

CHAPTER 4

GENDER AND SEXUALITY AND YA

Constructions of Identity and Gender

A lot is being made of the ways women are empowered in YA texts: women are fighting, leading, and generally kicking a lot more ass than traditional readers might expect in today's books. You'd think this is an exciting time for educators to highlight strong women in these books. And while that's generally the case, the YA genre still has a *long* way to go. Though texts like *Divergent*, *The Hunger Games*, *The Uglies*, *The Maze Runner*, and other contemporary bestsellers have strong representations of women and strong female protagonists, the depictions of traditional femininity still finds these characters as subservient and meek. Just because these characters are shown as physically powerful and intellectually superior to male counterparts, women are often still depicted as callously jealous and weak. Further, women are defined as powerful in these books in particularly limiting ways. Unless you are white, traditionally beautiful and heterosexual, you're not going to be getting a lot of mileage as a female in YA books at the moment.

MORE THAN FEMINISM

In describing why it is important for educators to present and guide use of a feminist lens in English classrooms, Appleman (2000) writes:

There are at least four dimensions in which using feminist theory can transform students' reading—how students view female characters and appraise the author's stance toward those characters, how students evaluate the significance of the gender of the author in terms of its influence on a particular literary work, how students interpret whole texts within a feminist framework, and finally, and perhaps most important, how students read the gendered patterns in the world. (p. 77)

Appleman's four dimensions help offer powerful readings of canonical texts like *Hamlet* and *The Great Gatsby*. The strategies she outlines in her chapter have helped guide important lessons within my own classroom. While entire bodies of scholarship, academia, and literature exist detailing the nuances and inner-debates of feminism, Appleman's explanation allows students to easily navigate major feminist tenets without being bogged down by the minutiae of the theory.

In case it is not obvious for all readers, I want to make it clear that feminism as a literary tool is *not* solely for girls. Personally, I explain to my students that I

CHAPTER 4

consider myself a feminist. I emphasize this to the boys in my classrooms so that they understand the personal stance with which I carry theory as a way of interpreting and acting within the world. When teaching about feminism, I start with easily identifiable aspects of books. In particular, a conscious recognition of the gendered authorship of texts within our classroom is a simple starting place.

That a text may be written by a male author is a clear place for students to begin casting assumptions about how gender can impact the text they are encountering. However, this in itself is only a starting place. More importantly within my classroom is recognizing that a *male gaze* perseveres throughout the books we read even if such books are written by women. As we'll see in several examples in this chapter, even the most popular YA texts that are written by women find their female characters controlled by men and unable to act on their own. The ways patriarchy guides popular culture such as YA can be made explicit through regular integration of a feminist lens within classrooms.

THIRD WAVE FEMINISM AND BEYOND

I've often used Appleman's (2000) explanation of feminism as a clear and accessible means to analyze canonical and popular fiction within my classroom. It is a powerful jumping off point for youth reflection and analysis. However, I have found it useful to complicate this lens as well. In particular I tend offer ways race and class are also components necessary to consider but sometimes disregarded in some feminist lenses. This incorporation, often acknowledged as "third wave feminism" in recognition of the history of feminism that it builds upon, is one I've come to understand through reading several scholars of color. In particular, Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's (1981) edited collection of essays *This Bridge Called My Back* is a foundational set of essays that explore subjected feminist stances that had not been widely acknowledged in feminist scholarship.

Generally, the ways race plays into feminism was not addressed prior to the era this collection emerged from; feminism prior was largely entangled with the socioeconomic concerns of (American) white women. As such, these authors, along with scholars like bell hooks (mentioned in the previous chapter), help reveal that there is not a single *feminism* but more a larger set of tools and thinking to draw upon. It is this ability of third wave feminism that allows the lens to be *opened up* for younger students. Working in a high school setting where I only taught students of color, third wave feminism allowed my students to begin with a recognition of how they—as men and women of color—live lives that are *gendered* and in which aspects of masculinity and patriarchy govern and underpin specific ways of living within their communities.

For students and teachers, being able to read a text like last chapter's *Gossip Girl* through a feminist lens provides a much needed space for recognizing how patriarchy continues to undergird social relations today. And when even the superficial aspects of *Gossip Girl* remind students of their lived experiences: devastating text messages,

bad hair days, hopelessly adolescent crushes, being able to scrutinize actions within the book from a feminist perspective helps unveil the possibilities for action and understanding in students' actual school lives.

