on the floor of the diner's kitchen while Icky lectured me.

'You don't do that kind of stuff, hear me? You don't take your own precious life. That's not your place to do that, Orpheus. Your job is to-'

'To live,' said Marilyn...

'You think that Lissa would want this bullshit? You think that she would approve?'

They didn't understand. They hadn't been there. Maybe Lissa wanted to die after what had happened. Maybe she couldn't deal with it.

...How could anyone know what she felt when Rupert went downstairs to rub her nose in it? He had seen us. She would have felt

ashamed. She would have been afraid of him calling her parents. Maybe she wrecked the van on purpose (Wyeth, 2004, pp. 56-57).

Although Orphea's impulse to commit suicide appears to result more from despair from her loss than from internalization of homophobia, she questions whether Lissa's death was indeed an accident or intentional. "She would have been ashamed. She would have been afraid of him calling her parents." Orphea understands that the suddenness of Rupert's assault, stemming from his virulent homophobia, might have frightened Lissa so much to want to indeed take her own life. She wasn't afforded time to process what happened between her and Orphea, as is the case in many other same gender romance novels, and so, Orphea and the reader are left wondering about the true cause of Lissa's death.

The internalization of shame that causes Orphea to wonder about Lissa's death is made more explicit in the novel of the transgender character Liam/ Luna (who as a child originally chose the name Lia Marie). In the form of a flashback (denoted by italics) Liam's sister and narrator, Regan, discusses the discovery of her sister/brother's attempted suicide.

*Pounding the door. 'Liam.'*

*He can't hear because he's got his CD amped up to earsplitting volume. Dana International, this Israeli singer I can't stand. Liam idolizes her.*

*I knock again. 'Liam!'*

*When he doesn't answer, I do the unthinkable. I barge in.*

*First thing I see are the pill bottles. A row lined up neatly along the edge of his bookshelf. They're Mom's; they have to be. I'm thirteen and I already know my mom's a popper.*

*But that's not what freaks me. The bottles are all empty.*

*'Liam?' I punch off the music. 'Liam!'*

*'What?'*

*His voice is faint, but it's a voice. I run toward it, to the closet.*

*He's huddled in the corner dressed in his football uniform. I rush over and grab his arm; try to wrench him to his feet.*

*He resists. He buries his head between his kneepads and mumbles,*

*'Leave me alone.'*

*'No.'*

*'Go away.'*

*'Come on.' The panic registers in my voice. 'You have to throw up.'*

*He goes limp. He doesn't budge. My first impulse is to kick him, so I do.*

*'Ow!' He scoots further into the closet. 'Why'd you do that?'*

*I fall to my knees and clench his shoulders; start to shake him.*

*'You have to throw up, Liam. I won't let you die!' This comes out a screech, which makes him raise his head and look at me. His eyes are already dead.*

*'Liam. Lia Marie. Please.' My eyes well with tears. 'Please.'*

*His left hand reaches out and snags the football helmet beside him.*

*He holds it up to me by the faceguard. Inside is a mound of pills. Blue, purple, orange, white.*

*'I can't do it,' Liam says. 'I can't even do it. I can't do anything right. I'm wrong. All wrong.'*

*'No, you're not.' I feel so relieved I throw my arms around him.*

*'Please, Re.' He clasps my wrists and pulls me away. 'I wasn't meant to be born.' He transfers the helmet to my right hand. 'Help me die. Pour these down my throat, okay?' He pleads urgently. 'Please?'* (Peters, 2004, pp. 66-67).

Throughout the novel, Liam's and Regan's dad pressures Liam to get involved in sports to Lia Marie's complete dismay. His latest attempt was to encourage Liam to try for the football team. She doesn't want to play football; she wants to play dress-up.

More importantly, she is born into a male-sexed body, but knows herself to be a girl. But how can she survive when her father so desperately wants her to act, to be a normal boy? Thus defying society's gender norms, the character Liam/ Lia Marie/ Luna feels "all wrong" and wants to die.

Another novel, *The Rainbow Kite* (Shyer, 2002) likewise poignantly describes a character's anguish from breaking society's norms around sexuality, and more importantly his father's expectations. Like Liam's father, Bennett's dad just wants his son to be 'normal,' i.e. sociable, attracted to girls, and involved in sports. Like Liam/Lia

Marie/ Luna, Bennett detests sports, despite generally being good at any that he tries. In this case, Bennett's dislike for sports derives from the ostracism and humiliation he quickly incurs upon joining any organized club: be it a stamp club or swim team. Regardless, "no faggots allowed" is the recurring message. As a result, Bennett quits each activity in turn- also to his dad's dismay, as his dad's motto is "never quit; stick with it," intensifying Bennett's shame upon disappointing his father over and over again. Bennett repeatedly prays to be made 'normal,' and is likewise frustrated to still be "queer." "“You just can't ever know, Matthew [his younger brother]. The times I feel twisted and dark and disgusting, how often I've prayed in church for God to come down and put a hand on me and make me like everyone else””(Shyer, 2002, p. 88).

Bennett's sense of shame only increases after his parents and neighbors discover a hate message spray-painted on the Cummings' garage door. His dad moves quickly to whitewash the door to avoid excess attention; their neighbor's dad forbids Bennett's friend Jeremy to visit anymore; his parents fight about how to handle Bennett's coming out; and most significantly, Bennett's dad refuses to allow Bennett to fly his kite at graduation. The kite that Bennett and Jeremy have been building is emblematic and presumably redemptive, in that it is supposed to be their crowning glory, proving to others and Bennett himself that he is worthwhile. Except now his dad won't let him fly it at graduation.

He wouldn't talk to me at all, saying his throat hurt, and more than anything it was this rainbow kite; after all this time and all this work,

Dad's ruling- *his* decree- not to fly the kite at graduation, was scary I guess for my brother, flying the kite at graduation was *everything*.

I know my brother pretty well. That's why I think for him, giving up on the kite was like going off the cliff he'd been on edge of since Frankie [his dog] died. Which sort of explains the unexplainable: what happened later that night (Shyer, 2002, p. 160).

Bennett gives his younger brother Matthew his dog and cat stamp collection and the blue metal bank he kept his money in.

'The combination is 6, 26, 22. Keep that too. I want you to have it.'

'What are you giving all this stuff to me for, Bennett?' I asked. I thought either the germs or the meds had affected his mind.

'...Just keep the stuff. I won't be needing any of it anymore' (pp. 160-161).

While the reader recognizes Bennett's act of giving away precious items as an indicator of suicidal thoughts, Bennett's actions just confuses Matthew. The next day Matthew attends school as usual, while Bennett stays home, presumably still recovering from a severe case of the flu. While at school, Matthew intuits the powerful need to go home and make sure that Bennett is okay. When he arrives home, both Bennett and his precious rainbow kite are missing, but finds a suicide note- in the form of a typewritten obituary- instead.

Bennett Lawson Cummings,  
born November 6, 1986,  
student at Clara Barton Junior High School,  
class of 2001,  
son of Alexander and Lydia Cummings.  
Died on May 24<sup>th</sup> at age 15.  
He leaves behind a brother, Matthew,  
grandparents Nellie and Arthur Eldridge  
of Minneapolis, Minnesota.  
Cause of death: SHAME (p. 171)

After calling his mom to inquire if Bennett was with her, Matthew runs out to Edgewater Point where Bennett was going to fly the kite.

It was the worst sight I'd ever seen in my life: Bennett's rainbow kite suspended in the blue sky over Edgewater Point.

I stopped my bike and tried to breathe normally, but the sight knocked the wind right out of me. The kite was bobbing along, being carried out to sea by the wind, getting smaller and smaller even as I had my eyes glued to it, as if I could will it to stop dead right there in the sky- *Stopstopstop!* It was suspended in space, and I guess the line had turned invisible in the blue air. What made it so terrible to see, what shot me down as I stood there trying to catch my breath, was that Bennett wasn't there, the spool tight in his hand, holding and guiding it. The kite had

escaped- or worse- he'd let it go, sent it to wherever, to the end of the earth, to nowhere, to oblivion, to the *moon*, because he'd just buckled under. Written his death notice, and given up. What else was there to think? He'd let go of the kite, bailed out on living. What else could it mean (Shyer, 2002, p. 171).

Bennett had jumped trying to kill himself, but was carried back to shore with the tide, where some fishermen found him and took him to the hospital. Although he doesn't die, he does for a while give up on living, refusing to speak. In the following excerpt, Bennett communicates through handwritten notes his deep-seated anguish over his shame and humiliation about being gay.

I could see his pen was shaking and he took a long time with it.

I'D BE BETTER OFF BEING DEAD

'No, you wouldn't! You wouldn't!' I cried. I started to cough and couldn't stop.

I'M ALWAYS HIDING WHO I AM

Bennett scribbled. At first it was too hard to read, some letters jerky or too close to each other and some i's without dots. I looked down over his shoulder, coughing.

I HATE ME I HATE ME I HATE ME

I climbed down from my brother's bunk, barking coughs. I needed a drink of water.

AND SO DOES EVERYONE ELSE

‘Not me! Not Mom, not Dad or Grandma or Grandpa,’ I reminded my brother when I could get my own voice working.

THEY’RE BETTER OFF WITHOUT ME

‘No, they’re not! *We’re* not!’ I felt hot, then cold (Shyer, 2002, p. 181).

Back and forth they argue via these handwritten notes, culminating in the most singularly painful two sentences of the novel: “I AM QUEER. I BELONG NOWHERE” (Shyer, 2002, p. 187).

While the novel addresses an important issue- the impact on society’s norms on the esteem of many GLBTQ youth, which leads this population to higher rates of suicide attempts than non-GLBTQ youth, *The Rainbow Kite* (Shyer, 2002) is also problematic in that it feeds into messages that reinforce GLBTQ youth as ‘at-risk,’ lacking resiliency and agency. As previously noted, Bennett’s conflict with self, family, and society is only resolved through an external show of support by his classmates, rather than by any act of personal agency.

As can be seen, persecution and harassment towards GLBTQ characters remain a pivotal element of the narratives of these sampled books. In fact, out of seventeen books, fourteen of them include some explicit form of persecution or harassment- the most pervasive being verbal harassment (14/14). Nevertheless, in many of the books, verbal harassment, in the form of taunts, slurs, and other homophobic innuendo, is also accompanied by more substantive forms of persecution- namely physical assault,

vandalism, or even hate crimes, such that the books depict near relentless forms of attack on GLBTQ youth.

In eleven of those fourteen books, the verbal abuse happens most frequently in the context of school settings, which underscores the institutionalized nature of schooling to reproduce heterosexism and foster homophobia. While fictionalized, current research on the experiences of GLBTQ students in schools supports these depictions. According to the 2005 School Climate Report conducted by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), 75.4.9% of LGBT students reported hearing remarks such as "faggot" or "dyke" frequently or often; 64.3% of students reported feeling unsafe in their school because of their sexual orientation; 40.7% of students reported feeling unsafe based on their gender expression (GLSEN, 2005). Within this context, many GLBTQ individuals, and several characters in these sampled books, come to internalize society's sexual and gender norms and so question their own worth and legitimacy. The characters Luna and Bennett both express a common sentiment among many GLBTQ youth- "I'm all wrong"- that leads to increased suicidal attempts among this youth population as compared to non-GLBTQ youth. For instance, the 2003 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey noted that 32.7 percent of LGB students have attempted suicide, as compared to 8.7 percent of non-LGB students, and that 17.6 percent of LGB youth require medical attention resulting from suicide attempts, as compared to 2.9 percent of non-LGB youth (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2007).

## **Social Networks**

Having discussed cultural institutions and practices and persecution, I now turn to the third major sociocultural category is social networks, which includes family and friends/peers. Both of these subcategories demonstrate powerful social forces in the narratives of these books, much as they do in the lives of GLBTQ youth themselves. Family members, friends, or peers in these novels may reject, question, waffle, affirm, and/ or support the GLBTQ characters therein. The significance of these categories derives from the sociocultural framework of heterosexism within which all the characters operate.

### ***Parents***

Inclusion of parents in these novels often serves as a source of narrative conflict for GLBTQ teens, as their lives and evolving identities frequently come into conflict with their parents' expectations for sexually- and gender-conforming individuals. This is true for many characters in these novels- e.g. Mel in *The Bermudez Triangle* (Johnson, 2004), Tony in *Boy Meets Boy* (Levithan, 2003), Holland in *Keeping You a Secret* (Peters, 2003), Liam/Luna in *Luna* (Peters, 2004), Bennett in *The Rainbow Kite* (Shyer, 2002). In the words of James from *My Heartbeat* (Freyman-Wehr, 2002), this is true for many "[b]ecause no one wants their kid to be gay" (p. 58). In fact, in this sample of themed books, there are characterizations (as supporting or backdrop figures) of only five parents who unequivocally affirm their teen's GLBTQ identity.<sup>3</sup> Thus, by and large characterizations of parents in these books assert presumptions of heteronormativity and expectations for their children as such. Continuing with the novel

*My Heartbeat* (Freyman-Wehr, 2002), Ellen learns that her brother Link and his best friend James are a couple, except that Link says they are not. This leads to a discussion between Ellen and James about homosexuality, societal and parental expectations for heterosexuality.

‘Maybe he [Link] doesn’t know that it’s a not a big deal to be gay.’

‘It’s a big enough deal,’ James says. ‘My parents make me see a shrink because they’re worried I’m gay.’

People used to think that being gay was a mental illness, but doctors (*especially* psychiatrists) no longer believe that. Even if Mr. and Mrs. Wentworth aren’t fit to be parents [that’s because they’re so self-absorbed], I’ve never heard Mom call them stupid. I ask James if his parents know that reasonable people don’t think being gay is a mental illness.

‘They do know,’ he says. ‘They send me so I can make my own choices without being influenced by their deep desire that I be straight,’ (p. 57).

Even if in the narratives in which GLBTQ young adult characters do not come out to their parents, they frequently struggle with parental expectations for heteronormativity nevertheless. For instance, towards the end of the novel *Eight Seconds* (Ferris, 2000), the main character John realizes that he is gay- although he never uses that word and struggles with the ramifications of this new awareness.

I sat under a lot of dusty trees, hot even in the shade, and thought about how important it was for my dad to have a son. Could he accept a new concept of what a son was? Could *I*? Could I ever give him the chance? I just didn't see how. And what about Mom, with her ideas of how things were supposed to be or what was decent and what wasn't? My news would put a serious dent in those. All her concerns about my turning out wrong would be realized in spades... (pp.182-183).

With John's sudden introspection, John's mother takes to watching him, notices the changes, but inappropriately points to the reason:

'I want to say something to you,' she said, her hands in the back pockets of her jeans. I braced myself. 'I want to tell you how pleased I am at your behavior lately. You've done what you're supposed to and more, according to your father. You've stayed out of trouble. You've thought better of that friendship with Kit Crowe. And you've been so nice and quiet and easy to have around- I have to believe you're finally growing up. I just want you to know that I've noticed.'

I kept rubbing my hands on the rag and almost laughed. All it took for her to finally be satisfied with me was for my entire life to be completely turned upside down that I didn't make sense to myself anymore. Yet she'd be staggered if she knew why she was so pleased with me (Ferris, 2000, p. 183).

Then, from *Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001) the reader sees Kyle's mother's confusion and personal struggle with her son's news that he's gay.

Later that week, Kyle arrived home from school to find his mother standing in the center of his bedroom- not cleaning or tidying up, just rubbing her brow. She'd been acting weird like that ever since he came out to her four weeks ago. She barraged him with questions like, Should she have done anything differently bringing him up? or, What about the ex-gay groups that claimed homosexuals could change?

Mom, he said, frustrated. You didn't do anything wrong and I can't change. Those groups are full of fakes. Besides, I wouldn't want to change, even if I could. I'm finally starting to like who I am. Are you sorry with how I turned out?

'No.' Tears puddle in her eyes. 'I'm just scared' (Sanchez, 2001, p. 103).

In yet another novel, *Gravel Queen* (Benduhn, 2003), Aurin's mother Prudence also questions Aurin about recent changes in her life and her new friendship with a girl named Neila. In doing so, they dance around the reason for these recent changes and the nature of this new relationship.

'What are you doing?' Pru is standing in my doorway. Fred and Neila left a few hours earlier, and I'm back to reading.

My head darts up from the magazine, snaps back to look at her.  
'Nothing.'

She is still standing there.

...She shifts her gaze upward and inspects the molding around the door, investigating the wood grain patterns. She runs her fingers along one group of swirls, tracing the pattern up along the edge. Notices a spot on the wall, picks at it with her fingernail, then wets her fingertip and tries rubbing the spot out. 'So what's new with you?' she asks.

'Nothing.'

She arches an eyebrow.

I shift my position, close the magazine, sit up. 'What do you mean?' I ask.

'You are constantly depressed, you never talk to us anymore, you suddenly have a whole different group of friends...'

'I'm a teenager.'

'You know, honey, you can talk to us any time. If there's anything troubling you-' her voice is tight, stretched, strained- 'and if it's your father and me that you don't feel comfortable talking with, I'm sure we can find someone else.'

'Someone else?' I scrunch up my face. 'Like *who*? A shrink?'

'There's nothing wrong with it.' Prudence cocks her head to the side like a dog listening to a high-pitched sound. 'Just for an extra person you would feel safe and comfortable talking to. If you need it.'

‘No,’ I say. ‘There is nothing wrong with it, but I feel plenty comfortable talking to people. And besides, my friends are not a whole different crowd...’

She goes into the bathroom and pulls out a bottle of cleanser and a cleaning rag, comes back to the spot on the wall. ‘Mm-hmmm,’ she says...

Prudence is scrubbing, scrubbing. Shaking her head...

She doesn’t understand why Aurin is no longer hanging out with her long time best friend Kenney and with Neila instead. She senses that Aurin has changed somehow, and that the change has to do with this new friendship with Neila.

‘So why can’t you go back to the way things were before?’

Prudence says. ‘Just pull yourself together, apologize to Kenney.’

‘Apologize for what?’

‘Well, you just said so yourself, you’ve changed.’ She’s still scrubbing the wall, has moved on to more spots that need her attention.

‘I’m not changing back, Mom. You think I’m like some kind of lizard or something has a few colors in rotation and I can just get them back? I’m *growing up*, I’m not reversing time. And that isn’t something I can apologize for...’

‘...And I should be able to change friends. You used to say yourself that I didn’t have enough friends. Now I have a new one, and you

don't like that either. You won't acknowledge it. You can't even remember her name.'

'This isn't about me, Aurin.' Not scrubbing. Looking at me.

'It isn't?' I arch my eyebrows.

'Don't talk back to me.' She's getting testy. 'I'm your mother.'

She huffs off a little steam. I can see her getting wound up, but also fighting against that. Trying to get to the end of what she was meaning to say all along, without ruining it with her temper. She desperately *wants* to be a calmer mother, not so high-strung and tense when talking to her children. So here she is, standing in front of me with rag in one hand, the bottle of cleanser in the other, and staring down at me from my doorway. And the whole reason she started this conversation in the first place is about something she's afraid of (Benduhn, 2003, pp. 139-142).

A couple of elements are especially provocative in the above narrative sequence.

First is Benduhn's characterization of Prudence, Aurin's mother. Prudence is trying to have a heart-to-heart conversation with her daughter, but is compelled at the same time to clean, scrub, and sanitize the walls. This appears symbolic of her desire for a sanitized daughter. Prudence understood and approved of Aurin's friendship with Kenney, but finds Aurin's new friendship with Neila as disdainful as the stains on the wall.

Unfortunately she cannot scrub those dirt marks clean and so suggests the possibility of Aurin seeing a psychiatrist who might be able to do so instead. The symbolism of the dirt

on the wall is suggestive of the ways that homosexuality has also been considered ‘dirty,’ a stain on otherwise good, moral souls, something to be eradicated and washed clean.

Also noteworthy in the above sequence is the location of the ‘problem’ driving the conversation in the first place. Prudence locates the ‘problem’ with Aurin and the recent changes in her behavior and new friendship, while Aurin challenges that the ‘problem’ rests not with her, but with her mother, and by extension society. “‘This isn’t about me’” her mother commented. “‘It isn’t?’” Aurin retorts. Aurin contends that the ‘whole reason [her mother] started this conversation in the first place is about something she’s afraid of.’ Although homosexuality, or sexuality in general, is not mentioned anywhere in the entire dialogue, the implication is that that is the source of Prudence’s fear. She asks in another point in the conversation: “‘I just want to know, what is so special about this new friendship... What are you doing that’s so much better or different than with Kenney?’” Aurin replies, her gaze held firm, “‘You wouldn’t understand.’ I say this quietly, but not without force” (Benduhn, 2003, pp. 142-143). While the reader most closely identifies with Aurin, Benduhn also wants the reader to feel for her mother.

Prudence dips her head, averts her eyes from me, drops her shoulders slightly, places the cleanser and rag on the floor in front of my doorway. ‘I’m trying to.’ She is also quiet, though, in a weary way. She turns and goes downstairs, away from me (p. 143).

While there clearly is conflict in this narrative sequence, it is also clear from the description that Benduhn is not trying to invoke an us/them, teen versus parent type of

conflict. Furthermore, Prudence's physical description suggests an attitude of surrender, but without any real feeling of victory for Aurin either.

The above examples provide insights into the struggles of GLBTQ youth and their parents- whether they necessarily know of their child's evolving identity or not- as characterized in these themed novels. However, a couple of novels describe in poignant detail the pain when parents' heteronormative expectations lead them to reject their child. One such example comes from *Keeping You a Secret* (Peters, 2003). As discussed in the earlier section on physical assault, Holland's mother discovers that she has been having a lesbian relationship with her new friend Cece and goes into a crushing rage. She starts beating her daughter, kicks her out of the house, giving her only two minutes to pack, and prohibits Holland from ever seeing her baby sister again. When Holland comes back after a couple of days to get more clothes, hoping for reconciliation, she is more thoroughly rejected a second time.

Mom's car was parked in the driveway. My pulse quickened.

Maybe when she saw me, remembered who I was...

The back door was locked, so I dug out my house key and inserted it into the keyhole.

It didn't fit.

I don't know how long I stood there, in denial. She was in the kitchen, behind the curtain. I could see her silhouette. She saw me, I know she did. The outline vanished. The message sank in. I stumbled back to the Jeep (Peters, 2003, p. 199).

In another novel, Peters (2004) describes another near assault and final disappointment and rejection of parent for child, upon discovering his/her transgender identity. On her eighteenth birthday, Luna comes into the kitchen dressed not in her boy clothes, but in a new short jean skirt and yellow sweater. Her dad demands that she go downstairs and change; Luna refuses.

Luna's spine fused. 'No. This is who I am. This is how I choose to live the rest of my life.'

'Not in my house you don't. Not if I can help it.' Dad's fingers clenched in a fist and he drew back his arm...

Dad's fist balled tighter. Hard, white-knuckled. His elbow extended farther back, arm vibrating.

I couldn't move; couldn't speak. I was frozen in time and space. I imagined the crushing blow to Luna's face, lethal in its intent, in its execution. Dad was big, strong. And more angry than I remembered him ever being.

Luna held her head high, waiting. Almost daring him to do it. Seconds ticked away. Years.

Then, slowly, Dad released his fist.

My lungs collapsed.

Luna reached around him for the door knob. 'Excuse me,' she said.

Right in her ear, Dad said, 'If you walk out that door, don't bother coming back...'

Luna poised for a long moment, her hand on the knob. She stared straight ahead into the solid wood, into nothingness...

Dad said, 'I mean it, Liam.'

Luna's arm fell to her side. Every bone in her body seemed to disintegrate as her shoulders slumped. She said, 'I realize I've been a big disappointment to you, Dad. I'm sorry I couldn't be the son you wanted. I'm sorry.' Wrapping her arms protectively around herself, she plodded through the living room toward the basement stairs. Defeat hung in the air like nuclear waste (Peters, 2004, pp. 223-224).

As clearly demonstrated, parents' deeply held heteronormative beliefs obviously employ great power- and in these novels significant narrative conflict- for their GLBTQ teens. Because of these assumptions and beliefs, the parental rejection is even that much more heartrending. In one case from *Finding H.F.* Watts (2001) depicts a minor character named Lacey who is kicked out of the house when her parents discover her in bed with another girl. Lacey now drifts along as one of the many GLBTQ street youth. 'The last time anybody saw Lacey was four months ago. Wherever she is, I hope she's OK. And if she's not, it's her parents' fault as sure as they'd picked up a gun and shot her' (Watts, 2001, p. 163). Through her narrator, Watts appears to indict all parents of GLBTQ runaways and street teens for rejecting their children and leaving them vulnerable to the dangers of the street.

*Conservative v. progressive*

Just as the novels *Love Rules* (Reynolds, 2001), *Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001), and *Rainbow High* (Sanchez, 2003) seem to purposefully juxtapose positive and negative portrayals of school administrator and faculty, the novel *The Bermudez Triangle* (Johnson, 2004) appears to counter positive and negative parental responses to their daughters' (presumed) coming out. When Mel's mother finds out that Mel and Avery have been dating, she calls Avery's parents for a meeting to discuss the matter.

'I thought it would be best if we all sat down and discussed this together,' Mel's mother said. She hadn't actually looked at Avery until this point. She did now.

'What are we discussing?' Avery's mom asked.

'A situation. Something's that's just come to our attention.'

'What kind of situation?' Avery's dad asked.

Mel's mom fixed her blouse for a good two minutes while her dad looked down at the floor.

'Avery and Melanie have been...'

Mel's mom stopped and looked at the heavy green winter curtains, which didn't quite match the slightly different green of the rug. The clash genuinely seemed to disturb her.

'Have been what?'

'More than friends.'

She seemed to hate these words even more than the curtains. She didn't say them in any kind of evil, Cruella De Vil voice, but Avery could feel her disgust (Johnson, 2004, p. 323).

While Mel's mom is taciturn, her dad uncomfortable, Avery's parents take a more progressive stance to the revelation, arguing that the girls should be comfortable talking about their questions or thoughts about their (again presumed) lesbian sexuality with their parents.

'Look,' Avery's mom said slowly. 'We know these are two good girls. And if they're gay-'

'I'm not gay,' Avery cut in.

'They have to be comfortable admitting that to us.'

'But I'm not.'

'Because they are still our daughters.' Mrs. Dekker patted Avery's shoulder. Avery rolled her eyes to the ceiling in despair.

'If that's how you want to raise Avery, fine,' Mel's mother said.

'But I don't want this for Mel. When she's older, she'll regret all the things she could have had- a husband, kids. She'll see that people treat her differently, and she won't like it.'

'I think if our daughters are discovering their sexuality, we should at least listen to what they have to say.'

'Discovering their... ' Mel's mother huffed. 'I don't think you're dealing with reality here' (Johnson, 2004, pp. 323-324).

Ironically, Mrs. Dekker is all ready to support her daughter's coming out process as a lesbian, only to find out that Avery realized she's not a lesbian. The relationship between Mel and Avery instigated a shift in identity for Mel, but not for Avery. The other point of irony in this scene stems from its occurrence in the narrative- towards the end of the novel- *after* Mel and Avery have dated, broken up, and then reconciled as friends again. Typical of young adult novels, the parents have largely been absent in this novel for the large majority of the text, only to appear near the end for this maternal battle of progressive versus reactionary, with father figures invoking more subdued and moderate stances.

After the battle between mothers and their respective positions, and Avery's parents removed, the conflict shifts to Mel's (divorced) parents themselves about the most appropriate response to Mel's coming out. Mel's mother wants to enforce a 'reality'- based approach, while her dad adopts a more measured stance.

'I just don't understand,' Mel's dad said. He spoke quietly. He seemed so genuinely sad that no one spoke for a moment.

'It's okay, Dad,' Mel said. She looked up at her father now, trying to reassure him.

'It's not okay.' This brought Mel's mother out of her short silence. 'I'm not going to support this kind of lifestyle. Neither is your father, and neither is Jim. Don't expect us to pay for your college or your living expenses. If this is how you're going to be, you'd better be prepared for some reality, little girl.'

‘Just stop,’ her father said. ‘You’ve said enough. Be quiet.’

‘I will *not* be quiet. It’s a fact. After she’s eighteen, we’re under no legal obligation to provide anything. Let her find her own place to live.

Let her try to find a job. Let her see what the world is really like’ (pp. 325-326).

The authors provide a range of parental responses in these sampled books to their children’s sexual- and gender-nonconforming identities- from outrage and disgust to complete affirmation and support. Holland’s mother in *Keeping You a Secret* (Peters, 2003) reacts in complete outrage: “I did not raise you to be a lesbian!” and “You disgust me!” (p. 180) beating her daughter in her fury and kicking her out. Mel’s non-custodial mother in *The Bermudez Triangle* (Johnson, 2004) does not go as far as disowning her daughter, but does threaten to sever future financial support. Contrasting depictions are epitomized through Nelson’s mother in *Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001), *Rainbow High* (Sanchez, 2003), who is the president of the local PFLAG chapter. Nelson comments, “I’m her fucking cause!” (Sanchez, 2001, p. 16). Then after Bennett in *The Rainbow Kite* (Shyer, 2002) comes out to his parents, resulting from a hate message spray painted on their garage door, Bennett’s mother reaffirms her love and support for her son: “Bennett is *perfectly* all right. It’s the world around him that’s out of line” (p. 140). Then she notices a picture of Mickey Mantle given to Bennett’s younger brother Matthew by a lesbian couple in the neighborhood, and comments: “I bet Mickey Mantle’s mother was no more proud of her son than I am. Straight or gay. You’re both batting a thousand with me” (pp. 140-141).

*Finding the moderate middle*

While such polarized responses are equally plausible, in some ways characterizations of parents who struggle somewhere in between these poles to make sense of their teen's alternate sexual or gender identities seem more realistic. Jason's mother in *Rainbow High* (Sanchez, 2003) does not know how to talk to her son about his coming out as gay. She appears as a quiet, unassuming Latina mother who has tried hard to keep her family together. At first she doesn't talk about his coming out, instead making comments such as, "I miss her [Debra, Jason's ex-girlfriend]. Such a nice girl. Maybe you and she could work things out" (Sanchez, 2003, p. 154). Then when he comes out to his teammates and the media catch hold of the story, she asks questions such as "What about ex-gay groups?" (p. 185) or "'Do you think it's because of him [Jason's alcoholic father] that you're-' the skin around her mouth wrinkled as she struggled with the word 'gay'?" (p. 190). While it is obvious that Jason's mother is not happy that her son is gay, the reader sees her trying to make sense of this revelation and come to terms with it the best she can.

As briefly highlighted above, Mel's father from *The Bermudez Triangle* (Johnson, 2004) likewise epitomizes this position. He is troubled by his daughter's coming out, saying, "I just don't understand." A little later Mel and her dad talk some more about her coming out.

'I'm sorry,' Mel said.

It probably sounded like she was apologizing for being gay. That wasn't it. She was apologizing for her mother and for making something in his life that took for granted suddenly foreign.

'Your mom did have a point,' he said. 'It's going to make things hard.'

'Faking the rest of my life would be harder.'

He considered this.

'I know this makes no sense to you,' she said. 'But it doesn't have to change anything between us.'

'Mel, you know that I'm going to love you no matter what, right?' her father said, pulling her close for an embrace.

Mel couldn't have been more grateful (Johnson, 2004, p. 330).

While the reader understands that Mel's dad would need time to adjust to this news, the statement of affirmation nevertheless is poignant and heartwarming.

One other novel powerfully demonstrates the difficult pull between parental expectations for their child's heteronormativity, the disappointment at discovering otherwise, and their enduring love for their child. It comes from the novel *Boy Meets Boy* (Levithan, 2003). As I discussed in the earlier section on homophobia and religion, Levithan characterizes Tony's parents as conservative Christians who believe that their son's homosexuality would cause his soul to be damned. Unlike the portrayal of conservative Christianity in other novels, Levithan treats even these characters with respect. He portrays them as loving, but anguish-ridden parents torn between their desire

for their son's happiness and their religious beliefs. Finally, Tony garners the courage to challenge his parents' position but does so courteously. I quote the novel at length here to demonstrate both the poignant treatment by Levithan for Tony's mother and her conflict over Tony's homosexuality as well as Tony's enactment of agency.

'I'm in here with Paul!' he yells.

Silence. Keys on the front counter. A pause. Footsteps on the stairs.

All those years of us pretending. All the 'bible study groups' and midnight curfews. All those times we had to wash the scent of a basement rave out of Tony's clothes, or let Tony onto our computers to go places his parents wouldn't let him go. All those moments of panic when we thought we wouldn't make it back on time, when we thought that Tony would come home and the door would be locked for good. All those lies. All those fears. And now Tony's mother coming into the room- not even knocking- and seeing the two of us sitting on the floor, him cross-legged and leaning on the side of his bed, me kneeling by the bookcase, not even pretending to be looking for a book.

'Oh,' she says- the kind of word that falls like a stone.

'We're going to do some homework,' Tony says.

She looks straight at him. 'I'm not sure that's a good idea.'

All those silences. All those burning thoughts kept hidden. And now Tony is letting them out, carefully. Now Tony is standing his ground.

‘Why?’ Tony asks- the kind of word that is thrown like a stone.

‘Why?’ Tony’s mom repeats- an off-guard echo, an uncertain response.

‘Paul is my best friend, and we’ve been doing homework together for a long time. He is my *friend*- nothing more, no different from Joni or Laura or any other girl. I am being totally honest with you, and I want you to be totally honest with me. Why could you possibly think it’s a bad idea for Paul and me to do our homework together?’

I see it in her eyes. I see exactly what Tony was talking about. That strange, twisted, torn love. That conflict between what your heart knows is right and what your mind is told is right<sup>4</sup> (pp. 153-154).

Although Tony’s mother acquiesces, telling him to keep his door open, she visibly wrestles with the decision.

...His [Tony’s] face is new-born raw, his arms wrap around his body. I move over to him and hug him tight. I tell him that he’s brave... His cry carries through the house. I rock him a little and look up to see his mother in the doorway again. This time I can read her perfectly. She wants to be where I am, holding him. But I know she will not say the things I am willing to say. Maybe she knows this, too. Maybe this will change, too. She looks at my face and gives me a nod. Or maybe she is finally returning Tony’s nod. Then she retreats again (Levithan, 2003, p. 155).

The struggle continues, however. Paul and his friends plan an end-of-the-year dance and very much want Tony to attend, but Tony's parents would normally forbid it. In this other excerpt, the reader once again experiences the anguish between parent and child.

'We've come to Tony up for the dance,' I say.

Tony walks up behind his [dad], dressed in his Sunday best.

'I see,' his dad says, not sounding too happy. 'Are you his date?'

'We're all his date,' Joni answers.

Everyone steps forward. Girls and boys. Straight boys and a drag queen. My boyfriend. My ex-boyfriend. My brother. Me.

Tony angles past his parents and joins us. His tie is crooked and his suit is brown. But I've never seen him look so marvelous.

'Can I go?' he asks.

His parents stare at him. They stare at us. His mom puts her hand over her mouth. His father steps back from the doorway.

'It looks like you're going, anyway,' he says sternly.

'But I want you to say I can go,' Tony implores, his voice cracking.

His father looks torn between dogma and helplessness. As a result, he simply walks away.

Tony turns to his mom. Tears drop from her eyes. She looks at Infinite Darlene. She looks at Joni. She looks at me and Kyle. Then she looks at her son.

‘Please,’ he whispers.

She nods. ‘Have fun,’ she says. ‘Be back by midnight.’

Tony beams with relief. His mother does not, not even when he leans over to kiss her good-bye.

‘Thank you,’ he says.

She holds him for a moment, looks into his eyes. Then she lets him go into the night (p. 183).

Although the conflict between Tony and his parents centers on issues of sexuality, the power of the drama derives from a more universal struggle between parent and young adult- that of letting go. Levithan’s phrasing “then she lets him go into the night” is incredibly suggestive with its metaphoric connotations of darkness, mystery, fear, evil, and the unknown- all of which Tony’s parents have desperately tried to keep away from Tony. Alas, the hero’s journey necessitates travels into the unknown, and Tony’s courageous confrontation with his parents, as that first step on that journey, renders Tony possibly more of a heroic figure than the main character Paul himself.

***Non-sexual aspects of relationships between parent/teen characters***

Although the primary conflicts in these themed books are driven from issues related to sexuality, it would be inappropriate to claim those are the only issues at hand. There are the ubiquitous acts of rebellion- Ariel getting a nose ring (in *Kissing Kate*);

Nelson going to Jeremy's house after his mother has forbidden Nelson to date Jeremy (in *Rainbow High*); H.F. and Bo concocting a fake story about Bo visiting a college so that H.F. can go find her mother (in *Finding H.F.*); Aurin sneaking out of the house while grounded (in *Gravel Queen*). In *Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001), Kyle struggles with his parents over his self-disclosure as gay, but he also struggles with them as many teens do to be viewed and treated as a young adult, rather than a child. It irritates Kyle every time his father spins Kyle's baseball cap on his head, as he did when Kyle was a child. "Even if his dad never accepted him being gay, at least he might stop treating him like a child" (Sanchez, 2001, p. 106). Likewise, in the novel *Boy Meets Boy* (Levithan, 2003), when Paul brings Tony over to his house the first time, Levithan uses this moment to further describe and develop the relationship between Paul and his mother.

My mother immediately looks at Noah's teeth as he says, 'It's a pleasure to meet you.' I can't really blame her; she's a dentist, and she can't help doing it. The biggest fight we ever had was when I refused to get braces. I wouldn't even open my mouth to let the orthodontist see my teeth. He threatened to put the braces on my closed mouth, and far as I was concerned, that was that. I won't be bullied into anything, and I have the crooked teeth to prove it. My mother is constantly mortified by this, although she's nice enough not to mention it anymore.

Because I am my mother's son, I noticed right away that Noah's bottom front teeth overlap a little. Because I am not *entirely* my mother's son, I find this flaw to be beautiful (p.62).

While inclusion of parental characters in these GLBTQ themed novels is certainly not ubiquitous<sup>5</sup>, when they are included, they are frequently used as points of conflict—either directly or indirectly. The examples of parental rejection characterize the most dramatic forms of such conflict, but even in books like *Eight Seconds* (Ferris, 2000) or *The Rainbow Kite* (Shyer, 2002), the youth are often described being in conflict with their parents' heteronormative expectations and falling short.

In the next sections, I examine depictions of GLBTQ close peer networks and friendships, i.e. friendships with other GLBTQ youth, heterosexual teens, teammates, and other allies, described by and large much more favorably than are parental depictions. I begin with friendships between GLBTQ characters.

### ***Peer networks and friendships***

#### ***GLBTQ friends as community***

As discussed in the earlier section on school social hierarchies, peer youth culture is an especially salient social force, that in conjunction with parents/families, largely police heteronormativity. For this reason, friendships among GLBTQ youth, as represented in these books, provide important safe havens, places of resistance, and connections to community.

As portrayed in these books, one crucial aspect of friendships among GLBTQ youth is the diminished social isolation and alienation. The feeling of otherness dominates relationships of GLBTQ youth with their families, peers, and society in general; and so, these friendships provide a location of sameness and understanding. For

instance, Sanchez (2001) relates this idea in *Rainbow Boys*, when he describes how two of three major characters, Nelson and Kyle become friends.

...From the moment he first saw him [Nelson] in art class, Kyle knew Nelson was different. But when Mrs. MacTraugh paired them up to draw each other's portraits, Kyle panicked and asked to be excused to the infirmary.

After school, Nelson tracked him down. 'Let's get this out. You know I'm queer, I know you're queer. Get over it.' He turned and started to walk away.

Kyle felt a rush, like he'd burst from the water after a high dive. He was no longer alone...

Soon Kyle was spending every afternoon at Nelson's. They wrestled without dumb rules and did mud facials together. With Nelson, Kyle didn't have to pretend to be anything other than himself (pp. 13-14).

The notion of "pretending" or "not pretending" to be anything other than oneself is a crucial one, experienced by many GLBTQ youth, is reiterated in the following excerpt from the novel *Geography Club* (Hartinger, 2003), but will be developed further in the later section on identity. For now, I focus on significance as related to friendships among GLBTQ teens. Kyle also mentions a feeling of elation upon meeting another gay teen, "because he was no longer alone." Hartinger more thoroughly elaborates on this idea, in which a group of disparate queer teens manage to find each other, gather at a local pizza parlor, and find community.

‘We’re all alone,’ I said.

It was quiet for a second. Then Terese said, ‘Man, is that true.’

‘Sure can’t tell your family,’ Kevin said. ‘My dad would go feral.’

‘Mine too,’ Min said. ‘I’m not even sure my mom knows what ‘gay’ is. And even if I could get her to understand that, how do I ever get her to understand ‘bisexual’?’

‘Can’t tell your friends either,’ Ike said, staring down at the pizza again, but not at the tomatoes this time. ‘Even if they say they’re radical. They’re not radical about this. Not when they’re still in high school.’

Of course what I’d meant when I’d said ‘We’re all alone’ was that there were no other customers in the pizza joint. I’d just been trying to make conversation. I hadn’t been talking about being gay at all. But it had finally got the conversation rolling, so I wasn’t about to explain what I’d really meant.

‘It’s not like I don’t have friend,’ Terese was saying, playing with her crusts. ‘I got a lot of friends. Sometimes they rank on me about being a dyke or a homo, but they don’t believe it, not really. I know what they’d say if they knew they were right. So it’s like you can never really relax, not when you’re with other people. I mean, if they knew the truth, would they still be your friends?’

*Yes!* I thought. That was exactly how I felt. During our talk at the stinky picnic gazebo, Kevin had said he felt this way too. Did that mean all gay kids felt like this?

‘It’s like you’re always wearing a mask or whatever,’ Ike said. ‘Your family, even your friends, you can’t let them see the real you...’

We kept talking, and I thought, except for Min, I don’t know these people- I don’t really even know Kevin. But it was like I could be completely honest for the first time in my life. We were telling each other things we’d never told our best friends before, things we’d never even said out loud.

The five of us may have been alone in the pizza place, but we weren’t really alone. Not anymore (Hartinger, 2003, pp. 39-40, 42).

The statement “we weren’t really alone, not anymore” epitomizes the relational significance of these friendships for GLBTQ teens. Through these friendships, characters learn and gain access to a broader queer community; they gain important support systems; they acquire “families of choice.”<sup>6</sup> For example, in *Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001), Nelson becomes Kyle’s gateway to the larger queer community.

[Nelson] told Kyle about Alexander the Great, Oscar Wilde, and Michelangelo. He explained the Stonewall Riots and defined words like *cruising* and *drag*. He told Kyle about gay youth Web sites and introduced him to out music groups like Size Queen and Indigo Girls (p.14).

These friendships also provide important support systems as characters navigate peer groups and largely homophobic school institutions. For instance in the book *So Hard to Say* (Sanchez, 2004), Frederick comes out to his close friend Xio, but fears she will not keep her promise to not tell anyone, and he will soon be “outed” to the entire school. However, Iggy promises his support if she does.

‘What about you?’ Iggy asked. ‘Does anyone know about you?’

I told him the whole story about Xio, ending with how she’d been absent from school today. ‘What if she tells someone?’ I sat up again.

‘What if everyone finds out?’

‘Well...’ Iggy nodded reassuringly. ‘I’ll help you through it’ (p. 200).

Another book *Finding H.F.* (Watts, 2001) epitomizes GLBTQ friendships forming “families of choice.” H.F. and her best friend Bo journey from rural Kentucky to Florida to find H.F.’s mom. Along the way they stop for a few days in Atlanta, Georgia, where they also are introduced to the wider world of the queer community, including GLBTQ bookstores, gay churches, and lesbian street youth. At this point, they meet Chantal, Dee, and Laney, all three teens who had been kicked out of their homes for being lesbians, causing H.F. to reflect on her enduring friendship with Bo.

‘Y’all brother and sister?’ Chantal asks.

‘Nope, just friends.’ I don’t know why I said it that way- ‘just friends’ - because I’ve always hated that expression. It makes it sound like friends don’t mean nothing compared to family, but I don’t think that’s

true. I mean, I love Bo better than any real-life brother I could've ended up with (Watts, 2001, p. 99).

Finally, an excerpt from the novel *Boy Meets Boy* (Levithan, 2003) eloquently captures the essence and significance of these friendships as described in these books. Paul and Noah meet in a bookstore and then run into each other on the train home. They become instant friends.

I asked him for his phone number, but he gave me an e-mail address instead. It was safer that way for him. I told him to call me anytime, and we made our next set of plans. In other circumstances, this would have been the start of a romance. But I think we both knew, even then, that what we had was something even more rare, and even more meaningful. I was going to be his friend, and was going to show him possibilities. And he, in turn, would become someone I could trust more than myself (p.37).

The feeling that “someone finally understands me” is vital for the mental health for all youth, but as demonstrated here, absolutely crucial for GLBTQ youth. Research related to coping mechanisms among racial/ethnic minorities underscore family and community affirmation against racist structures and episodes (Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Patillo-McCoy, 1999), but that GLBTQ youth frequently lack such resources.

Institutionalization of heterosexism and homophobia, as documented in the reports of verbal and physical violence towards GLBTQ youth in schools (GLSEN, 2005), compels most queer teens to remain closeted during their K-12 schooling. This increases feelings

of alienation- the consequences of which are best depicted in the novel *The Rainbow Kite* (Shyer, 2002), in which Bennett tries to kill himself because he thinks everyone hates him and he will never be right. According to these novels, once GLBTQ youth begin to find others like themselves, they no longer feel so wrong.

### ***Straight friends and allies***

While GLBTQ friendships are crucial for the mental and psychological well-being of GLBTQ youth, as demonstrated in these books, heterosexual friends and allies also provide valuable affirmation and support as well. One way characters manifest such support is through expressions of protection and loyalty. For example in *The Bermudez Triangle* (Johnson, 2004), Mel, Avery, and Nina are longtime best friends. While Nina is away at a leadership camp, Mel and Avery become romantically involved. After they reveal their relationship to Nina upon her return, she goes through a process of questioning and doubt; nevertheless, she remains fiercely loyal to her friends. In the following excerpt, Nina learns that Mel and Avery have been “outed,” despite their preference otherwise.

The Avery and Mel thing was going to come out because of Devon. It only made sense. The fact that Devon knew before Georgia meant that he had to be the source. And the fact that Susan Yee knew by eighth period meant that Devon had spread whatever he knew. Scowling, smirking Tieboy had gotten into her friends’ lives. Tieboy was going to go *down* (p. 172).

In a scene out of *Boy Meets Boy* (Levithan, 2003), the main character Paul relates his best friend Joni's protectiveness towards him through her pain and disappointment over the break-up with his ex, Kyle.

'Has Kyle spoken to you?' she asks, in a way that makes it clear that Kyle has spoken to *her*.

'Does saying hi in the halls count?'

'Well, it's a step.'

Joni always liked Kyle. She liked his confusion, his woundedness, his bafflement...the same things I liked about him, as well as his natural charm and his sincerity. When these things<sup>7</sup> turned against me, I think Joni was almost as hurt as I was. She'd trusted him with me. He let both of us down (Levithan, 2003, p. 53).

Then in the book *Keeping You a Secret*, the main character Holland has promised her girlfriend Cece that she would keep their relationship a secret, even from her otherwise closest friends. This causes conflict with one friend especially- Leah. In the following excerpt, Leah believes that Holland may be scared to come out to her- without using those words, and reassures her that she will be her friend no matter what.

Leah probed my face. I couldn't even hold her eyes. In a lowered voice, she asked, 'Do you want to talk about it, Holland? Because, you know, I'm your friend no matter what. You can tell me anything.'

A spike of fear lodged in my spine. She wasn't referring to Seth. She knew. Did he tell her? Did Faith? Was it my imagination running wild? Why did it scare me so much that Leah might know?

More than anything I wanted to tell Leah. My heart was ready to explode with the love I felt for Cece. But I couldn't. Wouldn't. 'There's nothing to tell.' I faked a cheery grin and shrugged.

'Okay, fine.' Leah stood to leave.

'Leah-'

She slung her purse over her shoulder.

'I'm sorry,' I said at her back, removing my glasses and rubbed my eyes. 'It's not you. It's me. I...just can't.'

She turned around. 'We're best friends, Holland. You can tell me anything, anything at all, and I'll still love you' (pp. 172-173).

Peers and teammates can likewise be affirming and supporting or negative and homophobic, as demonstrated earlier. Here I provide a couple of examples in which peers and teammates of GLBTQ characters provide important instances of support, despite being minimal background characters. For instance, in *Finding H.F.* one minor character name Marijane bolsters up H.F., after she was harassed by other male classmates.

'Say...H.F.,' Marijane hollers, 'you learn to piss standin' up yet?'

'Still practicin',' I say, as I unzip and squat.