BEAUTY AND THE MALE GAZE

Female identity in YA texts can be constructed subtly or overtly. Notions of beauty, attraction, and expected behavior of girls in books define for readers what is considered *normal*. The intentions behind descriptions and actions may not intend to limit female identity, but the effects are still the same. As one of the books my high school and college students alike have enjoyed, *Looking for Alaska* (Green, 2005) is pointed to as a powerful description of a strong, female character (even if the titular Alaska is not the protagonist). Let's look at an early description of Alaska:

And now is as good a time as any to say that she was beautiful. In the dark beside me, she smelled of sweat and sunshine and vanilla, and on that thin-mooned night I could see little more than her silhouette except for when she smoked, when the burning cherry of the cigarette washed her face in pale red light. But even in the dark, I could see her eyes—fierce emeralds. She had the kind of eyes that predisposed you to supporting her every endeavor. And not just beautiful, but hot, too, with her breasts straining against her tight tank top, her curved legs swinging back and forth beneath the swing, flip-flops dangling from her electric-blue-painted toes. It was right then, between when I asked about the labyrinth and when she answered me, that I realized the *importance* of curves, of the thousands places where girls' bodies ease from one place to another, from arc of the foot to ankle to calf, from calf to hip to waist to breast to neck to ski-slope nose to forehead to shoulder to the concave arch of the back to the butt to the etc. I'd *noticed* curves before of course, but I had never quite apprehended their significance. (Green, 2005, p. 19)

As one of the opening descriptions of Alaska, readers are confronted with Alaska as a physical object of beauty and allure than as a bright-minded and witty individual. Alaska *embodies* female sensuality for the narrator, Pudge. She is less an individual here than a lesson of sexual attraction. The way the text lingers on Alaska's curves and breasts and body and butt may be indicative of heterosexual male adolescence, but it does so in ways that further reify these practices of male-hood. That is, Green's choice of making his character a believable one through physical descriptions is one that perpetuates that this is what being a teenage boy is about. And while hormonal sexuality is important to acknowledge in a description like this, readers should be guided toward seeing how the "male gaze" defines and frames Alaska. As the female object of Pudge's affection, Alaska lacks voice or agency. Instead she is vastly unknowable, like the distant U.S. state that shares her name. She is sexualized by Pudge and will remain so for much of the novel. Obviously, sexual attraction is a major component of how females are portrayed in YA. At the same time, the sense

CHAPTER 4

that Alaska is mysterious and unreachable is an additional component of her beauty. By being an unobtainable *object* of Pudge's desire, Alaska's gendered role is one that is submissive to the whimsy of Pudge's narration.

Beauty in YA is not as simple as reinforcing conceptions of what is or is not pretty. Though it is true that the examples thus far reify western depictions of white skin as most desirable and body image being as thin as possible, it is also true that YA novels often tend to construct even more nuanced messages about beauty and individuals' actions. As examples of the complication of beauty and characters' actions, I want to explore the ways individuals are affected by beauty: both their own and that of others around them. In particular, beauty and attraction function as attributes that cloud female judgment. Let's look at parts of two popular YA novels as examples of the interrelation of physical beauty: Laini Taylor's (2011) *Daughter of Smoke and Bone* and Veronica Roth's (2011) *Divergent*.

While *Gossip Girl* utilized depictions of characters to reinforce capitalist practices and takes place in a somewhat contemporary and somewhat realistic depiction of society, Taylor and Roth's texts depict worlds fueled by magic and dystopian conspiracies respectively. Both of these texts focus on female teen protagonists that are at the center of potentially global-shifting mysteries. Their individual intelligence, quick wit, and occasional dashes of magic or expert combat training respectively, make these characters natural leaders and empathy-laden protagonists. And while these characters follow in the footsteps of Katniss of *The Hunger Games* as physically and mentally strong women, I would argue that the potential flaws in all three of these characters mean that they offer hazardous lessons for admiring readers to internalize.

In *Divergent* the female protagonist, Tris faces her fears in a simulation as part of the final test to join the Dauntless faction. After facing fears of crows, drowning, and being burned alive, one of Tris's final fears is best described as a fear of intimacy. More bluntly, Tris is shown as fearful of having sex with her character's love interest, Tobias. In the drug-induced simulation, Tris must face her fear in order to find acceptance within the sect she is a part of:

He presses his mouth to mine, and my lips part. I thought it would be impossible to forget I was in a simulation. I was wrong; he makes everything else disintegrate.

His fingers find my jacket zipper and pull it down in one slow swipe until the zipper detaches. He tugs the jacket from my shoulders.

Oh, is all I can think as he kisses me again. *Oh*.

My fear is being with him. I have been wary of affection all my life, but I didn't know how deep that wariness went.

But this obstacle doesn't feel the same as the others. It is a different kind of fear—nervous panic rather than blind terror.

He slides his hands down my arms and then squeezes my hips, his fingers sliding over the skin just above my belt, and I shiver.

I gently push him back and press my hands to my forehead. I have been attacked by crows and men with grotesque faces; I have been set on fire by the boy who almost threw me off a ledge; I have almost drowned—*twice*—and *this* is what I can't cope with? *This* is the fear I have no solutions for—a boy I like, who wants to ... have sex with me? (Roth, 2011, p. 393)

The passage challenges notions of what it means to be in control of one's feelings and actions. The narrator tells readers that Tris "wants" to have sex with Tobias but the description is anything but enticing. The male character "presses his mouth," and "tugs" clothing off, and "slides his hands" across the narrator's body. For someone who is fearful she must give in to the invasive actions of her love interest. Where is the narrator's agency here? More importantly, what does this passage suggest about femininity for readers? Is it to not be fearful when a boy one likes engages in similar activity? If this is her fear that she must overcome, should readers too find the willpower to endure such actions?

In similarly problematic depictions of female behavior, Taylor's *Daughter of Smoke and Bone* takes an otherwise independent and strong-willed protagonist and renders her all but helpless when encountering an attractive, male foe. Early in *Daughter of Smoke and Bone*, Karou encounters an angel named, Akiva. For Karou, his beauty is exuded to the point of distraction. While Karou is fighting Akiva, her internal monologue depicts a woman flawed by her own sexuality; the fact that she finds this angel beautiful drives her actions in ways that are potentially life-threatening:

He stood a mere body's length away, the point of his sword resting on the ground.

Oh, thought Karou, staring at him.

Oh.

Angel indeed.

He stood revealed. The blade of his long sword gleamed white from the incandescence of his wings—vast shimmering wings, their reach so great they swept the walls on either side of the alley, each feather like the wind-tugged lick of a candle flame.

Those eyes.

His gaze was like a lit fuse, scorching the air between them. He was the most beautiful thing Karou had ever seen. Her first thought, incongruous but overpowering, was to memorize him so she could draw him later. (Taylor, 2011, p. 95)

CHAPTER 4

Notice, across both Taylor and Roth's depictions of sexual attraction as a weakness and fear in female protagonists the use of the italicized "*Oh*." As if these women are stupefied and subsequently educated about sexuality through their encounters with men, both texts rely on this word as a means of suggesting the mental circuitry that wires women's sexual awakenings. To her credit, Taylor crafts her description such that it does not focus on specific physical attributes. Instead, such depictions of beauty are largely left to the imagination of readers. What is problematic here is the constant loop of physical attraction that runs through Karou's mind.

In addition to Karou's overwhelming sexuality, Taylor's text interweaves beauty and emotion for other characters in the text. For example, describing one of the ancillary characters, Taylor makes it clear that part of Liraz's beauty is specifically related to her being female and "sharklike". Taylor writes: "Though Hazael was more powerful, Liraz was more frightening, she always had been; perhaps she'd had to be, being female" (Taylor, 2011, p. 253). The construction of this sentence is striking: Taylor appears to deliberately draw connections that are powerful and problematic for young adult readers. It's not simply that Liraz is frightening *and* female—this in itself would be worth considering in how it implicates beauty for readers. Instead, Liraz is frightening *because* "she'd had to be, being female." Her frightening nature is due to how she is gendered by society. I want to make this use of "gender" as a verb clear: in the society of *Daughter of Smoke and Bone* Liraz is frightening and society casts her looks and frightfulness as particularly female attributes; they are cast, discursively, as what helps comprise her as a woman. For readers of this text the subtle construction of sentences like this one interweave feminine beauty – something that can be aspired to as frightening. However, perhaps more importantly, this beauty and fearfulness can be seen as powerful: beautiful women have power and can enact changes in the world around them.

Immediately following the above sentence connecting femininity to frightfulness, Taylor writes, "Her [Liraz's] pale hair was scraped back in severe plaits, and there was something coolly sharklike about her beauty: a flat, killer apathy" (Taylor, 2011, p. 253). This beauty is expanded to a less beautiful understanding of her appearance: her hair does not flow softly, it is "scraped" and "severe" and her appearance is "sharklike." The harsh alliteration within this sentence cuts into the reading of the text and makes the description of this female angel something wholly inhuman, frightful and dangerous. Whereas Pudge's view of Alaska as an unknowable and vastly sexual woman placed control of female identity in the hands and gaze of the male character, Liraz here is a strong and beautiful woman. However, the description here makes her cold, calculating, and dangerous.

While I've clearly hand selected fleeting moments in these books, I would argue that these are small microaggressions that female readers endure from one book to another. Instead of claiming that these readings of passages from Roth and Taylor critique too heavily minor, well-intentioned passages, I believe these are damning attributes of the literature we encourage young people to read non-critically. The

messages of how females must look and behave that are read again and again in these texts typify identities that sexualize and pacify a female readership.

A NOTE ABOUT MALE IDENTITY

Male identity in YA is a slightly trickier target to pinpoint. Unlike constructions of female identity through young adult literature, male identity is developed largely as a result of what is absent within current young adult novels. Though there are numerous male protagonists in books, what is most striking about YA books with regards to male identity is who constructs masculinity in these texts and assumptions about what drives male readers. For example, within my own classroom a struggle for male readers was finding texts that engaged them if they were not interested in violent fantasy stories, sports reveries, or urban tales of struggles in and out of gang culture. As discussed in Chapter One, these are the markets that men are placed into within the book-buying world of adolescents' literature. However, while some of my students are naturally interested in these avenues for reading in their formative teenage years, others end up selecting these books—through purchasing them at a store, checking them out at a library, or being advised to read them by a teacher—simply because there are few options other than these books to fit the niche market of male readers. As I'll discuss below, male identity in books is limited and, as a result, the reflections of what this means for teenage males in the 21st century is also striking. In particular, I see three main reasons that male identity is limited in its depiction in books:

1. A larger portion of today's YA texts are written by women.
In an article for Slate, Laura Miller (2012a) explains that the reason more than half of the best YA novels listed on the previously mentioned NPR top 100 list are written by women is because it is a "prestige free zone," Miller explains that because YA may not be seen as "serious" "literature" (emphasizing the problematic use of both words), it is not a space driven by male-authorship anymore. Meghan Lewit (2012) in the Atlantic also echoes this sentiment. Looking at industry trends, Lewit reports that books by and often marketed for women "represent both the target teen demographic, as well as the adult readers that have fervently embraced YA lit." In doing so, it becomes apparent that the YA genre (even when sales are generated by adults) can be seen as an extension of *chick-lit* in ways that make book buying a gendered activity.
2. Books catered for a primarily male audience fall into readily identifiable tropes.
For male readers, book choices are limited. With few exceptions, books marketed for boys are about sports, urban violence and survival, or fall into genre fiction like fantasy and science fiction. And while many readers will pick these books up, they limit what it means to be a male reader. How male readers are forced to choose between a small selection of sports, violence, or fantasy titles reflects

CHAPTER 4

the marketing structures described in Chapter One. What about the students (like many I've had in my classroom) that simply aren't interested in these topics? For the more voracious readers, exhausting the books I have that don't fall into these categories and are not explicitly marketed as "girly" can come about very quickly.

3. The books published for boys may skip the YA genre entirely.

As Miller (2012a) writes:

Many grown men recall segueing briskly from middle-grade kids' books to adult fiction in their teens, skipping the YA section entirely. They were, they say, keen to move on to the "real" books. No surprise, then, that fewer of them are inspired to write for a genre that they never particularly wanted to read and that, like teaching and librarianship, has traditionally offered little recognition.

The male-focused YA desert is problematic in the gap it can create. While appreciation for reading may be fostered at younger ages, students not ready for the leap to *real* books may be left floundering for material to read during their adolescence.

While generalizing depictions and assumptions about female identity in contemporary young adult literature is a somewhat easier platform to establish, how male identity is complicated in YA texts also offers significant illuminations about how males and gendered male identity are shaped by today's books. In looking at these limiting forms of male identity constructed within YA texts, it is also worth considering that the YA constructions of male readers imply, to an extent, that males are not avid readers. There are efforts to help promote male-reading activities. YA and junior fiction author Jon Scieszka has created the popular website (and related publications): guysread.com. With books and online opportunities to network, the site encourages book selections for males. However, even these interpretations of what it *means* to generate content for males can be problematic (as it is with females as well). What ideologies are implicit when we think of what books for boys are about? Such questions of identity construction are necessary for classroom spaces to challenge head on and reflect upon. Even in classic YA novels, the ways genders are described and developed represent challenges that lie ahead for the growing genre.

ASKING ALICE

In a segment on his stand-up comedy album *Freak Wharf*, comedian Paul F. Tompkins (2009) describes the YA novel *Go Ask Alice* (1971) as "the phoniest of baloneyes you could possibly imagine, so clearly written by the writing staff of *Dragnet*." Attempting to frighten readers of the perils of drug use through sensationalist anecdotes that are purported as *true*, *Go Ask Alice* is a text that plays comically when its details are shared in the live, nightclub setting that Tompkins performs. The title of Tompkins album, in fact, is a lengthy riff on the way the protagonist of *Go Ask Alice* describes the mental institution to which she is admitted as a "freak wharf." Tompkins focuses the brunt of his tirade on the fact that the reason *Go Ask Alice* is

such a compelling story for young people is due to how the protagonist relates to her readers. As Tompkins notes, the idea of a narrative about a girl's struggle with drug addiction is banal without a sense of connection to the reader's personal identity:

Here's why [the book] was so scary: This book was a diary that somebody found and published and it told the real story of this young girl's descent into a quagmire of drug addiction. So what? People get addicted to drugs all the time? You don't understand. The person in this diary was a *regular* person: meaning white like you or me. 'A white person on drugs? Ba-ba-ba-ba-but *I'm* white!' [Laughs].

Over the nearly 4 decades between Tompkins's humorous rant and the book's original publication, *Go Ask Alice* has sold millions of copies and is a cultural icon for many youth across the years. At the high school where I taught, numerous copies were stocked in most English classrooms and in our library. It was a book my own, non-white students would pick up, devour, and recommend to friends. Taken into a nightclub setting, the book's framing device as a *true* story feels hollow, awkward, and absurd. However, it remains a book that garners readership today and remains a part of today's cultural milieu.

Go Ask Alice is a work of fiction as Tompkins points out (though it was not authored by the writing staff of *Dragnet*). That being said, the book purported to be a *real* diary and until the mid-'80s *Go Ask Alice* was shelved in stores and libraries as teen non-fiction. In actuality, the book is largely credited to Beatrice Sparks, a therapist that supposedly worked closely with the unnamed girl that *Go Ask Alice* is credited to. The conceit of making the book's contents feel *real* is one we've seen carried into today's fiction. As described with *I Am Number Four* in the first chapter, the sense of reality here makes the book feel more salacious and morally-guiding than a purely fictional narrative. However, with *Go Ask Alice* and the other Sparks edited works, the veil of realism is intentionally deceptive.