It probably sounds like Marijane gives me a hard time about being the way I am- and she does- but I can't help liking her, because she's so

good-natured about it. If she calls me a dyke, then she makes sure she calls herself a slut in the same breath, so that's fine with me. If Marijane is gonna say something about you, she says it to your face, not like the whispering snub queens on the cheerleading squad.

As I'm leaving the bathroom, Marijane throws her cigarette butt into the sink with a hiss. 'Hang in there, H.F.,' she says. 'Don't let them bastards get you down,' (Watts, 2001, p. 53).

The next example comes from *Rainbow High* (Sanchez, 2003), prior to which Jason came out to his teammates. In doing so, he attempts to mitigate some concerns by reassuring his teammates that he isn't attracted to them- denouncing the predatory myth of gay men towards straight men.

'So, Jason!' Andre's voice boomed across the tile.

Jason braced himself, expecting his first challenge. 'Yeah?'

'So if none of us handsome studs is your type-' Andre laughed, 'who is?'

'Yeah, Jason,' Odell chimed in. 'What kind of insult is that?'

Jason shook water from his ears. Was he hearing things? Were they actually *joking* with him?

'You know, my cousin's gay,' Andre crooned on. 'I'll introduce you, but don't get your hopes up. He's nowhere near as good-looking as me.'

Jason knew their kidding was a cover-up for the awkwardness. And yet he was grateful. He laughed along, aiming his face into the shower spray, hoping no one would notice the tears of relief streaming down his face (Sanchez, 2003, pp. 131-132).

The most frequent examples of heterosexual peers supporting GLBTQ characters represent them primarily as important allies that provide affirmation and validation. In the first example, Victor and his buddies have been teasing Iggy, calling him ‘chica;’ then when Frederick stands up for Iggy, the other boys turn on Frederick also: ‘You mean Iggy’s your *girlfriend*?’ (Sanchez, 2004, p. 222).

Except then I noticed Victor eyeing me- not laughing and cracking up with the others, but silent, as if studying me. Was he trying to figure out if my being friends with Iggy meant I was gay? Was he trying to decide if I was worth rescuing from the ridicule?

He rubbed a hand across his chin- like when I’d first told him about my asthma and he’d assigned me to play goalie. Would he now come up with some equally brilliant solution? Or would he decide I could no longer be friends with him and the team?

His eyes moved between me, the other guys, Iggy, and back to me. I waited, the sweat trickling down the back of my neck. Then Victor suddenly swung out his arm.

I blinked. Was he about to smack me?

Then I felt his arm swing onto my shoulder, like he'd always done, and he pushed me ahead of him toward the field.

'Come on,' he told everyone. 'Let's play ball' (Sanchez, 2004, pp. 222-223).

As the leader of the group, Victor's response to Frederick is crucial, as the rest of the team would follow Victor's lead. In fact, it meant the difference between social ostracism and inclusion.

The importance of straight allies for GLBTQ teens is particularly highlighted in *Love Rules* (Reynolds, 2001), in which students initiate a gay-straight alliance. Reynolds, via her character Kit, testifies to the support and validation straight allies contribute to the alliance, so that the student group is not perceived just as a "gay" thing, but rather a group that promotes inclusiveness and tolerance.

'Don't you see, the better the mix of gay/straight students, the more credibility our group has? If you and Conan come to meetings... you both have a lot of respect here, and that lends respect to GSA.

'I don't know...'

'We need support. Your presence will make things easier from the very start.'

Easier for *who*, I wonder. Not for me.

'Think about it. Okay?'

'Okay,' I said, but not very enthusiastically (Reynolds, 2001, p. 132).

A minor character named Frankie affirms this need for support from heterosexual allies, commenting, “‘It’s hard, you know, feeling like a freak, and like no one in the world will ever like you’” (p. 132). Although Lynn feels torn between her desire to support her friend and “spirit sister” Kit and her need to fit in, her empathy for others wins out:

I watched [Frankie] move his swishy little butt down the hall, students moving away from him, no one speaking, the only recognition a few rude comments. For a moment I forgot my own trivial hang-ups, and my heart hurt for Frankie (p. 132).

Lynn becomes increasingly active with the campus GSA, but her boyfriend Conan is averse to do so as well. For most of the novel, Conan is quietly supportive of the GSA, but given his status on the football team- along with most of the homophobic perpetrators, he is reluctant to “rock the boat.” Eventually, however, he connects his experiences with racism as an African-American to the homophobia he witnesses at school and changes his stance.

Just before the bell rings, Conan holds both arms up and shows his bracelets.

‘I want that injustice for all deal we say in the pledge of allegiance every morning. For the whole rainbow bunch of us. If you agree, and want to let it be known- I’ve got a bracelet for you.’

He stands outside the classroom door, bracelets in hand. Steven takes one.

‘Thanks man. Those guys suck,’ he says.

Two girls also take bracelets. We're about to walk away when Woodsy walks up to us. She holds out her right arm and Conan slips a bracelet over it (Reynolds, 2001, p. 251).

Because of Conan's privileged status as a heterosexual football player, his proactive stance for justice presumably encourages and enables other teens to do so as well. Part of the power, as has been demonstrated, of heterosexist and homophobic behaviors in school settings derives from its institutionalization. If a person stands against homophobia, it is feared that others will think that he/she is gay too- and also incur homophobic harassment and social isolation. Because no one questions Conan's sexuality, his legitimacy also goes unquestioned. Thus, his ability to serve as advocate and ally for GLBTQ students is enhanced.

Typical of young adult novels, the authors by and large more positively represent youth friendships than parent/child relationships. Of these seventeen themed books, only five parents unequivocally affirm their child's GLBTQ identity, while two outright reject their child. Most parents, however, are characterized as struggling to come to terms with this revelation, because as James comments in *My Heartbeat* (Freyman-Weyr, 2002), "no parent wants a gay child." Although revelations by close friends of their GLBTQ identity can be difficult also, most are depicted as "being there" for their friends regardless- as in *Keeping You a Secret* (Peters, 2003), when Leah tells Holland, "You know, Holland, you can tell me anything, and I will still love you," or Lynn in *Love Rules* (Reynolds, 2001) and Nina in *The Bermudez Triangle* (Johnson, 2004) who both initially balk at their respective friends' disclosures, but ardently defend them against

harm. Additionally, straight friends are depicted as important allies to GLBTQ characters in intervening against homophobia, as when Victor chooses to still include Frederick playing soccer in *So Hard to Say* (Sanchez, 2004) or when Conan distributes rainbow bracelets seeking justice for “the rainbow bunch of us.” Friendships among GLBTQ characters are especially significant as they provide windows into the larger queer communities, affirmation and understanding that helps diminish the sense of alienation these characters frequently experience.

These three categories- heteronormativity, persecution, and social networks- comprise dominant cultural institutions and practices in these books. They demonstrate discursive ways of being that are infused throughout U.S. culture, taken for granted, institutionalized, and sanctioned in varying ways. Heteronormativity is the overarching context that structures and defines properly embodied expressions of sexuality and gender; persecution, the technologies of policing these norms; and social networks, the primary relationships of GLBTQ characters that variously uphold or repudiate these norms. Together then these categories create the cultural context in and against which these characters- and presumably real GLBTQ youth- must perpetually navigate.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is further embellished by the suggested bias against Southerners as ignorant, noted in Katrina's drawing out the word 'homosexuality' and the suggestion that it might still be illegal in the South. Although Battle denies this fact, the reader doesn't know which Southern state the character Battle is supposed to be from- and given its publication year of 2001 and thirteen states still upholding sodomy laws at that time (being overturned via *Lawrence v. Texas*, 2003), it is indeed possible either way.

<sup>2</sup> This of course depends upon geographical location. The social elite is likewise contextually dependent- football in some states, e.g. Texas, basketball in others, e.g. Indiana, or hockey in others, e.g. Wisconsin.

<sup>3</sup> This includes Nelson's mom (from *Rainbow Boys* and *Rainbow High*), Bennett's mom (from *The Rainbow Kite*), Link's mom (from *My Heartbeat*) and Wendy's parents (from *Finding H.F.I.*). There would be six, but ironically but by the time Avery's mom (from *The Bermudez Triangle*) is included in the novel, Avery has already gone through the process of questioning her sexuality and affirmed her heterosexuality.

<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note in this last paragraph the shift in the predicate voice, with the active voice used in the clause "heart knows" and the passive voice in "mind is told." Here the narrative returns to Paul's perspective that emphasizes the knowledge of the heart in contrast to that of the mind. He views the mind as acted upon by an unknown source, whereas, the heart acts independently, and is a truer form of knowledge. While this is definitely Paul's viewpoint, having already made clear early in the novel his opinions of religion in general, the reader wonders if he serves as a mouthpiece for Levithan here.

<sup>5</sup> Among the genre of young adult literature, largely absent, emotionally distant, self-destructive parents tend to be cliché, and there is a fair share of such parents in these novels. Orphea's (Orphe Proud) mother and Kate's parents (*Kissing Kate*) are deceased; Jason's (*Rainbow Boys* and *Rainbow High*) and Bo's fathers are alcoholics; Noah's (*Boy Meets Boy*) and James' (*My Heartbeat*) upper-class parents are narcissistic and self-absorbed, while Nelson's non-custodial father (*Rainbow Boys* and *Rainbow High*) is too busy to be bothered. Parental figures in the novels *Empress of the World*, *Geography Club*, *Gravel Queen*, and *So Hard to Say*, are absent for the most part from the narratives, except for minor cameo appearances.

<sup>6</sup> GLBTQ individuals frequently contrast 'families of choice,' an interconnected set of kinships established through friendships, with 'families of origin,' or biological families. Because many GLBTQ individuals are emotionally and/or physically distanced from their biological families, these 'families of choice' become important replacement families in queer communities.

<sup>7</sup> It's interesting to note the use of 'things' here, rather than the pronoun 'he.' It suggests a disassociation on part of the narrator Paul regarding the action- the turning against. Kyle's confusion, woundedness, and bafflement are turned against Paul, not Kyle himself. This intimates Paul's ongoing unresolved feelings towards Kyle, which contributes later to the narrative conflict.

## CHAPTER V

### IDENTITY CONSTRUCTIONS

In the last chapter, I examined three significant elements in these books related to GLBTQ characterizations based on culturally mediated factors- cultural institutions and practices, persecution, and social networks. In this chapter, I analyze the construction of characters' nonconforming sexual and gender identities in three facets: 1) constructing a modernist critical identity, 2) coming out as claiming identity, and 3) acts of affirming identity. In the first category, I review the ways these texts reify modernist notions of identity constructed through a largely linear process of coming out beginning with self-questioning, then self-awareness, and finally self-realization. In the second category, I discuss perceived values associated with proclamations of a GLBTQ identity. Lastly, I demonstrate various means by which characters' affirm their identities, highlighting powerful character portrayals of agency and resiliency.

#### **Constructing a Modernist Critical Identity**

Ever since the genesis of young adult fiction, questions of identity have been ever present within the genre; this is equally true of GLBTQ themed novels. All seventeen of these novels include questions of identity, with fifteen of the seventeen incorporating coming out as GLBT to some degree.<sup>20</sup> This may entail coming out to oneself, to parents, friends, or teammates. For some novels and characters, e.g. Frederick in *So Hard to Say* (Sanchez, 2004), Jason in *Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001) and *Rainbow High* (Sanchez, 2003), and John in *Eight Seconds* (Ferris, 2000), much of the novel's narrative may focus on internal and external conflicts related to coming out;

whereas, other novels, e.g. *Gravel Queen* (Benduhn, 2003) or *Finding H.F.* (Watts, 2001) may address the issue only briefly. Nonetheless, in novels in which coming out is a key conflict, the novels depict a largely linear and developmental process involving three components- self-questioning, self-awareness, and self-realization. Self-questioning indicates textual excerpts in which characters wonder about their sexual identity. Self-awareness indicates points in which characters begin to demonstrate awareness of a non-heterosexual identity. Then, self-realization indicates points in which characters acknowledge a GLBTQ identity, even if they do not come out to anyone else but themselves. Although they may be presented somewhat linearly and frequently overlap, they do not necessarily constitute ‘stages’ per se, and not all novels even include all three.

### ***Self-questioning***

Given the tremendous policing of sexual and gender norms, individuals who question their sexual or gender identity often suffer tremendous anguish and turmoil. They frequently wonder about possible repercussions and recriminations. They may seek to deny and repress non-normative feelings and attractions, as they attempt to make sense of them, especially by dating the opposite sex.

Even within the context of heteronormativity, a range of homosocial behaviors are sanctioned, which can cause confusion to characters’ trying to comprehend and come to terms with same gender attractions. This is particularly true for Lissa in *Kissing Kate* (Myracle, 2003) and Nic in *Empress of the World* (Ryan, 2001).

What I'd been turning over in my head was the fact that just because the two of us kissed, it didn't have to *mean* anything. Friends did that sometimes. Not to the extent we did, maybe, but girls at school walked around with their arms slung over each other's shoulders, and I'd seen guys on the football team slap each other on the butt more times than I wanted to count (Myracle, 2003, p. 22).

Nic runs into the same trouble, searching for others at the gifted and talented summer camp, for other couples like her and Battle:

i've tried to look for other (ahem) same-sex couples, too, but it's hard to tell. so many girls are all over each other, holding hands or doing each other's hair or giving each other back rubs. it's impossible to know if you're looking at friendship or lust.

or both.

as for boys...there are some jocky-looking guys who are forever punching each other on the arm or slapping each other on the butt. i suppose it's possible they could have something going on, but you'd certainly never catch them, say, kissing...(Ryan, 2001, p. 116).

John in *Eight Seconds* (Ferris, 2000) voices questions that many individuals have when a friend or sibling comes out to them: am I gay too? However, his questioning is amplified by his intense attraction to Kit.

But I wondered what people would think about me if we were friends. Would they assume I was gay, too? Would they assume Kit and I

were getting it on? Was gayness catching? Did the fact that I could remember exactly what Kit looked like when he got out of the shower mean I'd already caught it? What about the fact that I thought about him more than I'd ever thought about Bobby, my best friend? Or Kelsey, for that matter (Ferris, 2000, p. 114).

*Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001) opens with Jason struggling with his sexual identity, especially as Jason's main reference point is Nelson, an openly gay teen at his school with outrageous haircuts and effeminate mannerisms.

No, Jason was *not* like Nelson. That was for sure. He had a girlfriend. They'd gone out for two years, since they were sophomores. He loved Debra. He'd given her a ring. They had sex. How could he possibly be gay?

...So why'd he continue to have those dreams of naked men-dreams so intense they woke him in a sweat and left him terrified his dad might find out? (pp. 2-3).

Jason seeks to reaffirm his heterosexuality by dating and having sex with Debra, but doing so fails to squash his same gender attractions.

For a couple of characters conflicting opposite gender and same gender attractions creates confusion and angst. Nic from *Empress of the World* (Ryan, 2001) recalls being called a "thespian lesbian" and struggles to connect that information with her attraction to a guy name André.

I see beautiful Rachel in my head, but then I see shy, smart André—the boy I spent all last year in Geometry trying desperately to attract.

It doesn't make sense. *Thespian lesbian, thespian lesbian*. How can I be a thespian lesbian when I filled up a whole notebook with ways to impress André?

Then André's face turns into Battle's, and I wish I could stop seeing her, wish I could stop thinking about what it would feel like just to touch her hair or hold her hand.

But I can't (Ryan, 2001, p. 66).

Then likewise in *Boy Meets Boy* (Levithan, 2003), Kyle, Paul's ex comments on how he's attracted to boys and girls and the confusion it arouses.

I'm so confused.

Why?

I still like girls.

So?'

'And I also like guys.'

I touch his knee. 'It doesn't sound like you're confused, then.'

'But I wanted to be one or the other. With you, I wanted just to like you. Then, after you, I wanted to just like the girls. But every time I'm with one, I think the other's possible' (p. 85).

Then in *So Hard to Say* (Sanchez, 2004), Frederick repeatedly questions himself, his lack of strong attraction to girls, wondering: am I gay, hoping and praying the answer

is no. In the beginning of the novel, Frederick is new at school and sees a guy he nicknames “Dimple Guy,” but students tease him for being gay, a *maricón*.

Hi,’ he said, grinning at everyone, his gaze landing on me. Quickly I glanced away. What if it was true what Carmen had said? Was that why he’d smiled at me the first day- and now? Did he think *I* was gay?

While Iggy talked to the girls, I gazed down at my tray and listened to his esses. I guess they sounded a little whistley. What did mine sound like? (pp. 39-40).

During the course of the novel, Frederick and Xio go out to a movie with friends. Although Frederick would like to sit next to Victor, Xio arranges for him to sit next to her and for them to hold hands. Xio’s apparent attraction to him spurs Frederick’s self-questioning even more. He eventually seeks assistance from the internet, where he reads an article of a basketball player who comes out to his team. Coming to dinner, his mother asks if anything is wrong. “‘No, nothing’s wrong,’ I answered. But inside I wondered, *What is wrong with me?* Why had I read that story about the teenage basketball player so many times I could see his face without even closing my eyes?” (p. 88).

Frederick’s angst nearly peaks at a party in which Xio and her girl friends have arranged for opposite sex couples to play a variation of musical chairs. The last one standing chooses someone to enter a “closet” for a minute, during which they presumably kiss for that minute. Frederick seeks to avoid this encounter, but cannot unless being labeled “gay.”

I began nervously rearranging the little clam-shaped soaps and folding the towels on the rod, wondering: *But why don't I want to kiss any of the girls?*

'Frederick,' Xio shouted. 'Hurry up! We're waiting.'

'He's scared,' I heard one of the boys say.

'He's gay,' another boy chimed in.

Everyone laughed, then Carmen said, 'Don't give me a dirty look. I didn't say it this time.'

*Is that what's the matter with me?* I wondered. *But how could they know that?*

While the countdown proceeded, sweat trickled down my forehead. As Pepe and José emerged from the closet, everybody cheered. Everyone except me.

Once again the music started. When it stopped, Xio was left standing. What a huge surprise.

Her bright brown eyes smiled at me. 'Frederick?'

As I tried to return her smile, everyone whooped and whistled.

Victor pushed me out of my seat, proudly clapping me on the back.

But why wasn't *I* feeling proud? (pp. 108-109, 112).

Frederick spends the bulk of the novel questioning his sexuality, almost to the point of *ad nauseum*. He wonders why does Iggy smile at him; what does it mean that Xio seems to like him more than he likes her; why does he imagine kissing Victor?

Why? Why? Why? There is only one answer, but Frederick spends most of the novel running away from that knowledge, because he fears the answer itself.

Questioning one's sexuality and sexual identity leaves these characters troubled and confused. They repeatedly wonder "what is wrong with me?" Why do I not act like guys and girls are "supposed" to act? How can I make these feelings go away and what does it mean, if they do not? Frederick sums up this collective anxiety in his plea, "*Please God, don't let me be gay*" (Sanchez, 2004, p. 133). Underlying these questions is the clear comprehension of heteronormative strictures and the repercussions when individuals violate those norms. The consequences, as has been demonstrated, can be severe.

### ***Self-awareness***

While self-questioning focuses on the doubts that characters feel when they begin questioning their sexual identity, self-awareness describes the points in which characters begin attending to feelings of difference, more clearly seeking answers to their questions, or reflecting on past experiences that suggest homosexuality. A number of male characters especially remark on their awareness of this difference from very young ages: Paul in *Boy Meets Boy* (Levithan, 2003), Kyle in *Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001), Fred from *Gravel Queen* (Benduhn, 2003), Iggy from *So Hard to Say* (Sanchez, 2004), such that little description of increasing comprehension is provided. Casual observations by Kyle and Fred underscore this. When Aurin asks Fred, how he first knew, he replies "I guess it's something I always knew" (Benduhn, 2003, p. 116). Fred elaborates:

But I never really liked girls the way other guys do. You know Kimmie Chandler? Remember how she liked me that one time and we went out on that date a couple of months after I moved her?’

‘Yeah.’

Well, when she tried to kiss me, it made me feel sick. And not a good kind of sick. Like when I think about Grant, I feel sick, but it’s thrilling. It’s like champagne bubbles washing through me. When Kimmie’s lips came toward mine, I had to turn my head, and even though they landed on my cheek, I still felt icky (p. 116).

Similarly, when Jason in *Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001) asks Kyle about his self-awareness, Kyle shrugs and simply responds, “I knew I liked guys” (Sanchez, 2001, p. 65). Or when Frederick asks Iggy how he knows he is gay, he responds, “The same way someone knows if they’re straight” (Sanchez, 2004, p. 198).

While a few female characters describe having “always known,” too, there is typically more description of their dawning awareness, sometimes presented in past tense, as if recalling experiences, and sometimes in present tense, as part of the ongoing narrative. For instance, when Kit comes out to Lynn in *Love Rules* (Reynolds, 2001), Lynn asks Kit how long has she known that she is a lesbian.

‘Always, I guess. But I really started thinking maybe I was...different...sometime in seventh grade. You know, it was like one day we were a bunch of girls, only interested in soccer and volleyball, everyone hanging out by my tree, and the next day you and all of our

friends could only talk about Ken's so cute, and Steve likes Crystal, and doesn't Brian have the sexiest eyes you've ever seen, and isn't Freddie Prinze, Jr. just the finest thing ever on screen. And I didn't get it. All that boy talk bored me (Reynolds, 2001, p. 25).

Similarly, Mel from *The Bermudez Triangle* (Johnson, 2004) recollects her awareness of her difference, the signs that she purposefully avoided.

For years the signs had been there, but Mel had chosen not to interpret them. There were the pangs she felt when she saw Nicole Kidman floating above the crowd on her swing in *Moulin Rouge*. There was her weird obsession with the nurse with the long brown hair on *ER*. And while she loved Harry Potter, it was Hermione that she couldn't get off her mind.

When it came to people in her actual life whom she tended to think about a lot, Mel had plenty of excuses. Micky Jameson in seventh-grade had always covered for Mel when she messed up her flute parts. The girl with the shoulder-length blond hair and the slight lisp in her sophomore-year geometry class had always lent her a pencil or a piece of paper when she asked. And so what if she imagined going to Paris with her junior-year French teacher Mademoiselle Hall, the woman with the dark curly hair and the sly smile? Who cared that in Mel's imaginings, they walked hand in hand through the market from page 76 of the French II book or that they

went together in the romantic bistro pictured in chapter five, ‘Au restaurant’? She was just...thinking about French stuff (pp. 44-45).

Just as Mel refused for years to “interpret the signs,” Peters (2003) describes in *Keeping You a Secret* Holland’s secret crushes and her quick dismissal of their significance.

The sensation [from thinking of Cece] was stirring. It aroused me in a way...almost as if...

As if I was falling for her.

Okay, that didn’t shock me. I’d had crushes on girls before. I mean, who hadn’t? I’d see a girl in the mall or at swim meets and think, Wow, would I ever like to meet *her*. I wouldn’t act on the impulse or anything. I’d stop myself.

That’s what it was with Cece. An innocent crush. I admired her. She was strong, self-confident. So damn cool. Attractive a way only another girl would see (p. 83).

This causes her to reflect on other experiences, too.

...There were other times, too. Ms. Fielding, in German class. I was so in love with her. I used to pretend I needed help so I could stay after school. She wasn’t gay, I don’t think. Just beautiful. And Leah. God. I had a torrid crush on Leah in sixth grade. Seventh grade. Eighth grade...

My pulse quickened. Was I? Gay, I mean? If so, what was I doing with Seth?

Maybe I was bi. That would explain it. An open heart, willing to give and accept love wherever it came from. The feelings, the stirrings, the awakening senses with Cece, though, I'd never experienced those with Seth. With any guy (Peters, 2003, p. 102).

What is interesting in both these excerpts are the ways that the characters rationalize away their attractions to other girls. Mel was just thinking "French stuff" and Holland normalized her same gender crushes: "I'd had crushes on girls before. I mean, who hadn't?" Discursively speaking, both characters describe experiencing attractions that "should not" be felt and *knowing* something that "should not" be known; as such, they negate their relevance, because they were not supposed to "be" in the first place.

An even more detailed depiction of character's growing awareness of their gay or lesbian sexuality comes from *Orphea Proud* (Wyeth, 2004). Orphea describes her knowledge of her difference as her secret, one that would shine brilliantly in private between her and her best friend Lissa, and one that would have to be covered in public.

There are all kinds of secrets, of course. Little secrets that rest in a corner of your mind, neatly as a thin dime fits in the fold of your pants pocket; then the other kind that hides in your bones waiting to jump out. That's the big kind of secret, the dangerous kind that require a lock on your face. That's my kind.