While discerning readers can clearly see the alien invasion at the heart of a book like *I am Number Four* as a framing device to draw interest, the attempt here at constructing an *anonymous* and *true* book is false and troubling. Sparks would continue this tradition of masking fictional attempts across numerous other works she authored or produced including *Jay's Journal* (1978), *It Happened to Nancy: By An Anonymous Teenager* (1994), and *Annie's Baby: The Diary of Anonymous, a Pregnant Teenager* (1998). The titles hint at the moral lessons that—aside from *Jay's Journal*—focus on behavior and expectations for girls. These are scared-straight narratives to avoid drug use and premarital sex. That Sparks' limited biography tends to emphasize her background as a devote Mormon can help delineate the moral line that Sparks threads across her works.

As read by millions over decades, *Go Ask Alice* acts as a guide for *why* girls should not do drugs. Before being committed, the protagonist of the book becomes a prostitute, destitute, and homeless. Throughout the book there is a clear moral calculus that is developed for the unnamed protagonist. For readers this not only

CHAPTER 4

reinforces what is normative, acceptable behavior for female readers, it also guides what is normative and acceptable in terms of who can *be* a female protagonist. As Tompkins' punch line indicates, the *Go Ask Alice* protagonist is white. She is heteronormative in her fretting about liking certain guys. At the same time sex and sexuality are threatening and fearful within the text. Once she takes drugs they become a gateway to expressing her sexuality; otherwise, sexuality is shameful and to be hidden. Related to these points: not only is this young girl heterosexual but she is also fearful of homosexuality. Homosexuality and heterosexual sex are construed as things that happen to girls who do drugs. They are (in the ideology conveyed by the book) bad. They are dangerous.

These lessons—and the many played out in other shock-and-tell books that have followed in the sub-genre that *Go Ask Alice* helped create—have guided decades-long reinforcement of gender norms for young adult literature. More than simply depicting good and bad decisions of a girl, *Go Ask Alice* has singlehandedly helped delineate *normal* race, class, and sexuality for female characters in YA. In turn, the book implies who counts as a *normal* female reader.

DEPICTIONS OF HETERONORMATIVITY

Much of the remainder of this chapter explores gender and sexuality in YA. In particular the focus here is on challenging *who* gets to enact certain sexualities in young adult literature and how genders are constructed. In discussing different forms of sexuality in this chapter, I want to make several of my vocabulary choices clear. Though they are ever changing and evolving, I will be using the acronym LGBTQI as an adjective to describe books and series that focus on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and intersex (LGBTQI) characters. Different theorists will add to or rearrange the order of these letters. I have chosen these labels in this order due primarily to familiarity: as a teacher, these are the initials I used for discussing and teaching and displaying in my classroom. If this label denies and excludes identities that are not understood as traditionally heterosexual, this is not my intention.

In addition, another term I feel it is important to define at the outset of this chapter is heterosexism. Throughout this chapter, heterosexism (or, as an adjective, heterosexist) refers to dominant cultural practices and beliefs that assume individuals are heterosexual and that explicitly or implicitly promote a heterosexual—or heteronormative—lifestyle. Perhaps the clearest indication to me of prevalent heterosexist practices came annually in my classroom when high school students would ask me if I had a girlfriend. The assumption that my romantic partner would be a female because I am a male functioned as an opportunity for me to discuss heterosexist practices. I would emphasize to my students (as I do here) that heterosexism is engrained in dominant culture. Student assumptions about my sexuality conformed to the cultural practices they grew up on; I did not challenge my

students' assumptions on a personal level but instead as a means to look at societal influences on individuals and their actions.

Like in *Go Ask Alice*, the ways heterosexual behavior is construed as *normal* is found again and again in young adult literature (just as in popular media at large). There are several ways that heteronormativity is maintained in YA texts. In doing so, these books reinforce assumptions about what are *normal* sexual feelings and *normal* ways to associate gender and behavior. One major way that heteronormativity is maintained is through suppression of LGBTQI presence within novels. That the majority of protagonists are heterosexual and passionately driven in their actions by fulfillment of male-female romantic relationships represents assumptions about what readers of YA texts want.

To be clear, the majority of readers will, as a result, expect heteronormative characters with heterosexual romantic quests, but that may not be because of sexual or personal interest as much as the way they are assumed to be a heterosexual audience. With little choice but to consume predominantly heteronormative books, this concept is cemented one YA page at a time.

Another major way that heteronormativity is reinforced in YA texts is through pejorative assumptions about LGBTQI behavior or LGBTQI identity as abnormally different. As point of example, take a look at this passage from the beginning of *City of Bones* by Cassandra Clare (2007):

“Why not?”

“Because I like someone else,” Simon said.

“Okay.” Simon looked faintly greenish, the way he had once when he'd broken his ankle playing soccer in the park and had had to limp home on it. She wondered what on earth about liking someone could possibly have him wound up to such a pitch of anxiety. “You're not gay, are you?”

Simon's greenish color deepened. “If I were, I would dress better.” (p. 39)

Though Simon is sheepishly unwilling to confess his attraction to Clarissa, the small exchange implies three things that all reinforce heteronormativity. First, the exchange implies that Simon is attracted to Clarissa (even if she is stupidly oblivious). This is almost banal in how common nearly all relationships in YA texts are heterosexual in nature. This is only mildly problematic and—it could be argued—Clare is setting up the tension that will be read later in a (heterosexual, of course) love triangle between Simon, Clary and Jace. Secondly, look at how the question of Simon's sexuality is posed. It is not a harmless inquiry such as “Are you gay?” It is, instead, a *harmful* castigation that it is a problem if Simon is gay; it reads more like an accusation or a mean spirited joke. The discursive structure here: “You're not ____, are you?” implies that whatever label is placed in here is an inherently negative one. As such, heteronormativity is reinforced through portraying homosexuality as a negative condition to be afflicted with. Finally, Simon rebuts the accusation with an equally

CHAPTER 4

harmful response through reinforcing LGBTQI stereotypes. Through assuming that if he were a gay man Simon would dress better, Clare's passage tokenizes LGBTQI activities as limited to the kinds of behaviors seen in other forms of media such as film and television.

When looking closely at such small exchanges as the ones above, there is a danger that such analysis can be seen as scornful, mean-spirited nitpicking. You might say, I am reading too much into a single paragraph of a lengthy novel. I get these kinds of responses to critical readings of books, films, and TVs enough that I imagine I've burned a few book club and movie going invites over the years. The problem, however, is that this is such a small part of a book and yet Clare is able to imbue it with enough heteronormative coding that readers can quickly glance at these passages and internalize a message that non-heterosexual relationships are not *normal*.

For readers, these encounters with textual passages like the one above can be interpreted as heterosexist microaggressions, as described in Chapter Two. While we've already looked at how racial microaggressions are enacted in various YA texts, I think the concept is particularly important (and under-recognized for LGBTQI readers of YA texts). The vast majority of YA texts readers encounter function as literary assaults on LGBTQI ways of being and individual agency. To read of assumptions that gay men are better dressers or to hear the mock concern from Clarissa that Simon might be gay function as passing notices that LGBTQI readers are tourists when excavating plot and meaning from a book like *City of Bones*.

Related, looking at what is often considered a classic of the YA genre, I want to explore the way Robert Cormier exhibits heterosexism in *The Chocolate War* (1974). Taking place in an all-boys' private school *The Chocolate War* focuses on a bleak outlook about what happens when a single individual, high school freshman Jerry Renault, decides to stand up to the forces that insist he conform with his peers. In refusing to participate in the school's annual chocolate sale, Jerry is ostracized by his peers and is eventually put in physical harm's way. In a passage near the final third of the book, Jerry is confronted by a classmate that seems bent on instigating a physical altercation. Emile Janza starts his assault with verbal barbs. He is coy in how he phrases his comments to Jerry.

"You live in the closet." Janza smiled, a knowing, this-is-just-between-us smile, intimate, creepy.

"What do you mean—closet?" (Cormier, 1974, p. 200)

While readers could look at Janza's statement as an insinuation about Jerry's sexuality and that he is still living "in the closet," Janza expands the statement several paragraphs later in what becomes the highest moment of tension in the book thus far; more than any other part of *The Chocolate War* (including the violent conclusion) this is the passage of the book that shows Jerry angry enough to resort to violent action:

“This is what I mean by *closet*,” Janza said, his hand flicking out again, touching Jerry’s cheek, but lingering this time for the fraction of a second in a faint caress. “That you’re hiding in there.”

“Hiding what? Hiding from who?”

“From everybody. From yourself, even. Hiding that deep dark secret.”

“What secret?” Confused now.

“That you’re a fairy. A queer. Living in the closet, hiding away.”

Vomit threatened Jerry’s throat, a nauseous geyser he could barely hold down.

“Hey, you’re blushing,” Janza said. “The fairy’s blushing ...”

“Listen ...” Jerry began but not knowing, really, how to begin or where. The worst thing in the world—to be called queer....

“I’m not a fairy,” Jerry cried.

“Kiss me,” Janza said, puckering his lips grotesquely.

“You son of a bitch,” Jerry said. (Cormier, 1974, pp. 201–202)

The use of homophobic slurs throughout the passage is problematic. Though Cormier doesn’t imply that words like “queer” or “fairy” are appropriate, he does imply that being called these names is a source of such cruelty that it could be understandable to attack someone. To be called these names and for it to be suggested that someone is homosexual is reason enough to be upset. As such, like with the Clare example, Cormier reinforces heterosexist language used toward LGBTQI communities and also implies that sexual orientations that deviate from heterosexual are not okay.