My secret didn't start off that way. It started as a small bubble of surprising joy right in the center of my chest. I first felt it the day I met Lissa flying her kite. I felt it when we were walking home together, when

we sat next to each other on the school bus, or when we were at her house. It got so I couldn't wait to see her so I could feel that little bubble of joy. Pretty soon just thinking of her made it rise inside me. Was I in love with her even then? If I was, I didn't know it. And I certainly didn't think about hiding the fact that I was indescribably happy to have her as a best friend...

But in fifth grade, my bubble of joy had turned into a small geyser. Lissa had a habit of grabbing my hand and sticking it into her own coat pocket on the playground. That's because one of my gloves was always missing: she was trying to help keep my hands feel cozy; when I was eleven and a half, it made me feel electric. So one freezing day when she grabbed my gloveless hand on the playground and stuck it into one of her own coat pockets, I jerked away.

'What's wrong?' she asked.

'Nothing.'

It felt too good, that's what was wrong. But I couldn't say that. Not that I'd ever dream of breaking off our friendship at that point. She was like my other half. But our friendship was definitely changing, at least for me. Along with the pleasure of her company there was a slight hint of panic. Could it be that I was one of them? One of the people that Rupert called 'fairies?'

...By the time we were twelve, things came to a head. Every girl in class liked a guy. Every girl except me. Even Lissa had a crush on our friend Mike. I went along with it, listening to her rave about him as if he were a rock star and she were his groupie. Not that Mike wasn't a great guy, but I didn't think he was cute. But Lissa...

'He has such a cute mouth! He has cute muscles! He wears his jean in such a cute way! Don't you think?'

'If you say so' (Wyeth, 2004 , pp. 83-84, 86).

Although Lissa liked Mike, Mike liked Orphea, so Orphea went along with it, writing "love letters" with Lissa to Mike, so that they spent even more time together. Equally important, writing love letters to a boy was "proof positive" that she wasn't a "fairy"- so she told herself. Nevertheless, once that "relationship" ended, Orphea was confronted again with the question of her sexuality, brought about by a schoolmate: "Tell me one thing. Are you a dyke or what?" (p. 89). Thus for Orphea, her self-awareness developed in dual fashion: partly through the joy and desire in Lissa's company and others' censure of those feelings. In this way, she learned of the necessity to self-monitor her external behavior, to keep secrets, because hers was "the dangerous kind that require(s) a lock on your face" (p. 83).

In the above excerpts, the characters' awareness of their lesbian sexuality is portrayed as recollections of memories. As Mel says, "But she'd known. She'd absolutely known" (p. 45). Not all GLBTQ individuals or characters describe that knowing. They may feel a sense of difference, but not relate that to sexual or gender

identity until much later. One such example comes from *So Hard to Say* (Sanchez, 2003). In the last section, I reviewed at length Frederick's sustained questioning that comprises most of the book. This questioning begins to overlap with increasing awareness, when one of his peers jokes that he's gay, Frederick wonders, "*Is that what's the matter with me?*" (p. 109).

I glanced up from the computer to his drawing of me, tacked on my bulletin board. Was he really gay? And I couldn't help keep wondering, if he was, how did he know?

With my hand trembling a little, I clicked my browser on, moved my fingers to the keyboard, and typed three letters: G...A...Y.

Within seconds, a page came up listing 57, 386, 552 entries. I gulped. Where would I start? (Sanchez, 2004, pp. 86- 87).

In his internet search, Frederick focuses on a story of a teen that comes out to his teammates. Then he thinks about Victor and how he feels in his presence compared to Xio.

I turned to face the night table. Victor smiled back at me from the brass-framed photo. I thought of him wrapping his arm around my shoulder. When he pulled me to him it felt so different from Xio- not only physically. It was something else inside me that I couldn't explain.

Was that crazy? Was it sick? I choked on the hard knot in my throat, wishing...if only Victor were Xio and Xio were Victor (pp. 176-177).

In the above excerpt, Frederick describes a difference, physically and “something else” that he can not explain. This “something else that couldn’t be explained” suggests an increasing awareness that appears just below conscious recognition, reiterated in a couple other novels as well. In *Gravel Queen* (Benduhn, 2003), Aurin describes a powerful sense of difference between her friendship with Neila and her other friends, but lacks the language or knowledge yet to name that difference.

I turn the camera and zoom in on her. Lively, blinking, layered with depths. The amusement with our situation, the pleasure, joy, laughter. The part I can’t figure out yet. The fun of being with her and the extra part that makes this seem different somehow. The part I can’t see, but know is there somewhere (Benduhn, 2003, p. 78).

This subliminal understanding is most prevalent in *Eight Seconds* (Ferris, 2000), heavily laden with descriptions implying an instinctual knowledge. Early in the novel, John breaks up with his girlfriend Kelsey, knowing that he didn’t have a future with her “even if I couldn’t say why” (p. 19). When his sister Marty suggests that they might get back together after some time apart and some time to grow up, he denies the possibility of that happening with him and Kelsey. “I couldn’t say how I knew, but I was sure” (p. 21).

There were times when I questioned if I’d ever be able to feel about someone the way Kelsey wanted me to feel about her. I’d never even come close, with her or any other girl. It made me wonder if my remodeled heart [he had heart surgery as a child] was capable of that trick,

or if the surgeons had neglected to install some vital function that everyone else had (p. 21).

Another time describing the rodeos, John alludes to the varied advantages that come with winning. Of course, there is the money, and the “dinner-plate-sized buckles that the winning riders wore, decorated with images of bucking horses or bulls, fancy lettering, and best of all, the word CHAMPION”- and the women, known as “buckle bunnies, *if you wanted them*” (Ferris, 2000, p. 61, italics added). This brief aside hints at John’s disinclination towards women, but its subtlety suggests that John is not aware of the significance of his own statement. Then later, John becomes aware of his mother’s sudden attention directed towards him and wonders about the reason for it.

Her solicitude bothered me as much as the indifference I was more used to. What had she noticed. Did she think I was afraid of riding again, at the Monroe Fair, after being bounced off the bull? Was she watching to see if any of Kit’s ‘indecentcy’ was rubbing off on me? Or did she something else? Something that even I wasn’t aware of? (Ferris, 2000, p. 115).

Taken separately, the insinuation of homosexuality could be dissuaded- maybe John just needed some time to himself after the break up with Kelsey or he had not found the right girl. However, the repeated insinuations and circumspection about his differences- why was he not like other guys, why was he not particularly attracted towards *any* girl- underscores a subconscious awareness that Ferris seems to want the reader to comprehend before his protagonist does.

### *Self-realization*

Coming out for many originate in a powerful sense of difference, like a puzzle with the pieces scattered about. In this way, self-questioning depicts the confusion elicited from this sense of difference; self-awareness the effort to put the pieces together; and self-realization the point that characters discover the missing puzzle piece that makes it all make sense. While many characters sensed their “difference” from early ages, the reason for this difference frequently only comes into focus as a result of a pivotal experience. Fred from *Gravel Queen* (Benduhn, 2003) described feeling “icky” when a girl he dated once tried to kiss him. Kit from *Love Rules* (Reynolds, 2001) describes a similar sensation on a date with a guy named Brian, forcing her to think about and deal with her same gender attractions.

‘Remember that time with Brian?’

‘How could I forget?’

‘It wasn’t only Brian.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, Brian is a jerk all right. But I realized something that night that I’d not been wanting to think about, even though deep down inside I knew I *had* to think about it.’

‘Think about what?’

‘Think about how it wasn’t only Brian I didn’t want kissing me. I didn’t want *any* boy to kiss me ever.’

I don’t understand what she’s saying. ‘So?’ I ask.

‘So... I don’t like boys ‘that way,’ she says. ‘I don’t want a boy touching me ‘that way.’

She fiddles with another limp, grease-laden fry, not looking up.

Finally she says, softly, still not looking at me, ‘I like girls.’

‘You like girls?’

‘That’s how I am,’ she says (Reynolds, 2001, p. 24).

Mel in *The Bermudez Triangle* (Johnson, 2004) expresses a similar sentiment. She remembers her fixations on the nurse in *ER*, fascination with Hermione, and crushes on various other students and teachers. However, she too, avoided thinking about the meaning of these attractions, because then she would have to deal with them.

But she’d known. She’d absolutely known. The only thing she’d never done was write the word in the caption of the self-portrait that she kept in her head. That kept it from being real- because if it was real, she would have to deal with *reality*- and who even knew what the reality of being a lesbian was? That meant coming out and all kinds of complicated things that she really didn’t feel like thinking about before (Johnson, 2004, p. 45).

After kissing Avery, she had no choice but to do otherwise. Although it meant dealing with “reality,” it also meant that she could experience the exhilaration of that moment over and over again.

After spending the novel questioning himself, Frederick’s friend Xio in *So Hard to Say* (Sanchez, 2004) finally forces him to face the issue directly, asking “Do you like

me?” and then even more explicitly, “Are you *attracted* to me?” (p. 180). The only answer he could give, the honest answer, is no- because he is gay. Although he comes out to Xio, the certainty of this is underscored only when he first kisses another boy- Iggy.

What I didn't tell him [Frederick's father] was that kissing Iggy had opened up something inside me- feelings I'd never known before. Ever since, I'd been soaring in ecstasy, reliving every second I'd spent that afternoon with Iggy- chasing Pete over the furniture, going back to Iggy's room, admitting to him about myself, and then my heart nearly bursting as we kissed...(p. 216).

For John in *Eight Seconds*, the realization that he is gay [although he never uses that word directly about himself], brings about an unwelcome peace and resolution to his inner conflict. He describes his heart as pulling him into a “new way of being” with a certainty that could no longer be denied.

My mind was as beaten up as my body. Everything I knew and felt and understood about myself was different now that I was taking an honest look at it. I at last understood why I had always felt so different- and it had nothing to do with having a patched-up heart, or so many sisters, or with my dad's expectation and my mom's disapproval. It was just how I was. And the certainty, as terrifying and unwelcome as it was, had caused a click in my brain, a settling, that couldn't be rejected (Ferris, 2000, p. 179).

In this way, self-realization is depicted as the point of certainty, of *knowing*, settling once and for all the inner debate: Am I? Am I not? While it does not bring an end to conflict, e.g. Frederick then worries how he will act at school, will he/ could he/ should he avoid Iggy at school or with Jason should he come out to his teammates, it does generally enable characters to move forward. Once John becomes aware of Kit's gay sexuality in *Eight Seconds* (Ferris, 2000), he appears stuck, perpetually spinning his mental wheels, not able to really forge a close friendship with Kit and unable to withdraw himself either. Then after he pummels Kit in his outrage at the rumors now directed towards him, he turns inward on himself- until finally, John experiences the mental "click," "a settling, that couldn't be rejected" and he can begin to move forward again. For most other characters, the self-realization of a gay or lesbian sexuality brings a sense of newness and hope. In Mel's words, "it also meant that she could have this morning happen again, over and over" (Johnson, 2004, p. 45).

Moreover, these three aspects underscore the process of coming out as a developmental one, progressing from nonrecognition, to budding awareness, and finally to self-realization. The coming out process is also characterized as a personal attribute understandable and knowable, both of which reaffirm modernist notions of a stable, unified self, capable of being comprehended and known.

### **Coming Out as Claiming Identity**

Despite all of the possible negative consequences- being kicked out, loss of friends, verbal harassment, and even physical assault- of being or being perceived as GLBTQ, the authors by and large present coming out itself as a positive and affirming

act. In this sense, coming out refers to claiming and disclosing a GLBTQ identity, although it can also refer to coming out to oneself, described as self-realization. It defends and validates the person's humanity, which appears to be one of the prevailing messages in these books. The authors highlight several meaningful consequences to such affirmations of identity, which include: self-truth, family, community, and liberation.

### ***Self-truth***

Again and again, the importance of being honest and true to oneself is repeated in these books. When Kit comes out in the novel *Love Rules* (Reynolds, 2001), she cuts her hair, begins wearing numerous rainbow bracelets, and pierces her left ear multiple times. Her long time best friend, Lynn apologizes for staring and asks, "Doesn't it hurt," to which Kit replies, "Not as much as pretending to be straight" (Reynolds, 2001, p. 116). Then in *The Bermudez Triangle* (Johnson, 2004), Mel's dad worries about the potential harm that might come to her as a lesbian. 'Your mom did have a point,' he said. 'It's going to make things hard.' 'Faking the rest of my life would be harder' (p. 330).

In a scene from *Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001), a few days after Kyle comes out to his parents, he finds his mother standing bereft and confused in his bedroom.

Later that week, Kyle arrived home from school to find his mom standing in the center of his bedroom- not cleaning or tidying up, just rubbing her brow. She'd been acting weird like that ever since he came out to her four weeks ago. She barraged him with question like, Should she have done something differently bringing him up? or, What about ex-gay groups that claimed homosexuals could change?

‘Mom,’ he said, frustrated. ‘You didn’t do anything wrong and I can’t change. Those groups are full of fakes. Besides I wouldn’t want to change, even if I could. I’m finally starting to like who I am. Are you sorry with how I turned out?’

‘No.’ Tears puddle in her eyes. ‘I’m just scared.’

...[Kyle] pulled off his cap and gave his head a vigorous scratch.

‘Mom, don’t you understand? I have to be who I am? You always told me that. Or did you mean except for being gay?’

She studied him, trying to comprehend. ‘I’m sorry, honey. I just want you to be happy.’

He felt guilty for snapping at her. He had to give her credit for trying. ‘That’s what I want, too.’ (Sanchez, 2001, p. 103).

Although painful for her, Kyle insists that his mom attend to his truth: he is gay.

Furthermore, he underscores being out, being open, being true to himself is the only way he can lead a happy, fulfilled life- the very hope a mother has for her child.

As revealed earlier in the section on constructing a modernist critical identity, same gender desire often prompts characters to reexamine and renegotiate their sexual identity. In so doing, proclamations of that desire interweave with proclamations of their own GLBTQ identity, such that statements about whom they love conjoin with statements about whom they understand themselves to be. For instance, Wyeth (2004) incorporates poetry, purportedly written by the main character Orpheus between chapters, to accentuate Orpheus’s love for her beloved Lissa and her loss upon her sudden death.

If I dream you, will you dream me?  
 Will you be my eye?  
 To view me on a gauzy plain,  
 Wrapped up in the sky?  
 Tell me true  
 And I'll tell you  
 What love is all about  
 Toss our secrets in a wishing well  
 And do away with doubt  
 So dream of me  
 I'll dream of you  
 Then we'll dream a dream of us  
 Seen by all who care to view  
 Love's haunted trust (p. 98).

In this poem, Orphea's statements of love, dreams, and visions all intermingle, such that their love "seen by all who care to view" also denotes a profound statement of self-truth.

In another female-oriented novel, *Keeping You a Secret*, same gender desire compels Holland, the protagonist, to reconsider her sexual identity. At first she rationalizes the crush away, by referring to previous crushes she's had on other girls, and that she can admire a strong, self-assured girl in a way that only another girl can, or that she even be bi, a woman with an "open heart, willing to give and accept love wherever it came from" (Peters, 2003, p. 102). Finally though, she admits her desire for Cece and her

realization that she was a lesbian: “No, I wasn’t bi. I was sure of that now. The depth of desire- it was unbelievable. That, and the certainty of this being right. Being me...” (Peters, 2003, p. 149).

A slight variation on the theme comes from Levithan’s (2003) novel *Boy Meets Boy*, in which the main character Paul must reconcile competing attractions to focus on the boy he loves best, Noah. To do so, his best friend Tony advises, “Show him...Show him how you feel” (p. 157) and so Paul sets out to do just that.

On the first day, I give him flowers and time.

The night before, I unlock my closet of origami paper- over a thousand sheets of bright square color. I turn them all into flowers. Every single one. I do not sleep. I do not take breaks. Because I know that as well as giving him the flowers, I am giving him seconds of my life. With every flower, part of a minute. I tie as many as I can to pipe-cleaner stems. I arrange bouquets and lattices, some topped by cranes. In the morning, I garland them throughout the halls, centerpiecing it all at his locker, so he’ll know they’re all for him.

Every minute, every crease is a message from me (Levithan, p. 159).

Each day thereafter, Paul gives Noah a special gift: On the second day a list of hundred words that Paul likes written on a scroll under the heading “Words to Find and Know in this World.” On the third day, he gives Noah space, on the fourth a song, on the fifth film- twenty rolls delivered to Noah by an assortment of “accomplices.” On the sixth

day, he gives him letters, and on the seventh he gives himself- to see if his love will indeed be accepted. Noah in return gives Paul his own gift:

‘I wanted to write you back,’ he continues. ‘But then I decided to do something else instead.’

He pulls an envelope out of his bag and hands it to me. My hands are shaking a little when I open it. Inside I find four photographs. They are snapshots from our town, flashes from the night. Each one is a single word, but I am so familiar with the town that I can tell where they come from as well as what they say.

From the sign outside the Jewish Community Center: *wish*

From a Lotto advertisement outside the stationery store: *you*

From the inscription on the cemetery gates: *were*

And then, the last photo- Noah reflected in a mirror he’s placed in his studio. One hand holds the camera to his eye. The other is holding a sheet of construction paper, with a single word written on it.

*Here* (p. 170).

Who wouldn’t want to be loved like that?

In all of these cases, proclamations about personal sexual identity- this is who I am- and the objects of their desire- this is who I love- are conflated. As such, these statements enact both statements of desire, personal truth, and, except for *Boy Meets Boy*, of resistance to heteronormative constraints that would mandate otherwise.

### *Family*

Despite the incredible risks of coming out, many GLBTQ individuals, and likewise characters in these books, do so because they understand to do otherwise perpetuates a falsehood. They want others to see them as they “really” are, especially family members. As the case with Holland in *Keeping You a Secret* (Peters, 2003) and Laney, Chantal, and Dee in *Finding H.F.* (Watts, 2001), some parents may disown their children upon discovery of their GLBTQ identity. Even when this is not the case, these books only include four parental figures who unequivocally affirm their child’s queer identity. As a result, coming out often entails refashioning or reinventing the concept of “family.” In the following excerpts, support and affirmation appear to constitute “family” more than blood relations.

In the novel *Orphea Proud* (Wyeth, 2004), Orphea’s mother is dead and Orphea lives with her brother, until he literally drops her off on the side of the road in the vicinity of her great aunts’-whom she hasn’t seen since she was a child- residence hoping that they will “straighten” her out. However, their revelation about an interracial marriage between their white grandfather and black grandmother spurs Orphea to confide in them about her secret.

After that, how could I keep my secret? I was still afraid, but hadn’t Aunt Minnie been afraid? Besides, I wanted them to know me, to know me as well as I was getting to know them. By keeping my love for Lissa a secret from my aunts, I was keeping myself outside of the circle. I was keeping myself apart from I wanted, a family...

‘I have something to tell the two of you.’

Aunt Minnie looked up from her sorting. I was facing them both.

‘I’m gay. That’s the reason I came here. There was no problem in math. I had a friend named Lissa. We fell in love with each other. Rupert found out and got really angry. He said we didn’t have people like that in our family. I acted kind of crazy. So Rupert and Ruby drove down and dumped me here...’

Aunt Minnie got up and walked over to me... ‘You’re family, honey child. The fact that you’re gay, as you call it, doesn’t take away from that’ (Wyeth, 2004, pp. 159-160).

In this poignant scene, Orphea’s two great-aunts, Aunt Cleo and Aunt Minnie, affirm not just her identity, but her humanity. They reassure her and comfort her. “‘I do know that your mother would have loved you even more, if that’s possible.’ ‘How do you know?’ ‘Nadine was a free spirit. She’d never judge a soul’” (p. 160). Then when Orphea confides in them about Lissa’s death, Aunt Minnie says the words that she most needs to hear, “‘You’ve been through a lot, girl. But we’re here with you. You’re home’” (p. 162). Family for Orphea has been belittled with death, fear, and isolation: she lost both her parents, especially her beloved mother, and had to live with her homophobic brother, now guardian. In this way, Wyeth disrupts the concept of the traditional nuclear family and reconstitutes it through the loving bond between Orphea and her two great-aunts.

Then in the novel *Finding H.F.* (Watts, 2001), during general introductions of Bo and H.F. to three lesbian street teens Laney, Dee, and Chantal, Chantal asks about the relationship between Bo and H.F. ‘Y’all brother and sister?’ Chantal asks. This causes H.F. to reflect on her friendship with Bo and how he is family to her.

‘Nope, just friends.’ I don’t know why I said it that way- ‘just friends’ - because I’ve always hated that expression. It makes it sound like friends don’t mean nothing compared to family, but I don’t think that’s true. I mean, I love Bo better than any real-life brother I could’ve ended up with (Watts, 2001, p. 99).

Through H.F., Watts seems to challenge the power dynamics around the construct of “family.” For her, friends are family.

Lastly the concept of family is expanded even further in *Keeping You a Secret* (Peters, 2003), equating “community,” particularly the GLBTQ community with “family.” After Holland’s mother kicks her out, Holland stays with her girlfriend Cece and her family for a few days. However, this is an untenable situation that cannot last, and so, Cece goes in search for an alternate situation for Holland.

Cece said, ‘I don’t know why I didn’t think of this earlier....You’ll always have family now. You’re one of us...

‘Come on, Holland. We’re going down to the Center to check out their housing resources. Like I said, you have *real* family now.’ (pp. 194-195).

In this way, Cece pits the GLBTQ “family” against Holland’s biological family, and even her own, defining family as those who give support, assistance, and affirmation. According to Cece, in typical teenage fashion, argues this is in short supply from both.

Family is a powerful concept in GLBTQ communities. Given the widespread alienation and separation of many GLBTQ individuals from their biological families, or “families of origin,” many queer individuals describe creating “families of choice,” a network of friends that comes to substitute for one’s biological family. Also, given the powerful “family values” rhetoric of many conservative Christians that condemn homosexuality and households headed by lesbians or gays, queer communities have countered with slogans including, “Love makes a family” and “Hate is not a family value.” Because of these disciplining strictures on sexual and gender expression, as well as family formation, queer communities have needed to refashion and reinvent the concept of “family” itself.

### ***Community***

As has been demonstrated, being GLBTQ can lead to significant social isolation and confusion. As such, experiencing the broader GLBTQ community can be an effective means to counter these experiences. Because of the rise of the World Wide Web, the internet serves as one tool for connecting teens with other GLBTQ youth like themselves (as with Russel in *Geography Club*) and gaining important information (as with Frederick in *So Hard to Say*). The transgender character Luna researches gender identity on the web, learning history of other famous transgender individuals, transsexuals, and cross-dressers, basic information on gender identity disorder, including

steps towards sex reassignment surgery. She also meets another ‘trans girl’ (T-girl) Teri Lynn online, who shares her transitioning stories with Luna. But seeing pictures of Teri in her boy clothes, and then as real self- a girl gives Luna hope.

Libraries and bookstores also provide important avenues for teens in these books to learn about homosexuality (as with Ellen in *My Heartbeat*) and see themselves represented in books (Kit in *Love Rules* and Mel in *The Bermudez Triangle*). In the following excerpt, Johnson describes Mel’s venturing into the gay and lesbian section of a local bookstore, including both her trepidation and increasing excitement:

There was one section she’d never gone near: the gay and lesbian corner. It filled up two of the wall bookcases, and there was a huge green sign over the shelf. It was fairly public, as it was over by the wide cookbook nook. That was probably why she had stayed away before. Today, though, she was feeling a bit more courageous. The store wasn’t very crowded. She should at least be able to go over and *stand* by the books.

Mel walked over and surveyed the offerings from a distance of a few feet.

It was like she had just discovered a candy store in her own basement.

...Here was everything she ever hoped to know. Books on dating. There were a few books of correspondence between famous lesbians that looked like literature books. There was a half a shelf of lesbian erotica.

Though she wanted to look, she felt like if her hand came into contact with any of them, alarms would start going off, a huge spotlight would fix on her, and pink triangle confetti would be released from the ceiling.

She reached out anyway. She started randomly pulling things off the shelf and skimming the pages. It was strangely liberating, standing in the corner of the bookstore reading a gay and lesbian travel guide to Istanbul (Johnson, 2004, pp. 148-149).

In the book *Finding H.F.* (Watts, 2001), H.F. and Bo travel to Florida to find and meet H.F.'s mother. Along the way, they stop for a few days in Atlanta, where they become introduced to the broader world of GLBTQ communities, via three African-American lesbian street youth.

I was stupid to be afraid because Dee and Chantal and Laney look different- I might as well have been one of the snooty girls on the Morgan cheerleading squad for thinking that way. Dee and Chantal and Laney are different the way Bo and me have always been different. Different from- what is it Laney says?- "the hets." No matter where we're from or what we look like, we're the same kind of different (Watts, 2001, pp. 104-105).

Through them, they discover GLBTQ bookstores and the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), which is geared to the GLBTQ community. They also meet two gay men- "Preacher Dave" and his partner Bill of twenty years, who live in a former plantation home. Meeting them serves as an epiphanal moment for Bo: he comes out to Dave, speaking aloud for the first time that he is gay:

‘Well, we set there for a long time- for whole minutes, probably- without me sayin’ anything, until finally I hear myself sayin’, ‘Yeah, you’re right. I like boys. Not all of ‘em, but some of ‘em.’ He kinda laughs and says he’s happy to hear me say that- that he’s proud of who I am, and I should be proud too. And after that, H.F., I told him things I’ve never told another livin’ soul’ (Watts, 2001, pp. 130-131).

The search for others like himself sends Russel in *Geography Club* (Hartinger, 2003) to the internet where he meets in a chat room “Gay Teen,” a.k.a. Kevin Land from his high school. From there, a small group of GLB teens gather and create a small nested community of queer youth that provides a healing balm for each, knowing they are not alone anymore. Coming out enables Russel and other characters to find a supportive group of people that eventually extends beyond gay, lesbian, and bisexual characters to include others alienated by the social worlds of youth culture and create a sense of community across sexual orientations.

None of the six of us gathered in Kephart’s classroom- Min, Gunnar, Belinda, Ike, Brian, and me- had any idea what would happen when the teachers and other students found out about the Goodkind High School Gay-Straight-Bisexual Alliance. Would we be banished to Outcast Island? Or would we maybe, just maybe, be allowed to stay in the Borderlands of Respectability? (Let’s face it: the Land of the Popular was no longer an option.)

I didn't care. None of us did. Because wherever we ended up, we'd be there together (Hartinger, 2003, p. 225).

As discussed in the section on social networks finding and experiencing a sense of community helps ameliorate feelings of isolation and alienation. It provides important information, access to resources, and connection to other GLBTQ youth. But until a GLBTQ teen is at least out to themselves, this valuable source of validation remains out of reach.

### ***Liberation***

Finally, and possibly most importantly, coming out is depicted as a form of empowering liberation- as the ultimate act of self-validation and affirmation. At different times, characters still in the closet describe the awful feeling from persistently lying to their parents, to their friends about who they are. Coming out frees them from this. In *Gravel Queen* (Benduhn, 2003), Aurin, Neila, and Fred discuss the pros and cons of coming out to others. Fred advocates coming out to oneself, but not necessarily "broadcasting it." Aurin disagrees, "Honesty is honesty. Why would I want to lie to other people?" (Benduhn, 2003, p. 137). Neila, however, best sums up the best reason for coming out: it denies others the possibility of manipulating one's emotions and responses. In this way, "the closet" is portrayed as a disciplinary technology, in which people police sexual norms by demarcating what are acceptable expressions thereof, and coming out a defiance of those regulatory mechanisms.

This contrast between the constraining nature of “the closet” and the liberation invoked by coming out is best illustrated in *Keeping You a Secret* (Peters, 2003), in which Holland struggles with her and Cece’s secret.

The hiding, the secrecy, it was tearing me up inside. Why did it have to be this way? Why?

My lungs were ready to explode as I propelled off the bottom and split the surface. Then swam, lap after lap after frantic lap, trying to release it, expunge it, set it free. Set me free.

They got it wrong when they called it ‘the closet.’ This was a prison. Solitary confinement. I was locked inside, inside myself, dark and afraid and alone (p. 213).

Then a short while later, Holland and Cece discuss the advantages of coming out, particularly the sense of freedom and empowerment.

The best thing about coming out is, it’s totally liberating. You feel like you’ve made this incredible discovery about yourself and you want to share it and be open and honest and not spend all your time wondering how is this person going to react, or should I be careful around this person, or what will the neighbors say?’ Her eyes were sparking now, firing. ‘And it’s more. It’s about getting past that question of what’s wrong with me, to knowing there’s nothing wrong, that you were born this way. You’re a normal person and a beautiful person and you should be proud of who you

are. You deserve to live and live with dignity and show people your pride’  
(p. 220).

This sense of liberation is further exemplified in powerful imagery evoked in both the *Gravel Queen* (Benduhn, 2003) and *Luna* (Peters, 2004). In *Gravel Queen*, Benduhn characterizes Aurin’s life before Neila as a “numb zombie gray box,” in which Aurin goes through the motions of life, without really living. With Neila in her life and the passion aroused by her, Aurin experiences a newness, an awakening to herself that frees her from her caged-in life.

The little egg inside of me rattles around and starts to break free  
from the numb zombie gray box...

The egg cracks the crusty surface and flakes of dust crumble off  
my box while little glowy-things, new and shiny and bright, burst through-  
so soft and smooth.

...when suddenly I can feel feathers breaking from my back,  
splitting open through my shoulder blades, and sprouting wings...  
(Benduhn, 2003, pp. 123-124).

Then in *Luna*, Regan reflects on the way that her brother/ sister Luna also comes alive when she transforms from Liam to Luna:

Like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis, I thought. An exquisite  
and delicate creature, unfolding her wings and flying away. Except in  
Luna’s case, the butterfly is forced to rein in her wings and reinsert herself

into the cocoon every day. Every single day, she has to become a shell of a person (p. 126).

At the end of the novel, the day after her eighteenth birthday, Luna takes Regan to the airport to say good-bye and to start anew. Luna leaves for Seattle to complete her transition, her year of “real-life experience” living as a woman before she can undergo sex reassignment surgery.

Luna took two steps and wheeled around. Her eyes found mine and she smiled. An aura framed her, a glow. Her whole body seemed to be backlit as she blew me a kiss.

I felt it land, a brush of butterfly wings against my cheek. It lifted me up, away. All at once the weight of the world dissolved and I felt myself expand, grow. The same way Luna must feel to be free, I realized. She'd freed us both (Peters, 2004, pp. 247-248).

Although coming out can be an arduous process, authors in this sample by and large characterize it as a critical act of self-validation. It enables characters to move beyond the doubts and the confusion to healthy self-expression. Ironically, to claim a GLBTQ identity is to set oneself apart; to in fact name oneself as “Other.” Thus, to name one's identity (even as it might change) often may evoke exclusion, ostracism, and harm, but may also invoke inclusion into new communities, self-awareness, and self-fulfillment.

### **Acts of Affirming Identity**

Given the degree of harassment and persecution that many GLBTQ individuals face daily, it is easy to understand the despair and despondency many GLBTQ youth experience, including the higher rate of GLBTQ youth suicide than the average population (D'Augelli, Herschberger, & Pilkington, 2001; GLSEN, 2005; Kitts, 2005; Massachusetts Department of Education, 2005). This is best represented by Bennett in *The Rainbow Kite* when he comments, "I am queer. I belong nowhere." Despite the disheartening statistics reported by such studies including Massachusetts Department of Education (2007) and GLSEN (2005) regarding the emotional and physical welfare of GLBTQ teens, these same youth also demonstrate unusual resourcefulness and resiliency. In these texts, such resiliency is frequently manifested through affirmations of identity. While coming out and claiming a GLBTQ identity, according to these texts, in and of itself provides powerful validation and affirmation, narrative conflicts frequently compel characters to other acts that affirm the inherent dignity of their GLBTQ identity. In this section, I present and discuss textual references in which characters affirm and defend their own identities and the right to live as best befits them, grouped into three general subcategories: holding one's ground, reframing situations, and striking back.

#### ***Holding one's ground***

One basic, but powerful way that characters affirm their identity is by, what I call, holding their ground. A few characters, namely Nelson from *Rainbow Boys*/*Rainbow High*, Cece from *Keeping You a Secret*, and Kit from *Love Rules*, seek to hold ground, so to speak, by being "out and proud," by visibly and vocally claiming and

defending their right to live queer lives. A minor character in the novel *Finding H.F.* chooses to leave her suburban home and comfortable life, rather than accept her parents' conditions that she attend an ex-gay ministry and a conservative Christian boarding school upon completion of the program (Watts, 2001, p. 102). For other characters, however, fear of parental or peer reprisal keeps them from publicly claiming a GLBTQ identity or speaking up on behalf of another GLBTQ character. For this reason, the active choice to do so suggests a significant personal shift in the narrative. For instance, Mel in *The Bermudez Triangle* is depicted as cute, petite, and vulnerable. During a parent meeting convened by her mother with Avery's parents, Mel confirms her lesbian identity, and seems to stand taller for doing so. Avery wanted to stay and help fight the battle with Mel's mom, but she understood this fight was for Mel alone. And so, "Avery watched her, even as she backed up to the car and as they pulled away... Mel didn't seem that small anymore" (Johnson, 2004, p. 329).

Then in *Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001) and *Rainbow High* (Sanchez, 2003), Jason struggles with coming out- first to himself, then to his ex and close friends, his parents, and finally to his coach and teammates. Although he had promised his coach and the school principal he wouldn't come out to his team yet, the constant homophobic slurs by one of his fellow teammates Dwayne gets to him:

Dwayne released his grip on Nelson, shoving him away. 'You know,' Dwayne sneered at Jason, 'people are starting to think *you're* a fag.'

Jason's stomach clenched. A month prior he might've winced or lashed out at the remark, but he'd been through too much since then.

'What if I am?' he volleyed back (Sanchez, 2003, p. 122).

Surprised by his temerity, Jason then gains the courage to come out to his teammate with his coach's support. Furthermore, he is heralded as a role model because of it.

Also from *Rainbow Boys*, another major character Kyle is repeatedly harassed by his teammates, especially Charlie, after coming out- but unlike with Jason and the basketball coach, Kyle's swim coach, Coach Sweeney, never intervenes. Nevertheless, Kyle acquiesces to the homophobic insults by agreeing to not shower after swim practice. The greatest humiliation though comes when Charlie refuses to room with Kyle and Coach Sweeney first tells the boys to "stop being silly" and then reprimands *Kyle* for walking away, barring Kyle at first from participating in the swim meet. In response to the acute humiliation, Kyle chooses to out swim his team nemesis, thereby setting a team record in 100-meter freestyle. But it is after the swim meet though that a shift occurs in Kyle, such that he refuses to give way.

Afterward in the locker room, the other boys joked and laughed.

Kyle yanked his suit's drawstring, intending to towel dry.

But inside him something had shifted. He no longer cared if some nameless jerk didn't want to shower with him. Kyle dropped his suit and stepped toward the showers.

Across the spray of water, Charlie spotted him and muttered,

'Fag.'

Kyle stopped and drew himself up. 'Does that threaten you?' he answered back. 'Feel free to leave.'

Charlie wiped the water from his eyes, his face red from heat- or anger.

*Oh, crud.* Kyle braced himself. *Did I really just tell him that?* In an attempt to hide his trembling, he turned the shower handle on beside him.

To his relief, Frank called out, 'Hey, Kyle! Congrats on the team record.'

Kyle nodded back, his throat too tight to speak. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the steam rising off Charlie. Vin clasped his arm to hold him back, telling him, 'Let it go, man.'

Charlie shook him off. After a moment, he let his shoulders relax. 'Fag,' he grunted at Kyle again, and turned away.

Kyle ignored it this time. Instead he let the warmth of the locker room shower wash over him for the first time in weeks (Sanchez, 2003, pp. 182-183).

Just as Mel had to confront her mother, Jason Dwayne, Kyle Charlie, in the novel *Luna* (Peters, 2004) the male-to-female transgender character Luna meets up with her nemesis, Hoyt Doucet in a pivotal encounter. In the process of transitioning, Luna dresses as a girl to school. Hoyt jabbed Luna's shoulder again and yelled, 'Perv! You're a perv. I always knew it' (p. 207). Hoyt rips off Luna's wig, tearing out some hair, and

gives her a black eye. Despite the beating, Luna returns home to her sister Regan triumphant, finally proud and confident in herself.

‘That’s what I’m trying to tell you, Re. I survived. I lived. I proved myself today. I *want* to live. I can. You did that for me. You made me stand on my own two feet, gave me the push I needed; you required me to face it alone, which is what I have to do eventually (Peters, 2004, p. 213).

The encounter with Hoyt gives Luna the courage to come out as transsexual to her father and to eventually leave to complete her transition to be the woman she always knew herself to be.

While all the other examples portray characters standing up for themselves in face of significant opposition, this last one depicts Frederick from *So Hard to Say* (Sanchez, 2004) standing up for a supporting gay character named Iggy. Through the course of the novel, Frederick begins to question his sexuality. He sees how his peers taunt Iggy mercilessly- and Frederick doesn’t want that to happen to him. “*What if I’d been caught talking to him?* That would’ve been suicide, especially my first day at a new school” (p. 10). Although he wants to be friends with Iggy, Frederick nevertheless snubs him at school. At the point of Frederick’s greatest confusion over his sexuality, he goes to talk to Iggy; and they even kiss. Predictably back at school, Frederick encounters a ‘do or die’ moment, when his integrity is tested.

I was walking down the hall with Victor and the guys heading out to the field. We turned the corner and there stood Iggy, chatting and laughing with a girl, just like the first time I’d seen him.

Wearing jeans and a white shirt that made his tan skin glow, he looked even cuter than in my memories. As our eyes met, his killer dimples crinkled in his smiley cheeks. And I was the happiest boy in school...but only for an instant.

Then Victor called to Iggy and his friends, '*Hola, chicas.*' ('Hello, girls.')

The other boys burst into laughter at the dumb joke, flipping their wrists and prancing, imitating girls. Of course, they didn't seem anything like real girls.

Iggy's dimples faded and his gaze moved to me, his eyes angry but sad too, as if expecting me to do something.

I tried to be still, like Mom had said, while my heart sank. And in that moment I recalled all the times I'd walked past him, staring blankly in front of me, my heart aching.

Summoning every nerve in my body I now shouted to the guys, 'Why don't you leave him alone?'

The words came out louder than I'd meant, echoing off the lockers. The boys abruptly became quiet and turned to stare at me. Even Iggy seemed startled.

'I don't think it's funny,' I continued, my voice shaking. 'He's a friend of mine' (pp. 220-221).

Although it is Victor who redeems Frederick- after a pregnant pause Victor puts his arm around Frederick and says ‘let’s play ball,’ Frederick risks social alienation by finally garnering the will to speak up on behalf of his friend.

In all these cases, GLBTQ characters reach a tipping point that says ‘enough is enough.’ Whether on their own behalf or that of a friend, these characters defend the right to live the life that feels most inherently right and true to them.

### ***Reframing a situation***

Another means of affirming one’s identity among these characters is by reframing a homophobic situation. It is easy for GLBTQ characters to internalize the homophobia as Bennett does in the book *The Rainbow Kite* (Shyer, 2002) or feel small and helpless as Mel does in *The Bermudez Triangle* (Johnson, 2004). Importantly it enables characters to re-establish a sense of control that is taken from them through acts of homophobia.

In the book *Keeping You a Secret* (Peters, 2003), several lockers are defamed with the hate messages “DIE DYKE” and “FAGGOTS FUCK OFF.” Administrators call an assembly instantly, not to denounce the homophobia though, but the vandalism of school property.

After the assembly I [Holland] was so irate, I stormed to my locker. Cece was there. The others who’d been tagged were hanging out at her locker, too. One of the guys had a videocam and was shooting a tape of Cece, as if she were starring in a silent movie- making the discovery of the hateful message, tearing her hair out. She was funny. Made me want to

laugh. I couldn't laugh. I felt too angry, too numb. I heard her ask for a copy of the tape because it'd make great PA [performance art].

What's PA? I wondered.

I was so intent on watching her- them- that I didn't notice the crowd forming (p. 79).

Fear runs through the group, when Holland's friend, Leah, apologizes for the violence committed against them.

Cece and the others didn't respond. Most of them cowered against the lockers, looking freaked. They looked to Cece for direction. She clapped once and said, 'Okay, let's get this on film. You guys can be extras. I want to see moral outrage here, and fury. Like this.' She shook a fist at the crowd to demonstrate. 'Anyone got a beer? We could do foaming at the mouth.'

Laughter filtered through the crowd.

Cece cued the camera, and the extras really got into it, hamming it up and acting out. Across the hall, Cece's eyes found mine. They spoke the truth; she wasn't enjoying this. She was humiliated. Hurt. Afraid. Her fear was so palpable it made my blood curdle (pp. 80-81).

Cece leads the group to redirect their anger, fear, and humiliation through the dramatic re-enactment through the creation of a silent film. I find it ironic that even as they seek to reframe their victimization, and reclaim their voice, the

author chooses the technique of *silent* film, in which their voices are still conspicuously removed.

In another incident of homophobic vandalism involving school lockers, Kyle opts to reframe the homophobia into a radical declaration of queer pride:

The following morning, Kyle opened his eyes before the alarm sounded, wide awake. For some reason, he felt bold, new. Outside his window the sun blazed bright off the melting snow. He had an idea. On his way out of the house he stopped by the garage. He rummaged through his dad's workbench until he found what he needed.

It was still early when he arrived at school and marched down the hall. The few students stared at him as he passed. He probably looked crazed to them. He reached his desecrated locker and stood before the word QUEER. He reached into his backpack. With one long sweep he spray-painted AND PROUD! (Sanchez, 2001, p. 171).

In this way, Kyle's character profound statement of affirmation resists both individualized and institutionalized forms of homophobia- both the specific act of harassment, as well as the institutional silence by administrator to intervene and respond to such incident, given that months had gone by with "queer" spray-painted on his locker, but was quickly repainted once Kyle added "and proud" (Sanchez, 2003, pp. 25-26).

Then in the novel *Love Rules* (Reynolds, 2001), after recurring instances of homophobia, members of the school's GSA resolve to counter the violence by compiling

incontrovertible evidence, laying the base for a class action lawsuit against the school district if need be.

I rummage through my notebook and find the flyer that tells, among other things, the official, legal definition of harassment.

‘Dumping stuff on Frankie? That was conduct that created a hostile educational environment. That stuff affects all of us,’ I say.

Emmy nods, thoughtfully.

‘We should make official complaints about every little homophobic incident,’ Kit says. ‘Document everything. If Manly Max doesn’t take action, we should go to the school board, like Benny said.’

Frankie nods. ‘Okay. I’ll fill out an official complaint, but I want you to fill one out, too, Lynn.’

Me and my big mouth, I think. ‘No problem,’ I say.

‘I’ll do one, too,’ Caitlin says, in a voice loud enough to be heard.

‘Let’s sum up,’ Emmy says.

‘Report. Document. If nothing happens, take it to the next step,’ Kit says.

Star stands and raises her arm over her head, closed fist.

‘No more shit for dinner,’ she says (Reynolds, 2001, p. 231).

In this case, Reynolds (2001) provides a detailed outline how her characters plan to redress their grievances, and in so doing affirm their inherent worth and regain their own sense of personal agency. Given that these steps

originate from the national organization GLSEN, it also suggests steps for the potential reader inflicted with similar injustices to address those grievances as well.

Reframing bigotry and reclaiming hateful language has become a common practice among many marginalized and disenfranchised groups as a means of empowerment. The term ‘queer,’ for example, once a slanderous term against GLBTQ individuals, has now been reclaimed by these communities to denote pride. As Cece says in *Keeping You a Secret*, “All the hateful words, use them in fun. Claim them. Then they can’t be used against you” (Peters, 2003, pp. 214-215). That is the intent in all these situations- to relocate and reclaim the point of power away from the perpetrators of violence and back unto themselves.

### ***Striking back***

Besides holding one’s ground, reframing situations, GLBTQ characters occasionally feel compelled to affirm their GLBTQ identity by actively striking back against the perpetrators of violence. In one instance from *Finding H.F.* (Watts, 2001), in retribution for one particular beating, Bo and H.F. concoct a hot pepper juice and insert into the jock straps of the football team.

But I gotta hand it to Bo. He gets his licks in- not with his fists but with his brains. Like the hot pepper incident, for example.

Bo’s daddy is one of those macho men who likes to prove how tough he is by eating peppers so hot they make blisters on your gums. Back in the fall, after the football boys had beat him up pretty bad, Bo

snuck into his daddy's hot pepper supply and stole a few of the ones his daddy grows special- some Mexican kind that's supposed to be the hottest pepper on earth.

Me and Bo put the peppers in a blender and chopped them up till they turned into this scary-looking nuclear-green juice. Bo sneaked into the football locker room one Friday afternoon before a game and dabbed a little bit of the pepper juice onto every jock strap he could find.

Since Bo is in the marching band, he got to see it all. That night, the Morgan High School Rebels came running out on the field for the big game against the Taylorsville Blue Devils, only to fall to the ground, screaming and digging at their crotches like crazed animals. The game was canceled, and the team ran over each other and mowed down a few cheerleaders in their run to get to the showers (Watts, 2001, pp. 8-9).

Bo later explained the reasoning behind this particular instance: Craig Shepherd, the quarterback, had kissed Bo one night, only to participate in a mass pummeling against him the next. Craig had never participated in other gay-bashing episodes, but he presumably redirected his fear and anger at himself and his desires to Bo himself in this instance. "I'd made Craig Shepherd burn down there one way, so I was gonna make him burn another" (p. 133).

The other major instance of a GLBTQ character striking back is in *Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001). One of the major characters Jason suffers at the hands of a homophobic, alcoholic father. After his dad caught Jason at the age of ten in the

bathroom tub with another boy touching each other, he beat him severely, threatening to kill him if he was ever to do that again. So in high school when Jason realizes he cannot squelch his attraction to other men, even though he dated Debra for two years, he fears his father's response. But after witnessing Nelson and Kyle stand up to Jack Ransom and his friend, he gains the strength to stand up to his father.

The swinging door slammed open. Jason edged back as his dad barged into the room, swaying from side to side. His gaze bore into Jason. 'Why'd you bring that boy here? He looked queer.'

Jason felt his pulse pumping with anticipation. 'They're my friends.'

'Don't bring them here again,' his dad sneered. 'Hear me? I don't want any faggots in my house.'

Jason squared his shoulders. Later he would try to determine how he'd gotten the nerve for what he said next. 'Well' - he took a deep breath - 'you've got one.'

His dad's thick eyebrows knitted up and his jaw shook. 'What?'

Jason swallowed hard. There was no backing off now. Like Coach always said, the best defense was a good offense. 'You heard me.'

His dad swaggered toward him, growling, 'You disgusting...' His fists slammed against Jason's chest.

Jason stumbled back against the counter. 'Keep your hands off me!'

...Unable to restrain himself any longer, Jason jabbed his fist into his father's jaw. His dad stumbled backward against the wall, his shoulder hitting with a thud. He grabbed hold of the counter, dazed.

Jason stared at his fist, disbelieving what he'd done. He immediately glanced up, expecting to ward off a new pummeling from his father, but instead he saw a pathetic, insecure man gaping back at him.

In that image, all the events of the past few months connected for Jason: going to Rainbow Youth meeting; coming out to Debra; finding the confidence to tell Kyle about Tommy. Jason had feared where the experience would lead him, not sure he'd survive. But now the culminating moment had arrived, and miraculously, he was still standing (Sanchez, 2001, pp. 197-199).

In all these examples, the authors have created narrative conflicts that pit GLBTQ characters against others that would demean and degrade them. The characters can then either remain positioned as victims or reengage by affirming their GLBTQ identity and reasserting their own personal agency. In some cases, they do so by holding their ground, other times, reframing a situation, and yet others, by striking back. Despite the specifics of the individual conflicts portrayed, all of them represent GLBTQ characters coming into conflict with the heteronormative social structures that denies them their inherent legitimacy and sanctions homophobic behavior as regulatory mechanism, thereof.

Moreover, the constructions of nonconforming sexual and gender identities in these texts by and large challenge heteronormative proscriptions of identity, while reinscribing modernist notions of identity. The coming out process described suggests a set of rather linear and developmental stages in which some characters progress from nonrecognition to increasing awareness of a GLBTQ identity, and finally self-realization of that GLBTQ identity. This self-realization and the concomitant claiming of that GLBTQ identity- whether to oneself or to others- produces other positive effects: a sense of self-truth, family, community, and liberation. Furthermore, the powerful act of claiming a GLBTQ identity and the many acts of affirming that identity simultaneously serve to validate the humanity and worth of GLBTQ people and resist heteronormative structures that would stipulate otherwise.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Kyle in *Boy Meets Boy* struggles with sexual identity, admitting that he doesn't know what he wants. As a supporting character, that conflict remains unresolved at the end of the novel. Then in *My Heartbeat*, coming out is dubious: when Ellen asks Link and James if it's okay to say they are a couple, James says yes, and Link says no. Then they more or less break up. At no time do any of the characters 'come out;' in fact, James avoids being labeled altogether (which seems to be Freymann-Wehr's point).