Each time I’ve read and taught *The Chocolate War*, I am always struck by this passage and confused by Cormier’s intentions. How are young adults supposed to understand this passage? Readers are told early on that Jerry matches the demographic of most YA texts: he is a heterosexual white male attracted to women. We know from Cormier’s writing that Jerry is not gay. And while Janza is deliberately trying to provoke Jerry (who shortly falls into his trap and is physically beaten up by small children), it is striking to look at the approach Janza takes. Cormier makes Janza’s actions almost as reprehensible as the insinuation that Jerry is gay. In looking at the escalating dialogue, the remark that finally sets off Jerry is Janza’s request for Jerry to kiss him. Janza pretends to be gay (there is an audience of children watching, just as there is an audience of young adults reading) and *that* is what disturbs Jerry the most. Janza’s “lingering” touch of Jerry’s cheek and “grotesquely” puckered lips disturb Jerry to the extent that he becomes violently mannered and violently ill. Janza becomes a monster through depicting grotesque homosexuality here. It is frightening and insulting to Jerry. Cormier’s depiction practically justifies a world-vision of queer behavior as a threat.

CHAPTER 4

As Cart and Jenkins have already noted, the predominance of existing LGBTQI texts focus on men and predominantly gay men. Though they sprout up in texts like Julie Ann Peter's 2005, *Keeping You a Secret* or Cecil Castellucci and Jim Rugg's 2007 graphic novel *The Plain Janes*, the individuals and their experiences represented by the remaining letters in the LGBTQI acronym are left without a place at the YA table most of the time. This, too, is in some sense a microaggression.

Though it is in and of itself a vastly underrepresented sub-genre in YA, LGBTQI books have their own internal representation problems. These books tend to primarily focus on gay, white men. As such, mainly white men get to be gay in YA. Questioning women and men of color, bi-sexual teens and transgender individual have very few options to read about characters that are, in terms of sexuality, like them. And while YA texts usually do not validate the experiences or feelings of these individuals, they also in turn do not offer a view of a diverse world for the broad audience of readers. If young adults only read about heterosexual relationships (and even encounter the harmful language that non-heterosexual behavior is perverse), these texts reify assumptions about sexuality that have lifelong ramifications.

WHO GETS TO BE GAY IN YA?

I want to emphasize that any texts that speak directly about and for LGBTQI experiences are valued and significantly lacking within the YA genre today. In *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content: 1969–2004* Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins (2006) clarify that though LGBTQI representation in YA has broadened in recent years, it is still a vastly under-published subject within the genre. In their introduction, they note that the first young adult novel with gay content appeared in 1969—John Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*. Cart and Jenkins note that “in the more than thirty-five years since then nearly 200 young adult novels with gay and lesbian content have appeared in the U.S.” (p. xv). While that number may sound large, it actually averages to 5 novels a year.

Regarding Donovan's groundbreaking introduction of homosexuality into the YA genre Cart and Jenkins (2006) describe the book as:

tremendously important three-and-a-half decades after its publication, not only because it was the first book for young readers to deal with homosexuality, but also because it established—for good or ill—a model for the treatment of the topic that would be replicated in many of the novels that followed in the 1970s. The characters are male, white, and upper middle-class. The physical nature of what happens between them remains obscure. A cause and effect relationship is implied between homosexuality and being the child of divorced parents—more specifically, having an absent father and a disturbed and/or controlling mother. (p. 14)

As the slow trickle of LGBTQI books continues today, the titles most widely available help categorize what YA queer fiction looks like. That is, with so few

books available, the ones that do get published create a patchwork picture of who is privileged as represented in queer YA fiction. With several significant exceptions (Alex Sanchez's [2003] *Rainbow Boys* comes to mind), LGBTQI characters are often white and socioeconomically privileged. They may not be wealthy but Tiny in *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* or Holland Jaeger in *Keeping You a Secret* are anything but financially burdened in their stories.

And so, while I applaud the slowly diversifying representations of sexuality emerging in YA, I would argue that these books also identify who gets to be gay in YA. Likely based on increasing a wide readership, these books are about white and middle or upper-class individuals (reflecting the book buying audience).

In looking at the problematic representation of LGBTQI characters, I am intrigued by the trajectory of David Levithan's novels. Over the many books that Levithan has authored through 2013, every single text includes LGBTQI characters, often they are at the center of the stories. For instance, Levithan's (2003) first book, *Boy Meets Boy* is a warming love story about Paul, an openly gay 11th grader. *Boy Meets Boy* details Paul's adventures as he falls in love and reconciles past relationships and friendships in a welcoming high school. It is playful, silly, touching and campy. More than any other aspect of the book, the biggest pushback my college students that read this book in an adolescents' literature class have is that the book is too unrealistic in its positive depictions of acceptance. The book plays with expectations of what takes place in high schools (the star quarterback at the school is also a popular cross-dressing homecoming queen named Infinite Darlene). The book plays out as fantasy or idealized and over-the-top visions of inclusion in school spaces.

In the decade that he has been publishing books, Levithan's stories have become more fluid in their depictions of gender and identity. At the same time, the books' forms tend to challenge how we read and understand novels. Though these can be seen as two separate stylistic decisions on Levithan's part, I believe the uprooting of gender and sexuality can be tied to an uprooting of YA book structures as well. In the ten years since *Boy Meets Boy* was first published, a striking shift in Levithan's novels becomes apparent. One of his next books, *The Realm of Possibility* (2006), also focused on a gay characters. However, the form was strikingly abstract: a series of poems constructs a collage of narratives of love and growth. The book reads like a chorus of echoing voices speaking across and at each other.