## CHAPTER VI

### AUTHORIAL VOICES

Children's and young adult fiction has always been notorious for their authorial didacticism. In fact, children's literature as a field began with the express purpose to preach religious virtues and teach republican values to young children (MacLeod, 1994). As cultural forces shifted, so did the field of children's literature. Nevertheless, it wouldn't be until the 1960s that children's and young adult fiction would begin to include gender and racial/ethnic diversity, diverse family formations, and other contemporary issues, e.g. abortion, death, alcoholism and drug use. Although according to Lesesne (2004), fiction during this time period sought to "reach" out to young people by telling a good story, underlying thematic messages still remained central to the narratives.

In earlier decades thematic messages in gay and lesbian themed texts underscored notions of homosexuals as living dreary, unfulfilling lives, and doomed to short-term, ineffectual relationships (Cuseo, 1992). Moreover, these books, intentionally or not, conveyed the message that the homosexual "lifestyle" was to be avoided. This sample of seventeen texts, however, have been published in a whirlwind era between 2000-2005, in which multiple celebrities have come out- most notably Melissa Etheridge, Rosie O'Donnell, and Ellen DeGeneres- and several network and cable television programs have showcased gay or lesbian characters, including *Will and Grace*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, and *the L Word*. At the same time, Vermont legalized civil unions and Massachusetts gay marriage; the US Episcopal Church

ordained its first openly gay bishop; and U.S. Supreme Court nullified sodomy laws still remaining in thirteen states. Nevertheless, the controversy over gay rights has become more entrenched as both the Vatican and the Bush administration solidly denounced gay marriage in favor of a constitutional amendment to legally define marriage as between “one man, one woman.”

Given this highly conflicted context, in this chapter I examine overarching messages conveyed through the texts regarding nonconforming sexual and gender identities. I categorize these messages into three sections: 1) authorial messages, 2) GLBTQ texts as instruction manuals, and 3) denouncing heteronormative assumptions. In the first section, I briefly review overarching messages conveyed in these texts and methods used to communicate them. In the second section, I demonstrate instances in which the authors seek to instruct readers about GLBTQ issues. Lastly I examine how these texts play a critical role in denouncing heteronormative assumptions by especially highlighting Levithan’s (2003) innovative novel *Boy Meets Boy* as a case study.

### **Authorial Messages**

#### ***Characterizations***

First, characterizations in these texts play pivotal roles in the messages communicated through texts. On the one hand, GLBTQ characters are by and large emotionally stable and self-confident. Kit from *Love Rules* (Reynolds, 2001), Cece from *Keeping You a Secret* (Peters, 2003) and Nelson from *Rainbow Boys/ Rainbow High* (Sanchez, 2001, 2003) are all described as “out and proud.” Characters such as Nic from *Empress of the World* (Ryan, 2001) and Aurin from *Gravel Queen* (Benduhn, 2003)

more or less effortlessly fall in love with another woman with only minor angst over their non-“normative” same gender attraction. Jason struggles with his sexuality for most of *Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001), but then comes out to his parents, coach, and teammates and becomes a role model for others. On the other hand, homophobic perpetrators are largely positioned as antagonists and characterized as tormenting bigots. This includes Go-Go from *The Rainbow Kite* (Shyer, 2002), Jack Ransom from *Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001), Charlie from *Rainbow High* (Sanchez, 2003), Russ from *Eight Seconds* (Ferris, 2000), Rupert from *Orphea Proud* (Wyeth, 2004). This characterization of the antagonists and their homophobic belief systems corresponds with Kidd’s (1998) assessment that the overarching problem of contemporary GLBTQ works is not homosexuality, but homophobia instead.

### ***Authorial didacticism***

While all of the texts affirm GLBTQ identities, which could be characterized as a message itself conveyed in the texts, a few are much more explicit. For instance, *So Hard to Say* (Sanchez, 2004) and *Love Rules* (Reynolds, 2001) repeat the message “what is the big deal?” First, in *So Hard to Say*, Frederick struggles for the bulk of the novel with his sexuality. At the point of his greatest confusion, he visits a friend from school, Iggy. Although nervous at first about coming out, Iggy unabashedly comments: “‘It’s who I am,’ Iggy said, his voice confident. ‘And it’s my life, not theirs. The only reason other people stick their noses in it is so they can think they’re better.’” Hearing Iggy causes Frederick to wonder also, “*Why did people make such a fuss about it anyway?*” (Sanchez, 2004, p. 199). Similarly, at the conclusion of the novel *Love Rules*,

Lynn reflects how Kit's relationship with her mother has improved, how Kit has just become "more Kit," and how much her own perspective has changed:

When we turn the corner, we're right behind Kit and her parents. Her mom is in the front seat, but turned toward Kit, talking animatedly. When I think how things were with them, when Kit first came out...it's a minor miracle. And Kit...she hasn't exactly changed through all of this, she's just become, I don't know, more Kit. Looking back on all that's happened, it's hard for me to believe I was so uptight about everything when Kit first told me she was a lesbian. It's like what's to worry about? (Reynolds, 2001, pp. 268-269).

Another message is underscored in Reynolds' title itself: "love rules." After significant conflict about her friend coming out as a lesbian, Lynn finally concludes that it is love that matters, not the gender of the individuals. "That's the important thing, love. Not the rules of love, but love itself" (p. 96). Similarly in *Eight Seconds* (Ferris, 2000), after John spends most of the novel running away from the developing awareness that he's gay, he comes to realize the value of love, no matter where it is found: "Maybe love was just love, no matter who was doing it, and if you found it, you should be glad, because it wasn't such an easy thing to find. It certainly hadn't been for me" (Ferris, 2000, p. 167).

## GLBTQ Themed Books as Instruction Manuals

### *Instruction about GLBTQ issues*

In multiple instances, authors appear to wish to teach their readership about particular GLBTQ issues, including gay history, transgender identities, and ensuring compliance of educational codes regarding school safety and harassment by school administrators and districts. For example, in *My Heartbeat*, Freymann-Wehr (2002) uses his narrator Ellen's naiveté to teach about some history of homosexuality:

I learn a lot of things. Michelangelo was gay. Oscar Wilde went to prison for being gay (he died in Paris) but was married and had children. It used to be against the law for men to have sex with each other. People got arrested, lost their jobs, were abandoned by their friends, were put in mental homes, or killed themselves. A math genius who helped Britain beat the Nazis was rewarded by losing his security clearance when the government found out he was gay (p. 52).

In the novel *Finding H.F.*, Watts (2001) takes the opportunity to speak against the conservative Christian dogma opposing homosexuality. While in Atlanta, H.F. and Bo attend a Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), cathedral-like churches dedicated to the GLBT community.

Bo looks up from the silverware drawer. 'I never knew there were churches for...for...'

'For us?' Dave says. 'Well, think about it. What did Jesus say in the Bible about homosexuality? Not one word. Now, sure, homosexuality

is prohibited in the Old Testament, but so is wearing mixed-knit fabric and eating shellfish. And I don't know about you, but I've seen plenty of supposedly devout straight Christians wearing polyester and chowing down at Red Lobster' (p. 122).

***GLBTQ texts as “how-to” manuals***

At times, the novel *Love Rules* (Reynolds, 2001) reads like a 'how-to' manual, namely how to effectively deal with homophobia in schools. At a GSA meeting that had been opened to parents and community members, a GLSEN representative comes to talk about ensuring safety for LGBT students in schools. At this point, the novel's narration becomes more didactic, as Lynn explains the acronym LGBT and the GLSEN representative reports on national statistics regarding negative experiences of LGBT students in schools. Next, a question from one of the parents initiates dialogue that is meant to refute the idea of queer identities as a choice.

'Then why are they like that if it's so awful?'

Bennie waits a moment, seemingly gathering her thoughts. Then she asks, 'When you woke up this morning, did you decide to be heterosexual?'

'No,' Jessie says.

'When you wake up tomorrow morning, will you decide to be homosexual?'

'No! Why would I?'

'Could you, if you wanted to?'

'No!'

'Well then, does it make sense to you that *I*, or others like me, could wake up in the morning and decide to be *heterosexual*?' (pp. 213-214).

Lynn continues:

Here's some of what we learned from Benny Foster during the second part of our meeting: The education code protects students from discrimination and harassment because of gender and sexual orientation, in the same way that it protects against discrimination based on religion, race or sex. Crimes against people for those reasons are classified as hate crimes, and they're punished more severely.

Cool.

She outlined specific steps to follow if a school doesn't work to protect students. Go to the school board, which has an obligation to follow certain procedures to protect students and to resolve complaints. If the school board doesn't follow through, the State Department of Education is obligated to take over. If *that* doesn't get anywhere, Benny's advice is to sue the school district. Sounds extreme. But when you think about it, what Frankie experiences, and Kit, and lots of others, is pretty extreme, too (pp. 215-216).

As can be seen from these excerpts, the narration shifts from simple storytelling to instruction. Reynolds' backdrop character Bennie and her narrator Lynn seem to be

mouthpieces for the author herself. When Bennie responds to the parent's implied question of choice, it is as if Reynolds herself is speaking to a broad amorphous audience: how can you think it is a choice? If heterosexuals did not choose to be heterosexuals, why would you think GLBT individuals could choose their sexual or gender identity? The focus appears to center on the message, information she wants to convey to her readership, rather than character development or plot development. Even when Lynn speaks again a little later about attending the GSA meetings, the language is heavy-handed, evoking notions of good and evil:

The thing is, until tonight, I've thought I was going to GSA mainly for Kit, and maybe a little for Frankie. But now I know it's for me. I want to stand up for what's right, like my gramma and grampa did [by participating in civil rights marches]. I don't want to be one of those good people who do nothing, and allow evil to triumph. Not that I expect to change the world and everyone in it. I'll just work on this little H.H.S. piece of the world (p. 216).

### **Denouncing Assumptions**

#### ***Going beyond the stereotypes***

In addition to conveying specific messages about informing readers about differing aspects of nonconforming sexual and gender identities, these novels strongly denounce persistent heteronormative assumptions. One way they do so is through inclusion of a wide diversity of characterizations. For instance, Sanchez's novels *Rainbow Boys* (2001) and *Rainbow High* (2003) circumnavigate through the lives of

their three main characters- Nelson, Kyle, and Jason- and all three represent different embodiments of gay life (Cart & Jenkins, 2006). Nelson could be considered the most stereotypical- flamboyant, radically ‘out’, with exaggerated mannerisms and language. Kyle is repeatedly described as so ‘normal,’ wears a baseball cap, burdened by glasses and braces, quiet, and level-headed and unassuming, and a strong student academically. Finally, Jason is a ‘closeted’ star basketball player, tall and muscular, poor at math, and verbally abused by his homophobic father. Then in *The Bermudez Triangle* (Johnson, 2004), Mel, the lesbian, is portrayed as petite and delicate; whereas, Avery, who is not gay, is depicted with short, cropped hair and grunge T-shirts. Then Kit in *Eight Seconds* (Ferris, 2000) is a first-rate bull rider.

Sara Ryan (2001) in her novel *Empress of the World* likewise appears to refute the “boxes” of gender and sexual expression imposed on individuals through heteronormativity. After Nic begins dating Battle, she begins to search for the presence of other same gender couples and struggles to do so, based on the diversity of gender expression:

and there’s another boy i’ve seen, i think he’s in katrina’s class,  
who often wears long velvet skirts and lots of black eyeliner, but i believe  
this to be a fashion statement rather than a declaration of sexuality, since i  
have observed him making out with various angst crows.

i suppose he could like boys, too, though.

i of all people should remember that (Ryan, 2001, p. 116).

Then when Nic comes out to a classmate, Anne, her classmate presumes that as a woman who loves another woman [Nic resisted labeling herself as lesbian, possibly bisexual], Nic doesn't like guys.

'I think he's flirting with you,' Anne whispers. 'Are you mad?'

I look at her, confused. 'I don't know if he is or not,' I whisper back, 'but why would I be mad?'

'Because he's a guy!' Anne whispers more loudly.

'Oh! No, that wouldn't make me mad,' I say.

Anne shakes her head. Obviously, I keep failing to act the way she expects (Ryan, 2001, p. 180).

### ***Challenging cultural myths***

The didacticism in Ryan's novel is limited and circumspect, given her ability to craft believable and engaging characters; whereas, it is much more evident in Ferris' (2000) and Reynolds' (2001) novels. Through the character Kit, Ferris (2000) challenges many of the assumptions about gay men, beginning with the predatory myth of gay men: "But, just so you know, I do get the difference between friendship and romance" (p. 105). Kit seeks to assuage John's anxiety by reminding him that he can be friends with straight men without desiring sexual relationships with them. Next, he dismisses the idea that as a gay man, he is that different from John. "'I can't imagine your life,' [John] said. 'You thought you could. Before you knew. You thought it was pretty much the same as yours'" (Ferris, 2000, p. 111). The previous discussion continues here. At one level it's about John's confusion about Kit and what that means about himself and on another, it's

a message to the wider readership: you knew and liked me before; you understood me- now what is so different now that you know that I'm gay? "You thought it was pretty much the same as yours," Kit reminds. It shouldn't be any different.

'Except for-' I didn't know what words to use.

'Except for *who*,' he said. 'Everything else is similar. I like a lot of the same things you do- we talked about those at rodeo school when we couldn't sleep. I want work I love. I want, eventually, to find a partner for my life. I want to have friends and good times. Why does that make you nervous? Never mind, I know' (p. 111).

Kit assumes John is having trouble with Kit's sexuality, but not for the reason he thinks. Again the reader hears from the author the similarities of GLBT people to others: work I love, a life partner, friends and good times. The suggestion is: how strange is that?

'Let me tell you something. I've already found out that the absolutely last thing I ever want to do is come on to a straight guy, so that won't be a problem if I can help it. Do you think I should have to hang out just with other gay guys?'

'Well, no-', I began.

'It's tempting,' he interrupted me. 'It's easier. But I don't want my life to be that narrow. I also don't want to hide who I am, though I don't broadcast it, either. You don't have to go around declaring you're straight so why should I always have to announce I'm gay?' (pp. 111-112).

Kit's diatribe may in some ways be understandable, given the harassment GLBTQ individuals receive, and the hostility directed at him by the novel's antagonist- Russ, but in this sequence, it feels tiresome. It is as though Kit is so sick and tired of all the assumptions made about him that he explodes here with John. However, he is not really listening to what John is saying and more importantly *not saying*. Similar to the scene with the GLSEN representative in *Love Rules* (Reynolds, 2001) the dialogue shifts into a monologue of sorts, in which the author appears to be ranting against society's homophobic attitudes, rather than developing characterization or plot conflict.

#### **Case Study: *Boy Meets Boy***

While all of the novels appear to denounce various assumptions about gays and lesbians- e.g. that someone necessarily "looks" gay or lesbian to be gay or lesbian, or gays want to influence or recruit heterosexuals to be gay, Levithan's (2003) novel *Boy Meets Boy* deserves special attention. Levithan crafts his entire novel to counter heteronormative assumptions. Through the use of farce he creates a context in which straight guys sneak into queer bars, the debate team receives as much fan fare at the high school pep rally as the football team, and the star quarterback is also the homecoming queen.

#### ***Disrupting "common sense" notions of sexuality and gender***

A couple of "common sense" notions that Levithan particularly seems to dispute are young children's lack of awareness of their sexuality and the "naturalness" of heterosexual attraction. Paul, Levithan's main character, is described being fully aware

of his sexual orientation from a very young age and naturally “assuming” that boys liked boys.

I’ve always known I was gay, but it wasn’t confirmed until I was in kindergarten.

It was my teacher who said so. It was right there on my kindergarten report card: PAUL IS DEFINITELY GAY AND HAS VERY GOOD SENSE OF SELF.

I saw it on her desk one day before naptime. And I have to admit: I might not have realized I was different if Mrs. Benchly hadn’t pointed it out. I mean, I was five years old. I just *assumed* boys were attracted to other boys. Why else would they spend all of their time together, playing on teams and making fun of the girls? I assumed it was because we all liked each other. I was still unclear how girls fit into the picture, but I thought I knew the boy thing A-OK (Levithan, 2003, p.8).

After his kindergarten teacher explains that “gay” refers to boys who like other boys, she elaborates on the “whole boys-liking-girls thing” (p. 12).

I can’t say I understood. Mrs. Benchly asked me if I’d noticed that marriages were mostly up of men and women. I had never really thought of marriages as things that involved liking. I had just assumed this man-woman arrangement was yet another adult quirk, like flossing. Now Mrs. Benchly was telling me something much bigger. Some sort of global conspiracy.

‘But that’s not how I feel,’ I protested. My attention was a little distracted because Ted was now pulling up Greg Easton’s shirt, and that was kind of cool. ‘How I feel is what’s right...right?’

‘For you, yes,’ Mrs. Benchly told me. ‘What you feel is absolutely right for you. Always remember that’ (p. 9).

Then during his elementary and middle school years Paul became the first openly gay president of the third grade class, took a boy named Cody to their fifth grade semi-formal, and in sixth grade helped start their elementary school’s first gay-straight alliance.

Luckily, our principal was cooperative, and allowed us to play a minute or two of ‘I Will Survive’ and ‘Bizarre Love Triangle’ after the Pledge of Allegiance was read each morning. Membership in the gay-straight alliance soon surpassed that of the football team (which isn’t to say there wasn’t overlap)...

All in all, life through junior high was pretty fun. I didn’t really have a life that was so much out of the ordinary... (pp. 12-13).

What is striking is how Levithan capitalizes on his narrator’s perspective to challenge these assumptions and make the extraordinary seem ordinary and the ordinary seem extraordinary. He repeatedly plays with language in order to challenge broad societal assumptions. For instance Paul comments on kissing Kyle in ninth grade, the only “straight boy I’ve ever kissed. (He didn’t realize he was straight at the time)” (p. 18). The understated humor derives from the transposition of presumed heterosexuality

with homosexuality. Likewise, when Paul runs for president of his third grade class, he and his friend Joni create a slogan that plays on the close relationship of the words “gay” and “guy.”

Joni was my campaign manager. She was the person who came up with my campaign slogan: VOTE FOR ME...I’M GAY!

I thought it rather oversimplified my stance on the issues (pro-recess, anti-gym), but Joni said it was sure to generate media attention. At first, she wanted the slogan to be VOTE FOR ME...I’M A GAY, but I pointed out that this could easily be misread as VOTE FOR ME...I’M A GUY, which would certainly lose me votes. So the A was struck, and the race began in earnest (p. 11).

The delicious irony of this section plays on the difference of a single vowel. In contemporary society, there are still few openly gay political representatives and society is stratified based on male dominance. While historically being a “guy” has been an asset and being “gay” has not, Levithan reverses them here, so that being gay carries more capital than being a guy.

***Disclosing “secrets”***

Later in the novel Levithan again challenges the “normalcy” of silencing gay and lesbian identities through the questionable use of labels. A minor character named Amber joins Paul and his friends on the decorating committee for the upcoming dance. Paul teases her, saying,

‘I swear, if you weren’t an Old Navy-wearing lesbian Club Kid, I’d probably kiss you now.’

Amber’s laugh stops. She looks around to see if anyone’s heard.

*I’ve gone too far, I think.*

‘I’m sorry,’ I say.

Amber waves me off. ‘It’s okay. It’s just that I’m not...well, I don’t like to think of myself as... a Club Kid.’

She smiles again.

‘I’ll never think of you that way again,’ I promise.

‘I mean, I love joining clubs and all. I just don’t want word to get out, okay?’

Her secret is safe with me (p. 142).

In novels with GLBTQ characters, secrets are commonplace, with a significant number of characters in the closet, worrying over “who knows.” As such, *Levithan* plays with the closet motif, with just the right amount of hesitation, noted by the eclipses, the stammering. One assumes, apparently including Paul, that she did not want her sexual identity disclosed. But in this case, she does not worry over the lesbian label, but that of being called a “Club Kid” [a group of high school students who join lots of clubs and attend once or twice, just so they can put it on their resume for college]. She disputes the label because she doesn’t want to be associated with “them”- other Club Kids.

Levithan's whimsical farce, however, is brought to point of hyperbole through the conflation of drag queen/ homecoming queen and football quarterback in the character Infinite Darlene.

I don't know when Infinite Darlene and I first became friends. Perhaps it was back when she was still Daryl Heisenberg, but that's not very likely; few of us can remember what Daryl Heisenberg was like, since Infinite Darlene consumed him so completely. He was a decent football player, but nowhere near as good as when he started wearing false eyelashes.

Infinite Darlene doesn't have it easy. Being both star quarterback and homecoming queen has its conflicts. And sometimes it's hard for her to fit in. The other drag queens in our school rarely sit with her at lunch; they say she doesn't take good enough care of her nails, and that she looks a little too buff in a tank top. The football players are a little more accepting, although there was a spot of trouble a year ago when Chuck, the second-string quarterback, fell in love with her and got depressed when she said he wasn't her type (pp. 15-16).

The reader can't help but laugh at the drama ensued around and through Infinite Darlene. In her/him, Levithan engages in some literary gender bending by conflating two gender extremes, namely the drag queen and football quarterback. On the one hand, Infinite Darlene creates an external social identity that is meant to pose as a woman; on the other, she performs in one of the most 'ultra-masculine' roles in modern society.

Although there are few unequivocally affirming supporting characters of GLBTQ identities in these novels, the authors have created complex, multi-dimensional characters engaging in conflicts frequently related to their sexuality or love interest. In this way, they convey messages of affirmation and value and refute common assumptions about GLBTQ individuals. Furthermore, they, I believe, support a position posited by Paul in *Boy Meets Boy*:

...More than anything in this strange life, I want Tony to be happy. We found out a long time ago that we weren't meant to fall in love with each other. But a part of me still fell in hope with him. I want a fair world. And in a fair world, Tony would shine (Levithan, 2003, p. 5).

Through their narratives, these authors appear to support positive portrayals of GLBTQ individuals and their right to fair and just world as well.

## CHAPTER VII

### SUMMARY AND ONGOING CHALLENGES

Since the genesis of young adult literature in the late 1960s, literature dedicated to GLBTQ characters has been slow to emerge. Between 1969 and the publication of Donovan's *I'll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip* and today, more than 200 books have been published. But as researchers (Cart & Jenkins, 2006; Cuseo, 1992) have noted, the majority of those works reinforced negative portrayals of GLBTQ people. Specifically, homosexuality was commonly depicted as a passing stage unto proper heterosexuality, whereas, confirmed GLBTQ individuals were doomed to live dreary, isolated lives. While the publication of *Annie on my Mind* (Garden, 1982) demonstrated a significant shift in this portrayal, it has not been until recently that positive portrayals of GLBTQ teens have been readily available.

Acclaimed researcher and young adult literary historian, Michael Cart (2004) notes that reading young adult literature, "the quintessential literature of the outsider," provides "the lifesaving necessity of seeing one's own face reflected in the pages of a good book and the corollary comfort that derives from the knowledge that one is not alone" (p. 46). For GLBTQ youth, this is exceptionally important given the heteronormative structures in place to monitor and control sexual and gender identities and expressions.

With this in mind, I examined seventeen GLBTQ themed novels for images, representations, and messages presented about sexualities and gender identities, seeking to answer three primary questions: 1) What are the networks or systems of power that

are unveiled as inhibiting the identities of the characters? 2) How are the identities of these characters constructed? 3) What messages do the texts convey regarding nonconforming sexual and gender identities? I found that the authors largely created dynamic, three-dimensional characters with complex histories and narratives that affirm and validate GLBTQ identities. Furthermore, I observed two overarching set of factors: one that encompasses culturally mediated forces, which include cultural institutions and practices, persecution, and social networks, and a second that emphasizes a critical modernist construction of identity. This is significant because previous studies of young adult fiction with GLBTQ content have failed to identify how these texts demonstrate both macro and micro forces or document how these texts are informed by or engage with ongoing discourses around GLBTQ issues. I also examined the texts for messages conveyed about GLBTQ identities. In doing so, I found a progressive-oriented didacticism pervasive through the texts that positively portrays GLBTQ characters, denounces homophobia, frequently challenges heteronormative assumptions and behaviors, and instructs readers about various issues and conflicts common to GLBTQ youth.

### **Summary of Findings**

#### *Cultural institutions and practices*

First and foremost, one of the most distinguishing characteristics of these themed books is the manner in which they foreground influential cultural institutions and practices in contemporary GLBTQ young adult lives. By the phrase cultural institutions and practices, I have referred to discursive ways of being that have come to be infused

throughout U.S. culture, taken for granted, institutionalized, and sanctioned in multiple facets. Specifically, I analyzed the depictions of heteronormativity, homophobia, and institutions of schooling as authoritative networks of power that more often than not serve to oppress GBLTQ characters, rather than advocate on their behalf. In these books, the presumptions of ‘normality,’ the privileged status, and the pressures for conformity driven by heteronormative structures are brought to bear. Holland rationalizes away her crushes on other girls, because it wasn’t appropriate to act on them. Mel avoids naming her infatuations, “although she knew, she absolutely knew” because that it would make it real. The more stereotypically effeminate gay male characters, e.g. Nelson, Iggy, Frankie, Bo, are depicted as bearing the worst brunt of heteronormative policing: name calling from early elementary grades to escalated episodes of violence in secondary grades. The irony of such violence derives from the permissiveness of significant authority figures, especially teachers and administrators, regarding the violence, believing that these youth “deserve what they get” because they don’t dress, walk, talk like “real men.”

Furthermore, I have shown the fundamental connection depicted in these books between presumptions of heteronormativity, homophobic beliefs and actions, and schooling authorities. Heteronormative beliefs sanction homophobic behaviors, silencing would-be allies and fostering a sense of entitlement among homophobic perpetrators. Likewise, heteronormative assumptions, more times than not, lead teachers and administrators to blame the victim for violence incurred upon them. Again and again the

message is reiterated and perpetuated, “if you would just straighten up,” then all would be fine.

This context then creates the greatest point of conflict for characters in these novels. To varying degrees the main characters thrash and strain against the confines placed upon them. In fact, the only character free of such conflict is Paul in *Boy Meets Boy* (Levithan, 2003), a novel of blurred genre, which is situated in a farcical town in which divisions based on sexuality and gender simply do not exist.

### ***Persecution***

While in many ways, heteronormativity creates the overarching context and conflict against most of the characters to one degree or another, this becomes manifested in the descriptions of persecution and harassment that overwhelmingly pervade these novels. While striking, the depiction of harassment in these books is commiserate with national hate crime statistics in which 95% of anti-GLBTQ violence is directed against individuals, whereas most other hate-based crimes are targeted against property (Aston, 2001; Lambda, 2007). Although there are several incidents of hate-based vandalism (*Rainbow Boys*, *So Hard to Say*, and *Love Rules*), most of the harassment- verbal and physical- is targeted against specific individual characters.

Multiple researchers document environmental factors as a more frequent basis for these crimes rather than individual pathologies (Aston, 2001; Comstock, 1989; Franklin, 1997). Bette Greene, the author of *The Drowning of Stephen Jones*, interviewed approximately 150 assailants of anti-gay hate crimes before writing the

novel, noted that most were “good boys” prompted to violence by alcohol use, boredom, and insecurity around their manhood (Franklin, 1997).

Taken together, the findings...confirm that antigay violence is culturally normative for a least a large segment of American young men...widely shared social values impart a sense of permission and even encouragement to vent their rage on gay men and lesbians, thereby disregarding the humanity of their homosexual victims (Franklin, 1997, p. 192).

Significantly, Franklin (1997) concluded, “antigay violence is pervasive because it expresses values aligned with social norms (p. 52). Such is the widespread cultural aversion to homosexuality, it becomes socially acceptable to harm them (Fone, 2000).

In a case study of an anti-gay hate crime in Houston, TX, Aston (2001) accentuates the cultural and institutional forces of schooling and heterosexism that permit and enable such violence. He notes the importance of the youth peer culture and thrill-seeking that prompted a number of high school boys to regularly go on gay-bashing trips. They would even wear arm bands to school to signify themselves as members of the “gay-bashing club.” However, when antigay harassment policies have been put into place, they have employed psychological approaches to a social phenomenon.

The ‘problem’ is situated *inside* a child, and programs intended to mitigate homophobia, interrupt antigay comments or activities, and ‘teach tolerance’ are seen as the solution. Research, however, has shown that bullying unfolds in a peer context and that understanding the ‘social

ecology of bullying' is critical to designing effective interventions (Rofes, 2005, p. 44).

What becomes clear then through empirical research and the fictional portrayals in these novels is the degree to which homophobia is permitted, socially acceptable, and even (dare I say) "normal." This leads to a sense of permission or entitlement amongst would-be gay-bashers that it is okay, and even right, to commit acts of violence against GLBTQ people.

### *Social networks*

Although research has documented increased rates of attempts and suicides among GLBTQ youth (D'Augelli, Herschberger, & Pilkington, 2001; GLSEN, 2005; Kitts, 2005; Massachusetts Department of Education, 2007), compared to their heterosexual peers, research has also demonstrated that the majority of GLBTQ youth never attempt suicide, and many have never even considering doing so (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2005). One reason that has been posited for the difference is the degree of support in their social networks. Cohen and Wills (1985), for example, documented an inverse relationship between a teen's social resources, i.e., social support from family and friends, and feelings of intense distress and depression. Given a cultural context that frequently induces "minority stress," stress that is derived from "interactions with dominant-group members [which] often require minority-group members to maintain a degree of vigilance in regard to the minority component of their identity" (Brooks, 1981, p. 79), this is especially critical. However, unlike other minority groups, GLBTQ youth often cannot rely on family members or other close-knit

communities to mediate the resulting stress. As Kevin comments from *Geography Club* (Hartinger, 2003), “Sure can’t tell your family. My dad would go feral” (p. 39) Or Terese from the same novel, “So it’s like you can never really relax, not when you’re with other people” (p. 39).

However, “support” is not clearly, empirically defined. In the novels, for example, *The Rainbow Kite* (Shyer, 2002) and *Luna* (Peters, 2004), Bennett’s and Liam’s fathers want the best for their children, but this is scripted through heteronormative proscriptions. As such, they support and encourage their efforts in sports and heterosexual dating, but the support is withdrawn in regards to their respective alternate sexual and gender identities. As such, one social-psychology study noted a *positive* relationship between “social support” and increased levels of anxiety and distress among suicidal youth in follow-up interviews post suicide attempts. In nonsuicidal youth, social support demonstrated no effect whatsoever (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2005). The researchers explained this finding, suggesting:

Regardless of the supportiveness of family and friends, GLB youths may experience degrading and belittling relationships with members of their social networks, possibly with the same family and friends who provide support. Persons who care and love the youth may respond negatively, even violently to the youth upon learning about his/her GLB status (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2005, p. 158).

In fact, this research study appears to corroborate the some narrative conflict described in the novels, i.e., fear of disappointing parents can exacerbate internal conflict around nonconforming sexual and gender identities and increase anxiety.

In addition to perceptions by GLBTQ youth of their parents' expectations, I highlighted in the section on social networks descriptions of parental responses, when their child came out to them, or they simply suspected/ observe nonheteronormative behavior. For instance, Kyle's mom in *Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001) stood in his bedroom saddened and perplexed, or Aurin's mom in *Gravel Queen* (Benduhn, 2003) trying to talk to her daughter about "something that scares her," all the while scrubbing at a stain on the doorframe, or Mel's father in *The Bermudez Triangle* (Johnson, 2004), "who looked so genuinely sad that all were silent." In her phenomenological study, Saltzburg (2004) interviews parents about their reactions upon their child's coming out. One mother (Mother P) expressed her pain this way: "It was like our worst fear come true" (p. 112). Saltzburg (2000) synthesized these comments, saying, "Emotional responses most noteworthy of capturing the pathos of first learning that an adolescent child was gay or lesbian were state of panic and deep loss, a sense of existential aloneness, and feelings of shame" (p. 113). Of the ten parents she interviewed, not one expressed joy or affirmation upon first learning of their child's gay or lesbian identity.

Because of the great likelihood of a negative parental response, at least initially, to a child's coming out as GLBT, this increases the significance of close peer relationships. Indeed in these novels, authors tend to characterize these reactions and relationships much more favorably. Friendships among GLBTQ individuals are

underscored as means to decrease social isolation and alienation and to gain an understanding of broader queer communities. Heterosexual friends and allies also figure prominently in these texts. For instance, Lynn in *Love Rules* (Reynolds, 2001) and Nina in *The Bermudez Triangle* (Johnson, 2004) are initially reluctant to actively support their friends' coming out, but eventually become strident advocates and allies.

### ***Critical modernist identity***

Ubiquitous to young adult novels are questions of identity, in which protagonists struggle in midst of various conflicts to ascertain or redefine who they are. For many GLBTQ characters, this largely entails coming to understand or gaining the confidence to disclose their sexual or gender identities. As such, I return to the complicated construct of "identity" in the first place. For centuries philosophers have debated the nature of identity, arguing mostly from an essentialist perspective, either based on bodily form or that of consciousness and memory. The field of psychology has largely followed suit, asserting the concept of identity as based on a stable, unified self who inhabits both the same body and collects a set of experiences and memories as that same person.

Furthermore, Erik Erikson (1968) contended that conflicts of identity essentially define the nature of adolescence, in which youth judge themselves in light of and comparison to significant others in their lives. "[A] young person, in order to experience wholeness, must feel a progressive continuity between that which he (sic) has come to be during the long years of childhood and that which he conceives himself to be and that which he perceives others to see in him and to expect of him" (p. 87). While Erikson viewed this conflict largely in reaction against parental values, the increasing power of

youth peer culture may as often prompt significant conflicts of identity: *Who am I? Am I like them?*

Although this construction of adolescence has recently come under critique, it is upon this foundation that young adult literature still largely derives. In their character development, authors create life histories for their characters with flashbacks now a common narrative technique. Peters (2004) used this technique prodigiously in her National Book Award honoree *Luna*, the story of the transitioning of a male to female transsexual character. Written from Regan's perspective, Liam's/ Luna's sister, Peters employs these flashbacks of the "past" to illuminate Liam's/Luna's behaviors in the present. Additionally, Erikson's positing of "adolescences in crisis" essentially constitutes the plot development of young adult literature as well. This can be clearly seen in stories in which coming out is the primary conflict, and even in those which aren't. For example, in *Geography Club* (Hartinger, 2003), Russel struggles against both the powerful pull of popularity in youth culture and the desire to keep his closeted baseball player-boyfriend Kevin Land. But as with many YA novels, redemption for Russel can only come from choosing between doing what is right and "hanging" with the popular crowd, which includes Kevin. He cannot do both.

Although these novels are heavily imbued with psychological constructions of identity (pretty much cliché in YA novels), they also underscore the personal and social significance attributed to identity labels (Goffman, 1959). The significance attributed *personally* to any of these three components depends upon the *social* significance infused to the labels. For many of these characters, their struggle with claiming a

GLBTQ identity revolves around the marginalized status of that identity- and the concomitant label associated with it. For instance, Orphea from *Orphea Proud* swells from the geyser of joy aroused by her best friend Lissa; however, it is the external labels, “fairy,” “dyke,” attributed to those feelings that cause her and many others- Frederick, Jason, Avery, Russel, Bennett, John, to squelch those feelings. It is for this reason that Cece from *Keeping You a Secret* reiterates the common strategy among minority groups to reclaim negative labels, including “fairy,” “dyke,” “queer,” so that they lose their regulatory power.

Although labeling in these books most often serve as disciplining agents, they also provide clarity, a confidence based on a clear orientation to the world, even if that orientation derives from a disenfranchised position. Mead (1934) highlights that one’s subjectivity results first from being made an object by others. In other words, it is how others understand us that we first learn to understand ourselves. You know where you stand. John in *Eight Seconds* describes it as a “a click in the brain, a settling” that can’t be disavowed. Conversely, when characters don’t know what label to apply to themselves, they are uncomfortable, suffering from a kind of cognitive dissonance, best exemplified in Kyle from *Boy Meets Boy*, when he says, “You see, Paul, I don’t know who I am” (Levithan, 2003, p. 86).

In this way, modernist notions of identity prevail in these books. In coming out stories, characters generally proceed linearly from heterosexuality to homosexuality. Even when characters like Kyle declare, “I don’t know who I am,” the unsettling of this statement derives from not knowing, based on the assumption that they should and that

they can. Nevertheless, there are a couple of notable exceptions in these books that suggest a more poststructural approach to identity: James from *My Heartbeat* and Infinite Darlene in *Boy Meets Boy*. During the course of the novel *My Heartbeat*, Freymann-Wehr depicts James attracted first to Link, and then to his younger sister Ellen. Although he doesn't know if he's gay, straight, or bi, he is unconcerned and dismissive of the labels. They just don't matter. Then with Infinite Darlene, the Levithan purposefully avoids tagging her/him with a label. The reader doesn't know how she would self-identify her gender identity or his sexual identity. Both characterizations are radical in the active avoidance of labels and presumed argument that it just does not matter.

### ***Coming out and claiming identity***

Understanding that the authors predominantly construct coming out largely as a developmental process deriving from a modernist framing of identity, I next examined multiple facets related to coming out in these texts, including: self-truth, family and community, desire and romance, and finally liberation. These are presented as both inherent values to coming out and means of (pro)claiming a GLBTQ identity.

At the most fundamental level, coming out is constituted as a critical statement of personal truth: this is who I am. While on the one hand it resists proscriptive efforts to denounce or exact heteronormative conformity, on the other hand such proclamations also resist a fluidity of sexual or gender expression. It reinforces the notion individuals must define who they are and then are restricted to the conceptions associated thereto.

Coming out is also constructed as a pivotal point that enables characters to move beyond the doubts and the confusion to healthy self-expression. In this way, certainty is favored and ambiguity problematized. Unlike James in *My Heartbeat* (Freyman-Wehr, 2002), who demonstrated unusual comfort with uncertainty and ambiguity, significant narrative impetus is connected to characters' struggles to come to terms with their sexuality. Once they *know*, they are liberated. The presumptions and privileging of heteronormativity, likewise a modernist construction, doubly constrains characters sexual and gender expression, given that to *not* know, to doubt, intimates the possibility of not being gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgender. Thus, GLBTQ characters often feel compelled to come out in resistance to such pressures.

### ***Affirming identity***

Although research studies involving GLBTQ youth have emphasized their increased participation in at-risk behaviors (Alexander, 2000; O'Connor, 1995), current studies are also quick to acknowledge the resiliency of GLBTQ youth as well (Talbur, 2004). Narratively, this resiliency is characterized through prominent affirmations of identity. Demonstrations of this can be made manifest through character and/or plot development. For example, Nelson from *Rainbow Boys* (Sanchez, 2001) and Cece from *Keeping You a Secret* (Peters, 2003) are characterized as being unabashedly "out and proud," embodying personal sites of resistance that challenge dominant discourses around sexuality. In this section, I discussed three recurring forms of affirming identity: holding one's ground, reframing a situation, and striking back. The category 'holding one's ground' represents key textual references when characters refute efforts by their

antagonists to marginalize and demean them. This is best epitomized in the scene from *Rainbow High* (Sanchez, 2003), when after an important swim meet, Kyle finally stands up to fellow teammate Charlie.

Afterward in the locker room, the other boys joked and laughed.

Kyle yanked his suit's drawstring, intending to towel dry.

But inside him something had shifted. He no longer cared if some nameless jerk didn't want to shower with him. Kyle dropped his suit and stepped toward the showers.

Across the spray of water, Charlie spotted him and muttered,

‘Fag.’

Kyle stopped and drew himself up. ‘Does that threaten you?’ he answered back. ‘Feel free to leave’ (Sanchez, 2003, pp. 182-183).

The second category “reframing a situation” references scenes when characters similarly engage in a shift in perspective, but also alter their behavior from a reactive stance to one more proactive. A clear exemplar of this comes from *Love Rules* (Reynolds, 2001): students from the newly formed GSA are tired of the homophobic harassment, the assaults, and the lack of substantive action by the school principal. As a result, they decide to follow the advice of a GLSEN representative and document and report every homophobic act seen or enacted against them. Star sums up their collective attitude when she retorts, “No more shit for dinner” (Reynolds, 2001, p. 231).

The third category, striking back, reflects instances in which characters are compelled to defend themselves or exact justice through more aggressive or physical

means. The best example of this comes from *Finding H.F.*, when Bo exacts revenge against the school quarterback for one night kissing him and the next day participating in a group assault on him by inserting hot pepper juice into the jockstraps of most of the football players. “I’d made Craig Shepherd burn down there one way, so I was gonna make him burn another,” Bo told H.F. (Watts, 2001, p. 133).

Important to all these categories is the shift in perspective and stance by the major characters. At some point, the characters gain a sense of empowerment, thereby rejecting the diminished status imposed upon them. Authors literally describe their protagonists standing up, standing taller, as when Avery notes of Mel, “[she] didn’t seem that small anymore” (Johnson, 2004, p. 329), or Sanchez depicts Kyle drawing himself up defiant, and challenging, “Does that threaten you?” Underscored in these textual references is the Foucauldian notion, “where there is power, there is resistance” (Sawicki, 1991). Although Shyer deviates from this trend, only freeing her protagonist from the shame of externally and internally attributed homophobia by a collective affirmation, the majority of authors in this sample appear to utilize the narrative framework of conflict/ resolution to accentuate critical points of resistance that transforms the character from victim to agent. In so doing, these texts can serve as examples for readers (Norton, 2003), providing alternate means of confronting, resisting and undermining homophobic attitudes and behaviors.

### *Authorial voices*

Contemporary messages in GLBTQ themed books by and large emphasize the inherent value and dignity of GLBTQ people. Although authors do not fail to depict the difficulties and dangers present to many GLBTQ youth, they locate these dangers external to their protagonists, rather than suggesting an inherent flaw in being queer. This is especially conveyed through portrayal of bigotry in novels' antagonists. Even Bennett who believes, "I am queer. I belong nowhere," is reconciled to himself and to his classmates through a vibrant display of solidarity with him at the junior high graduation. Two other central messages include "what's the big deal?" and "love rules." Through the complex, fully rounded characterizations in most of these sampled novels, the authors portray GLBTQ teens as normal, average youth with hopes and dreams, hurt when betrayed or "dumped," anxious about college and their futures, in conflict with their parents about growing up. If so much is the same with GLBTQ teens as non-GLBTQ youth, then the question remains, to use Frederick's words in *So Hard to Say* (Sanchez, 2004): "Why did people make such a fuss about it anyway?" Corollary with this question is the other overarching message: "love rules." Although *Love Rules* most conspicuously conveys this theme, it is likewise present throughout the texts. As John notes in *Eight Seconds*, "Maybe love was just love, no matter who was doing it, and if you found it, you should be glad, because it wasn't such an easy thing to find." This is reiterated in the almost effortless ways that Aurin falls in love with Neila, Mel with Avery, Nic with Battle. Even when falling in love creates a personal struggle as with

Holland for Cece or Jason for Kyle, the love and desire they feel for the other wins out over their fears and anxiety about coming out.

In addition to these central messages, the authors appear to contradict persistent negative assumptions and myths about GLBTQ individuals. Through the message ‘love rules,’ for example, the authors foreground love and desire in same gender relationship, not sex, since a common myth is that homosexuality is more about sex than heterosexuality. Likewise, through rounded characterizations and the use of humor, authors seem to downplay common stereotypes around gay men and lesbians. Although Nelson in *Rainbow Boys* and *Rainbow High* is even called “Nelly” by the initial closet Jason, he brings light-hearted whimsy to the novels. Or, H.F., who describes herself as in relation to her unknown father: “Whoever my daddy was, he must have been a plain-looking, blue-eyed skinny boy, since that’s what I look like, right down to the ‘boy’ part (Watts, 2001, p. 6), speaks to the reader with such forthright honesty and self-deprecating humor that she isn’t a stereotype, she’s real.

### **Critique of Modern Constructions of Identity**

While the fiction affirms GLBTQ identities and problematizes heteronormative assumptions, these novels, minus a few exceptions, continue to assume modernist notions of identity. Specifically, these sampled books represent identity in three major facets: developmental, knowable, and categorical. First, identity is characterized as developmental in that it is depicted as something either one *is* or goes through a series of stages and *becomes* (Erikson, 1968). In these books, characters either are GLBTQ, have always known they were GLBTQ, or come to understand that they are GLBTQ. In

efforts to resist heteronormative expectations, many characters feel compelled to claim an identity, proclaiming as Luna does to her father, “Dad, I’m a transsexual” (Peters, 2004, p. 221) or Kit to her longtime best friend Lynn “That’s what I’m telling you. It’s definite! I am definitely a LESBIAN!” (Reynolds, 2001, p. 38). Second, identity is demonstrated as knowable, in which the unconscious or subconscious awareness of difference transforms into conscious realization. Some characters such as Paul, Kit, Mel, Kyle, Nelson, Orphea, Iggy, Bennett, H.F., Bo, Liam/ Luna describe “having always known” even if they didn’t have the language to initially name their difference or sought to repress the knowledge of their difference, while others “came to know” during the course of the narrative that they were GLBTQ, including John, Jason, Frederick, Aurin, and Lissa. Then finally, identity is depicted as categorical and identified by specific labels. In this sample, some of the different categories include: gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, queer, and heterosexual.

While these themed novels predominantly reify modernist conceptions of identity, there are a several notable exceptions from the themed books *Boy Meets Boy* (Levithan, 2003) and *My Heartbeat* (Freyman-Wehr, 2002) and two non-themed (and thus not otherwise discussed in this study) books *Postcards from No Man’s Land* (Chambers, 2002) and *What Happened to Lani Garver?* (Plum-Ucci, 2002). Rather than representing identity as delimited by clear boundaries, these novels offer alternatives that favor alinearity, ambiguity, and uncertainty. In *My Heartbeat*, for instance, Ellen tries to determine if her brother Link and his best friend James are “a couple,” and by extension if they’re gay. James admits to having sex with other men, but claims to be uncertain

about his sexuality or sexual identity. Link who has not slept with men, denies that he is gay, presumably because he is afraid that he is. James, however, appears comfortable with uncertainty: “I don’t know either...It doesn’t scare me, though” (p. 46). It is his relaxed manner that sets James apart, contrasting heteronormative proscriptions of masculinity that forcefully compel renunciations of homosexuality. Next, in *Boy Meets Boy*, Levithan (2003) plays with gender identity through the character Infinite Darlene, who is both the high school quarterback and homecoming queen. In one short excerpt, Levithan alludes to a performative construction of gender, distinguishing gender from personhood: “Beneath the mascara and the lipstick and the chicken pox scar on her lower lip, beneath the girl and the boy to the person within, who is concerned and confused and sincere” (p. 106). In this way, personhood is distinct from gender, is the source of emotion and empathy, and is real; everything else is attribution.

The two non-themed novels trouble these sexual and gender binaries even more explicitly. In *Postcards from No Man’s Land* (Chambers, 2002), the main character Jacob travels from the U.S. to Holland to participate in a WWII memorial. Immediately upon arriving, he meets Ton, who Jacob first takes to be a woman but discovers to be a man. Despite this, Jacob still finds himself attracted to this girl/ guy, and comes to explore his own bisexuality. Through the character Daan, Chambers appears to challenge naturalized categories around sexuality and gender:

All the stuff about gender. Male, female, queer, bi, feminist, new man, whatever- it’s meaningless...’

Jacob said, 'I dunno. Doesn't seem to me to be as clear-cut as you make out.' 'Yes it is,' Daan said. 'I love who I love. I sleep with who I love if we both want it. Nothing to do with male or female...All that matters is the people I love. How we live together. How we keep each other alive' (pp. 277-278).

Plum-Ucci (2002) likewise challenges these sexual and gender categories through the conspicuously androgynous character Lani (pronounced Lonnie) Garver. When Lani first arrives at his/ her new school, several girls, including the protagonist Claire, try to figure out whether Lani is a girl or boy.

'...take offense or anything, but can I ask you a personal question?'

'Yeah, go ahead.'

'Are you...a girl?' Macy asked.

I was turning all shades of red, but Lani didn't flinch. 'Oh! No. Not a girl. Sorry.'

We waited, I guess because we were expecting to hear the natural next line, *I'm a boy*. The smile on his face left me feeling he enjoyed the awkward pause and the notion that our heads might be slightly confused.

'Okay,' Macy finally stumbled. 'You're a guy.'