In 2011, Levithan published *The Lover's Dictionary*. As its name implies, the book's short entries are organized alphabetically. They detail a cycle of a relationship: from attraction to love to dispute to separation. The narrative is one that the reader must cobble together. When did certain actions happen? Is this relationship concluded? Flourishing? Stewing in some sort of stasis? Arguments could be made in any direction. For some, this may make this an unfulfilling narrative. There lacks the kind of definitive plot and resolution that readers expect. However, on the other hand, this is also a book that offers powerful, liberating possibilities for readers. There is no set way to read the book. Want to read an entry from the letter R first? Go for it. The story is fluid in ways that makes relationships seem like extended

CHAPTER 4

possibilities and hiccups. There's also something else significantly apparent the longer you spend time with *The Lover's Dictionary*: there is no set gender in the book's descriptions and entries.

A heteronormative view of the book could easily assume this is a detailed account of a romance between a male and a female. Readers more familiar with Levithan's repertoire could likely infer that this is a book detailing a homosexual relationship. However, I do not see the structure of the book as one that was developed in an effort to please various readers. Instead, the book looks like an effort to blur our understanding of gender. The way conceptions of being male and female are created and defined by contemporary society can feel out of step for questioning young and not-so-young people alike. If the ways I enact my gender as a thirty-something male do not fall in-line with how society casts male gender and masculinity, my behaviors and actions are in discord with general social rules. *The Lover's Dictionary*, then, is a challenge to these expectations. The universality of the feelings, experiences and emotions within the book establish that it doesn't matter if a protagonist is male or female. Levithan's book succeeds because of the structural conceit of veiling the text in a swath of second person pronouns: "you" and "your" replace the gendered labels "he" or "she" and "his" or "hers." Levithan is able to create an engaging and critically lauded novel with few clues about gender.

The conceit of writing a book where gender is largely absent would seem like a singular experiment. However, Levithan followed up *The Lovers Dictionary* with a similar attempt: *Every Day* (2012). The fantastical premise of this novel is something like this: each morning the protagonist of the novel wakes up as someone new. This isn't just anyone; the age of the person is consistent with the age of the protagonist. However, name, location, gender, and sense of identity are all that of a new person. In essence everyday the main character becomes someone new (while still preserving past memories). The protagonist refers to itself as "A." Throughout the book, A embodies men, women, straight and queer identities. However, after a central turning point the protagonist finds an innate connection with a female character. And so begins a central question that is at work *across* Levithan's books: how do we communicate and fall in love with those around us, regardless of gender and sexuality? These are not simply defining categories in which we are placed in Levithan's texts, but fluid states we move between. *Every Day* follows A's elusive search for this female character. Is this a romantic relationship? A spiritual one? As a female being sought, does this implicate that A's true nature is a heterosexual one? That is, deep down inside, is A gendered as male? Conversely, is this an LGBTQI text that engenders A with female qualities? Levithan reaches beyond traditional expectations of gender and looks for human-to-human, *individual* connections.

THE THING ABOUT STANDARDS

For better or worse, standardization within professions that incorporate young adult literature is an integral component to the ways teachers and librarians operate. That

the teaching profession is becoming a more rigid space through specific forms of assessment of teacher fidelity to standards is a common theme in U.S. education policy in the 21st century thus far. Likewise, librarians confine the organization and distribution of their media products so that these space are navigable for users; if I am familiar with the systems and codes of one library, chances are high that I should be fairly adept at transferring this knowledge to another library branch. The standardization of U.S. education is highly problematic, driven by corporate textbook and test creators.

Lately, as I've been reading and questioning the choices in young adult literature, I've been wondering what kinds of standards underlie the YA texts I pick up. Does YA have a set of rules that guide the logic of what is printed for teens? And while there are *always* deviations from these rules, I believe that, yes, YA's depictions of society (even futuristic societies) and people (even non-human, paranormal people) tend to conform to specific standards. In general these standards reinforce cultural practices and assumptions about how readers should live and judge the world around them. In particular, the standards for how gender is construed within YA texts is limiting and troubling for the diverse readers these books are marketed to. Likewise, unless a book is specifically marketed for an LGBTQI audience, a heteronormative stance is the standard for YA.

Of course, hopeful exceptions continue to emerge within the genre, *Putting Makeup on the Fat Boy* (Wright, 2012) was a well-received novel that focuses on teenager Carlos, a gay, cross-dressing boy in New York. The novel received numerous awards including the American Library Association's Stonewall Book Award. The book breathes new life into a genre that lacks the diversity of characters like Carlos.

In *Gutenberg Galaxy* Marshall McLuhan (1962) describes how the introduction of print culture in the 1600s functioned as a mechanism for nationalization. Print helped guide and control dominant thought. And while I will discuss shifts of power in terms of production in Chapter Six, McLuhan's analysis continues to stand true for the ways YA literature defines and depicts gendered ideologies.