After that I forever thought of and referred to Lani as a he. The truth is, he never actually answered (p. 17).

Even after they become friends, Claire continues struggling to make sense of Lani, because he did not “fit” any of the usual categories.

His grin looked irritated. ‘You’re trying to stereotype me. Don’t do that. I hate it.’

‘I am not...There’s a difference between stereotyping and deciding where somebody fits in.’

‘What’s the difference? It’s all for the purpose of passing judgment.’

‘I wouldn’t say that. It just helps you get to know somebody better’  
(p.45).

But Lani contends that all the labels we use to identify people are limiting. “I don’t like being put in boxes. Boy, girl, dork, popular, those are boxes” (p. 46). Later, so, too, he argues are gay, straight, and bisexuality- all boxes and completely unnecessary.

While the majority of the themed novels challenge heteronormative strictures around sexuality and gender, these four novels, especially the latter two, invoke postmodern notions of sexuality and gender, contesting the categories themselves. Levithan, Chambers, and Plum-Ucci might also contend that genre structures, such as contemporary realistic fiction, are also “boxes,” because all three blend, blur, and defy the typical boundaries of genre in these novels. In this way, these novels suggest a possible future trend in young adult fiction that underscores dynamic fluidity and ambiguity in the characterizations and the structure of the novels themselves.

### Ongoing Challenges

Although this research study has focused on GLBTQ themed novels, the implications are much broader. For instance, numerous librarians nationwide are refusing to stock the 2007 Newbery Award winner *The Higher Power of Lucky* (Patron, 2006) because of the word “scrotum” (a dog’s) immediately on page one. Two nonfiction, award-winning books *It’s Perfectly Normal* (Harris, 1994) and *It’s Absolutely Amazing* (Harris, 1999), geared for children in grades 4-8 and seven years and up, respectively, have likewise been highly challenged in recent years for their physiologically accurate depictions of maturing sexed bodies, discussions of sex and sexuality- including homosexuality (ALA, 2007). In 2005 alone, these two texts were among the top ten most challenged books: *It’s Perfectly Normal*, ranked number one, because of “homosexuality, nudity, sex education, religious viewpoint, abortion and being unsuited to age group” and *It’s Absolutely Amazing*, number ten, due to sex education and sexual content (ALA, 2007).

Middle school and secondary educators may wonder too about including these texts into their curriculum, fearing negative reprisals. Whenever considering incorporating potentially controversial material into the curriculum, educators should refer to national guidelines established by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE, 2007) or their national organization regarding selection of materials.

The potential incorporation of texts with GLBTQ content, however, suggests other broader curricular and societal challenges, regarding dominant ways of structuring classroom spaces and contexts, specifically:

- How might we reconcile the tensions around young people and their bodies that concomitantly denounces and accentuates young people's sexuality?
- How might we reframe our classroom into more democratic spaces that encourage participation of all students, especially those traditionally silenced and otherwise marginalized, such as GLBTQ youth?
- How might we create safe spaces that interrupt normalized Discourses and classroom discourses (Gee, 1996) around the homosexual/ heterosexual binary (Sedgwick, 1990)?
- How might we rethink our ideas of young people that does not reconstitute the adult/ child power dyad, but rather advances student voice and agency? (Rofes, 2005)

These questions challenge the dominant power dynamics within K-12 classrooms, within which teachers exercise institutional authority of the schools to regulate the context, voices, and bodies of their students. It also denotes advocating culturally relevant pedagogies, which seeks to make curriculum more meaningful to students and encourages students' personal and critical engagement. Moreover, it challenges us as educators to risk vulnerability and advance self-reflective teaching that promote participatory and democratic practices in the classroom, rather than claiming singular control of ideas and behavior (Greene, 1993).

Notwithstanding the ongoing controversies around these texts, reading and discussion of young adult fiction with GLBTQ content could provide one avenue for increased inclusiveness, participation and engagement by GLBTQ and non-GLBTQ

individuals alike. GLBTQ students gain the opportunity to read stories that give voice to events and feelings they may be experiencing, or have experienced and provide a sense of connectedness. Non-GLBTQ individuals may gain a greater understanding of the conflicts of these young people so that they might intercede and advocate for GLBTQ youth in their stead. Finally, both GLBTQ and non-GLBTQ individuals may understand heteronormativity as a social construction embedded in particular socio-historical contexts rather than as naturalized facets of human interaction. In this way, Paul's (from *Boy Meets Boy*) hopes for his best friend Tony might be realized for all GLBTQ youth: "I want a fair world. And in a fair world, Tony would shine" (Levithan, 2003, p. 5), and so would they all.

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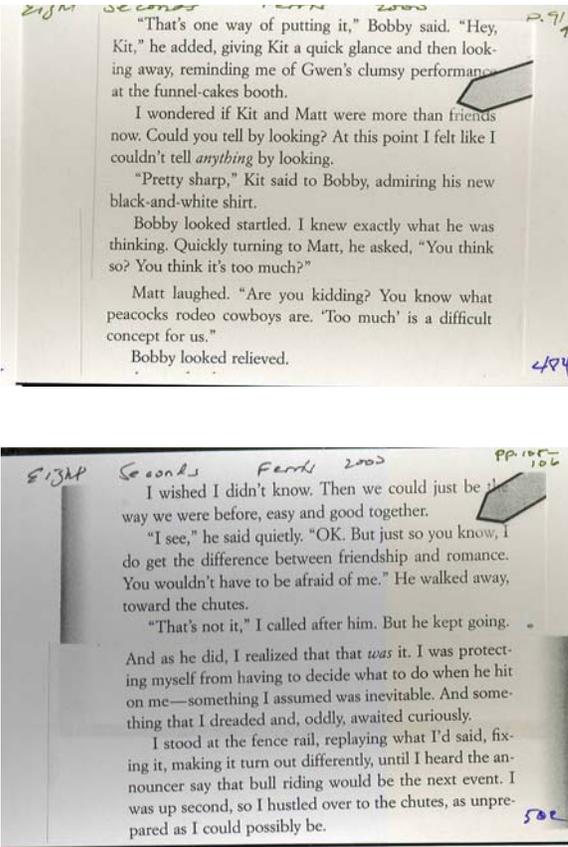
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## APPENDIX A

## Expanded example of Analytic Triple-Entry Journal

RESISTANCE: *DENOUNCING ASSUMPTIONS*

Topic/ Thematic Category	Text Sources	Analysis/ Reflection
Denouncing assumptions	 <p>218M seconds Ferris 2000</p> <p>"That's one way of putting it," Bobby said. "Hey, Kit," he added, giving Kit a quick glance and then looking away, reminding me of Gwen's clumsy performance at the funnel-cakes booth.</p> <p>I wondered if Kit and Matt were more than friends now. Could you tell by looking? At this point I felt like I couldn't tell <i>anything</i> by looking.</p> <p>"Pretty sharp," Kit said to Bobby, admiring his new black-and-white shirt.</p> <p>Bobby looked startled. I knew exactly what he was thinking. Quickly turning to Matt, he asked, "You think so? You think it's too much?"</p> <p>Matt laughed. "Are you kidding? You know what peacocks rodeo cowboys are. 'Too much' is a difficult concept for us."</p> <p>Bobby looked relieved.</p> <p>213AP seconds Ferris 2000</p> <p>I wished I didn't know. Then we could just be the way we were before, easy and good together.</p> <p>"I see," he said quietly. "OK. But just so you know, I do get the difference between friendship and romance. You wouldn't have to be afraid of me." He walked away, toward the chutes.</p> <p>"That's not it," I called after him. But he kept going.</p> <p>And as he did, I realized that that <i>was</i> it. I was protecting myself from having to decide what to do when he hit on me—something I assumed was inevitable. And something that I dreaded and, oddly, awaited curiously.</p> <p>I stood at the fence rail, replaying what I'd said, fixing it, making it turn out differently, until I heard the announcer say that bull riding would be the next event. I was up second, so I hustled over to the chutes, as unprepared as I could possibly be.</p>	John asks, "Could you tell by looking?" Given Kit's character description, Ferris vehemently seems to be answering her own character's question with NO. As such, she seems to seek to denounce common stereotypes and assumptions many people hold about gays.

Eight Seconds Ferris 2000 p.111

"Maybe by telling me why I scare you."  
 "You don't...", I began, but then knew I was lying. And that was no way to have the friendship I wanted with him. He waited. "OK. Maybe *scare* is too strong a word. But *nervous*. That's more how I feel."  
 He stayed quiet, waiting some more.  
 "I can't imagine your life," I said.  
 "You thought you could. Before you knew. You thought it was pretty much the same as yours."

"Except for—" I didn't know what words to use.  
 "Except for *who*," he said. "Everything else is similar. I like a lot of the same things you do—we talked about those at rodeo school when we couldn't sleep. I want work I love. I want, eventually, to find a partner for my life. I want to have friends and good times. Why do that make you nervous? Never mind. I know."

"Let me tell you something. I've already found out that the absolutely last thing I ever want to do is come on to a straight guy, so that won't be a problem if I can help it. Do you think I should have to hang out just with other gay guys?"

"Well, no—," I began.

"It's tempting," he interrupted me. "It's easier. But I don't want my life to be that narrow. I also don't want to hide who I am, though I don't broadcast it, either. You don't have to go around declaring you're straight, so why should I always have to announce I'm gay?"

Eight Seconds Ferris 2000 p.113

"Yeah. I don't know, either." I studied the few berries in the bottom of my pail. My brain was still boiling with thoughts, but Kit was seeming like Kit again, and not some fearful stranger. How could I have forgotten what he was like?

"Come on," Kit said. "Why don't we finish with these berries and get over to the bull." He started pulling berries off the bushes. "I hope you know there's more to a person than just a libido."

I'd have to look that word up when I got home. (I did. It means "the instinctual sexual impulse.")

All the way home my brain kept boiling. But now it was boiling about me, not about Kit. How big a jerk was I, is what I wanted to know. I still liked Kit. He was cool and strong and interesting, and I wanted his friendship.

On one level, Ferris denounces the common prejudice that gays and lesbians will hit on straight people, which is the basis for the 'homosexual panic' defense argument. Through Kit's voice, she denounces that firmly, "I do get the difference between friendship and romance."

On another level, this is also about John's self-questioning- his mix-up expectations, discussed in self-realization.

The previous discussion continues here. At one level it's about John's confusion about Kit and what that means about himself and on another, it's a message to the wider readership: you knew and liked me before; you understood me- now what is so different now that you know that I'm gay? "You thought it was pretty much the same as yours," Kit reminds. It shouldn't be any different.

Eight Seconds Ferris 2000 p. 135

"I'm good at flirting with six-year-olds," Kit said. And then his face got serious. "But it's something I've got to be careful about."

"Careful? What do you mean?"

He looked away from me. "There'll always be people who think guys like me...that we're predators or something."

The idea of *anybody* doing *anything* to Clemmie almost made me sick. The idea that someone could think Kit would do that was disgusting.

Eight Seconds Ferris 2000 p. 136

Kit watched my reaction. "I have to be careful, that's all I'm saying—and most careful around little boys. But I don't think it's a good idea for me to be alone with Clemmie. Then, there's no way anybody can think... well, you know."

I couldn't think of anything to say. Kit's life was a foreign country where all the rules were new to me. He was right when he said a lot about our lives was similar. But where they were different, they were *very* different. "I'm sorry," Kit said softly. "But that's how it is."

Eight Seconds Ferris 2000 p. 147

I was exhausted in my body and my mind. I turned the radio up. Love songs. Nothing but love songs. Sweet love, raunchy love, love gone bad, love gone ecstatic, extramarital love, extraterrestrial love. But no gay love.

In fact, any of those songs could probably be about gay love, but nobody who listened to them ever thought of that. Maybe love was just love, no matter who was doing it, and if you found it, you should be glad, because it wasn't such an easy thing to find. It certainly hasn't been for me.

Empress of the World Ryan 2001 p. 115 E

i guess i should be getting angry, or upset, but more than anything it's just odd—what has changed about me, that makes these people now want to call me this name? do i look different? it's not as though battle and i have been out necking constantly. not that i'd mind. or would i? i don't know—whenever we're

Kit assumes John is having trouble with Kit's sexuality, but not for the reason he thinks. Again we hear from the author the similarities of GLBT people to others: work I love, a life partner, friends and good times. How strange is that? *ES*, p. 111

Kit's tirade is understandable, but a little tiresome. It's like he's so sick and tired of all the assumptions made about him that he explodes here with John— not really listening to what John is saying and more importantly *not saying*. The author comes off heavy-handed here for that reason.

Ferris gets tiresome with the dialogue here. John is supposed to be unraveling his own questions knotted inside, but it comes off like a long didactic message to the world about GLBT individuals and homophobic prejudice. "...but Kit was seeming like Kit again, and not some

Empress of the World Ryan 2001 p.114

as for boys...there are some jocky-looking guys who are forever punching each other on the arm or slapping each other on the butt. i suppose it's possible they could have something going on, but you'd certainly never catch them, say, kissing.

and there's another boy i've seen, i think he's in katrina's class, who often wears long velvet skirts and lots of black eyeliner. but i believe this to be a fashion statement rather than a declaration of sexuality, since i have observed him making out with various angst crows.

i suppose he could like boys, too, though. i of all people should remember that.

Empress of the World Ryan 2001 p.180

"I think he's flirting with you," Anne whispers. "Are you mad?"

I look at her, confused. "I don't know if he is or not," I whisper back, "but why would I be mad?"

"Because he's a guy!" Anne whispers more loudly.

"Oh! No, that wouldn't make me mad," I say.

Anne shakes her head. Obviously, I keep failing to act the way she expects.

Judging Her Words 119

When the preacher gets up to talk, it's not Preacher Dave. Instead it's a woman. Have you ever heard anything to beat that? In Memaw's church, women can't do nothing but teach Sunday school and bring covered dishes for dinner.

The woman preacher's pretty too. She's got short, wavy blond hair and has on one of them shirts with a collar like Catholic priests wear. I can't stop staring at her, and I can't stop thinking. *She's a woman, she's a preacher, and she likes girls just the same as me.*

fearful stranger. How could I have forgotten what he was like?" It sounds forced.

ES, p. 114

The self-awareness of societal bigotry rings true, but again, it is just too heavy-handed. Too preachy; too didactic. Ick.

Ferris via Kit comments: I'm the same person as before you knew that I was gay, but comes off across very heavy-handed, whereas, Ryan via Nic makes the same argument, but it sounds like Nic, not just a mouthpiece. The use of the journal, the lack of capitalization and the informal style: it *sounds* like her internal musing, not a exposition to the world.

I wrap my arms around Bo and hug him. All his boy parts are touching my girl parts, but there's none of the spark that I'd feel pressed up against Wendy or Lacey. You know how the hateful preachers are always saying that God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and

	<p>Steve? Well, hugging Bo naked in the ocean, I feel like we're a new kind of Adam and Eve. We already ate the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, and instead of being punished for it, we learned that the world is big and full of opportunities, and that love is always good: Girls can love girls if they want to, boys can love boys if they want to, and a girl and a boy can love each other as dear friends and nothing more or less. We are naked, and we are not ashamed.</p> <p>-- <i>FHF</i>, p. 140</p>	<p>Exploring and reconsidering gender and concomitant gender and sexual norms. The guy in the long velvet skirts could like girls and could like boys too. She basically reminds herself (and the audience) not to put people into boxes.</p> <p>Through the discussion of Atlanta's MCC church, Watts counters the negative assumptions held about religion and GLBTQ individuals. Here in fact, the preacher is a woman and a lesbian- doubly unheard of in rural Kentucky...</p> <p>Watts underlying <b>theme</b> comes out very strong in this section...</p>
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## APPENDIX B

### Portrayals of homosexuality

Text excerpt	Source	Classification
“I’m all hooray for gay. It’s not a problem”	Johnson, 2004, p. 159	As no big deal
“I think it’s cool that you’re open to stuff.”	Johnson, 2004, p. 193	As no big deal
“I stop at the tune store, where I’m greeted by Javier and Jules. Half the store is Javier’s, half is Jules- they have entirely different musical tastes, so you have to know going in whether the tune you’re looking for is more like Javier or Jules. They have been together for more than twenty years, and today as they offer me cider and argue the blues, I want to ask them how they’ve done it. To be together with someone for twenty years seems like an eternity to me. I can’t seem to manage twenty days. Twenty weeks would be a stretch. How can they stand there behind the counter, spinning songs for each other day in and day out? How can they find things to say- how can they avoid saying things they’ll always regret? <i>How do you stay together?</i> I want to ask them, the same way I want to ask my happy parents, the same way I want to go up to old people and ask them, <i>What is it like to live so long?</i> ”	Levithan, 2003, p. 134	Homosexuality as enduring
She [Nina] had a very clear snapshot in her head of Mel and Avery making out, but now she saw a different angle of it. It wasn’t like they just kissed and that was it. They had a relationship. They noticed things about each other. They probably even dressed up for each other, just like she would dress up to get Steve’s attention. They read into each other’s signals, and they probably marked little anniversaries. Their relationship was a hundred times more complicated than the plain old	Johnson, 2004, p. ?	Homosexuality as ordinary?

Triangle stuff.

“You may think this is kind of weird. But hey- you guys are all deviant and sinning, at least according to my grandparents you would be, so you don’t have any excuse to be shocked.”

“I’m so glad we can be a *National Enquirer* article for you,” I say as I stroke the fuzz on top of Battle’s head.

\*\* What is unusual about this is that the speaker doesn’t claim this view, but refers to her grandparents and what they would believe & think. The reference to grandparents suggests the notion itself is old-fashioned and out-of-date.

The fact is, there’s a difference between being alone and being lonely; I may not have been completely alone in life, but I was definitely lonely.

“You’re not surprised I’m doing rodeos instead of going to flight-attendant college?” Kit asked, a whisper of bitterness in his voice.

“No, no, not at all,” I said.

“Fine with me if you are,” Bobby broke in. “Anybody who can give it to Russ the way you do, and sit a bull the way you do is OK, even if you *are* in flight-attendant college...”

When he was gone I said to Bobby, “It’s really OK with you? About Kit?”

“Well I kind of had to decide in a hurry, with him right there needing an answer. But yeah, why not? He’s an OK guy. What do I care what he does on his own time? As long as he doesn’t ask me or you for a date- and why would he- what’s it got to do with us? Why are you looking like that? What? You thought my mind was even smaller than it actually is?”

If Memaw knew the truth- that I’m girl-crazy instead- I don’t know what she’d do. Pray and cry and try to get me ‘cured,’ I

Johnson, 2004, p. ? Homosexuality as deviant

Harteringer, 2003, p. 11 Homosexuality as lonely

Ferris, 2000, p. 96 As okay-

Watts, 2001, pp. 4-5 As needing a cure

reckon.

- |   |                                 |                          |
|---|---------------------------------|--------------------------|
| <p>“...Then after they’d talked to their minister, they called one of those bullshit family conferences that’s supposed to make you feel like something you say might matter. They told me I was sick and they wanted to help me...that if I wanted help, there was this place they could send me to- this Christian counseling center...I could go there, and they’d ‘rehabilitate’ me- naturally they didn’t say ‘brainwash,’ even though that’s what they meant...</p>   | <p>Watts, 2001, pp. 101-102</p> | <p>As needing a cure</p> |
| <p>“I’m not worried about her. She really digs Aunt Mim and Laura.”<br/>         “Laura?”<br/>         “Yeah, she’s my aunt’s girlfriend.”<br/>         “Girlfriend?” I squeak before I can stop myself.<br/>         ...Yep, that’s right! My aunt’s a big old dyke! Does that <i>bother</i> you?”<br/>         Anne looks at me for a minute. “I’m straight,” she says nervously. “I mean, just in case you were thinking- I mean, it doesn’t bother me or anything, but you know, you should just be aware that I’m straight.”<br/>         “I know,” I say. “I’m glad it doesn’t bother you.”</p> | <p>Ryan, 2001, pp. 101-102</p>  | <p>As no big deal</p>    |
| <p>...but then my sadness is interrupted by the sight of something I never thought I’d live to see: two guys in their 20s, tan and good looking, both wearing sunglasses and wearing cut-off Levi’s walking through the park, <i>holding hands</i>...One blond woman who’s watching her kids play looks at them a little funny, but her little frown is the closest thing to trouble that they get.<br/>         Why couldn’t we be friends in private?</p>   | <p>Ryan, 2001, p. 171</p>       | <p>As no big deal</p>    |
| <p>I didn’t want Kit to come. Or what I really wanted was for him to come but for no one to know about it.</p>  | <p>Watts, 2001, p. 96</p>       | <p>As no big deal</p>    |
| <p>“Are you thinking I’m some kind of freak show?”</p>  | <p>Ferris, 2000, p. 115</p>     | <p>As asheme</p>         |
| <p>“Are you thinking I’m some kind of freak show?”</p>  | <p>Ferris, 2000, p. 133</p>     | <p>(as above)</p>        |
| <p>“Are you thinking I’m some kind of freak show?”</p>  | <p>Ferris, 2000, p.??</p>       | <p></p>                  |

Quickest, surest way to become least popular person is have people <i>think</i> you might be gay.	Hartinger, 2003, pp. 3-4	As pariah/ outcast
Brian [who is an outcast] didn't seem so different to me. Because I knew that's how people might treat me if they ever learned the truth.	Hartinger, 2003, p. 11	As pariah/ outcast
Too bad we <i>can't</i> say that it's a gay club," Terese said. "That'd keep everyone away."	Hartinger, 2003, p. ?	As pariah/ outcast
But coming down here the way you are, with your friend the way he is? Are you trying to embarrass me? You and your little faggoty friend want to make me ashamed, to make me feel like it's my fault you turned out to be-	Watts, 2001, p. 150	As shameful
All that lookin' you do at every man that gives you the time of day...and you can't tell me you don't do more than look.	Watts, 2001, p. 151	As shameful
That's how you ended up with that dyke bastard you've got for a daughter.		
last night when i was coming out of battle's room, this girl I don't know looked at me like I was a three-headed monster, and absolutely scuttled away from me down the hall like she thought i was going to breathe fire or something.	Ryan, 2001, p. 115	Monstrous??
but on the other side, the angst crow who was so mean to me when i liked her dress saw battle and me walking around holding hands and she actually smiled	Ryan, 2001, p. 115	Affirming
I had told Kevin that I felt out of place too, but I'd left out the part about feeling lonely, because I thought it sounded a little too Oprah.	Hartinger, 2003, p. 23?	As outsider/ not fitting in
On Monday there's a notice in the bulletin about the new Hamilton High GSA group meeting. When Woodsy reads the notice in PC, Eric starts in with his sin against God and nature thing again.	Reynolds, 2001, p. 110	As sin
When I think about all the hours I've been forced to wear a stiff dress and sit in a hard pew and listen to some man tell me how I'm gonna burn in hell, eating stale bread and peanut butter and sleeping in the	Watts, 2001, pp. 114-114	As sin

Escort doesn't sound that bad.		
...But I'd rather roll naked in a bed of poison ivy than go to church with her. Besides, what if it's one of them churches that tries to 'cure' people like us? All my life I've heard gay people preached against as perverts...	Watts, 2001, p. 117	As sin
...And she told us that Taylor, her roommate, was really her girlfriend...I said I thought it was great."	Watts, 2001, p. 118	As sin
In some ways I bet it would be really nice...You know? I think about how much closer I am to you than to my guy friends, and I wonder if that's what it's like. Like, you'd understand everything the other person was going through, and you'd take such good care of each other...Although I'm sure gay couples have their problems, too. But maybe they're able to talk about them more easily."	Myracle, , p. 188	Affirming
"Someone said he's gay. Do you think it's true?" Grant asks. His tone surprises me, since it doesn't sound demeaning at all, but genuinely interested..."Well, you know, it would be cool if he was." He says this like it doesn't really matter to him one way or the other. As if he was just making light conversation...	Myracle, pp. 85-86	Affirming- to the point of overly romanticized
Maybe it was better once you were an adult, although even then I was sure you'd run into people who didn't understand. But in high school? God. If the kids I knew found out two girls were into each other, they'd treat them like pariahs. Not all the kids, but enough. And guys like Travis Wyrick would go nuts, tossing out insults and calling them 'dykes.' Or making jokes about forming a sex triangle, if they were pretty.	Benduhn, , p. 42	No big deal
"Don't say freak," I tell her. "It's worse than weird."	Benduhn, p. 45	As pariah
"That's how it felt, though, inside. Like I was stranger than fiction freak..."	Reynolds, 2001, p. 44	As freak

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