

Rewriting Love and Identity: A Reparative Reading of
Queer Representation in Young Adult Literature

by

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Introduction

Young Adult literature is a relatively new genre in the world of literature. The idea of the 'young adult' is itself a new concept, having emerged in the shifting social scene of post-WWII America. With the assertion of a new kind of domestic normalcy came the creation of adolescence, the precarious period between childhood and adulthood. During the early twentieth century, adolescence did not exist as a defined category. The majority of American went straight from childhood into the workplace, sometimes in their teen years. Those who didn't, who were able to continue their education and earn high school diplomas, were considered an anomaly. In this way, adolescence developed as a kind of luxury, a repose from the obligations of adulthood. YA lit expert Michael Cart credits G. Stanley Hall, the first president of the American Psychological Association, as the first to use the term "adolescence" in 1904 as a distinct category. His work, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education*, has been highly discredited, but has also been used to inform prevalent notions of adolescence as a time of strife and turmoil and, as Cart writes, "a phenomenon that invited, even required, adult intervention and supervision" (4). Contemporary considerations of adolescence are still heavily informed by these early notions. Adolescence is simultaneously seen as a luxury and a time marked by turmoil and strife. Although literature targeted specifically toward adolescents had been brewing for some time, with publications such as *Sue Barton* in 1936, Young Adult Literature began to emerge in its more familiar form after WWII with Maureen Daly's 1942

novel *Seventeenth Summer*. With the popularity of Daly's novel, publishers began to realize the potential in marketing literature specifically toward adolescence.

YA literature has come a long way from its origination in post-WWII American culture. YA titles have become mainstays in mainstream pop culture, with series publications such as *Harry Potter*, *The Hunger Games*, and *Twilight*, as well as stand-alone publications such as *The Fault in Our Stars*, *The Giver*, and *The Book Thief*. Yet despite its popularity and prevalence in American culture, YA literature has had limited success in becoming a topic of critical consideration in academic spheres, typically discredited for being too simple, or for lacking literary merit. Anna Soter and Sean Connors note, “[Literature students] tend to be curious about young adult literature, but are not convinced that it is as rich, as deep, as powerfully moving, and as complex as the literature they are accustomed to reading” (63). The assumption lingers that YA literature has little or no critical value.

Even within critical considerations of YA literature, there is still the lingering conviction, or expectation, that YA literature has little to offer. In *Critical Foundations in Young Adult Literature*, Antero Garcia argues that, “YA texts help reify cultural assumptions and viewpoints about power and representation” (7). Garcia asserts that the vast majority of YA texts are ordered by and reinforce heterosexism, which he as “dominant cultural practices and beliefs that assume individuals are heterosexual and that explicitly or implicitly promote a heterosexual—or heteronormative—lifestyle” (86). Garcia later asserts that one means of maintaining heteronormativity in YA texts is through the absence of LGBTQ

narratives in the genre. In a chapter on LGBTQI representation, Garcia writes, “The vast majority of YA texts readers encounter function as literary assaults on LGBTQI ways of being and individual agency” (88). Garcia uses Robert Cormier’s novel *The Chocolate War* to illustrate the way in which heterosexism functions through the disparagement of queerness in YA texts. Reacting to a moment in the text when the protagonist is called queer and responds violently, Garcia writes:

Though Cormier doesn’t imply that words like ‘queer’ or ‘fairy’ are appropriate, he does imply that being called these names is a course of cruelty that it could understandable to attack someone...Cormier reinforces heterosexist language used toward LGBTQI communities and also implies that sexual orientations that deviate from heterosexual are not okay. (89)

Contemporary critics of YA literature such as Garcia are the first to point out the failings of the genre as a whole, particularly the ways in which representations of gender and sexuality fail to break dominant heteronormative constructs.

Beth Younger also examines how heteronormative constructs are reinforced in YA texts, particularly in the portrayal of female sexuality. She writes, “the authors rarely describe male bodies, but female bodies are continually looked at in what becomes a powerful enactment of the male gaze...Characters (and readers) internalize the gaze that reinforces female objectification, and these social constructions of young women’s bodies become accepted norms” (47). Younger goes on to note that many YA novels not only reinforce heterosexuality, but reinforce acceptable forms of heterosexuality. Younger uses Judy Blume’s novel *Forever* as an example. *Forever* is a classic YA text, which garnered a great deal of attention for its explicit sexual

content, as it details the sexual relationship that develops between Katherine and her first boyfriend, Michael. While *Forever* deserves praise for depicting an explicit, pleasurable teenage sexual relationship, it is also indicative of the heteronormative constructs that dominate YA literature. As Trites notes, “It proves ultimately impossible for her to write a novel about teenage sexuality without linking the story to societally sanctioned ideologies” (93). Blume was ultimately able to write such a text because of its strict enforcement of heterosexuality.

While I'm appreciative of writers and educators who look critically at YA literature, I believe that part of the critical work to be done on YA literature, a heavily scrutinized genre, is presenting alternative texts that break dominant heteronormative constructs and demonstrate the value of YA literature. That being said, it is worth approaching YA literature from a reparative position, as put forward by Eve Sedgwick in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Peformativity*. Sedgwick makes the distinction between paranoid and reparative reading position. She notes that a paranoid position, among other things, is anticipatory in that it assumes and expects negative affect in the hope of preempting it. Sedgwick writes, “paranoia requires that bad news be always already known” (130). Paranoia is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “any unjustified or excessive sense of fear.” Medically, paranoia has a contentious history with homosexuality, as paranoia developed as a distinctly homosexual affliction, as put forward by Freud. The paranoid impulse that Sedgwick notes holds with the assertion of paranoia as linked with homosexuality. Sedgwick writes, “What is illuminated by an understanding of paranoia is not how homosexuality works, but how homophobia and heterosexism work—in short, if one

understands these oppressions to be systemic, how the world works” (126). In this way, the paranoid position can provide valuable insight into the workings of oppressive systems. However, Sedgwick takes issue with the primacy of the paranoid position over other positions. She writes, “it seems to me a great loss when paranoid inquiry comes to seem entirely coextensive with critical theoretical inquiry rather than being viewed as one kind of cognitive/affective theoretical practice among other, alternative kinds” (126). Sedgwick believes that this kind of singularity in approach can have the effect of being harmful for the reader, since the paranoid position leaves the reader closed to possibility.

Whereas paranoid reading is inherently avoidant, reparative reading is productive, embracing rather than avoiding. Sedgwick notes that the two positions should not be seen as inherently at odds with each other. She writes, “it is sometimes the most paranoid-tending people who are able to, and need to, develop and disseminate the richest reparative practices” (150). In noting the difference between paranoid and reparative reading processes, Sedgwick writes:

Allow each theory its own, different prime motive, at any rate—the anticipation of pain in one case, the provision of pleasure in the other—and neither can be called more realistic than the other. It’s not even necessarily true that the two make different judgments of ‘reality’: it isn’t that one is pessimistic and sees the glass as half empty, while the other is optimistic and sees it as half full. In a world full of loss, pain, and oppression, both epistemologies are likely to be based on deep pessimism... But what each

looks for—which is again to say, the motive each has *for looking*—is bound to differ widely. Of the two, however, it is only paranoid knowledge that has to thorough a practice of disavowing its affective motive and force and masquerading as the very stuff of truth.” (138)

Sedgwick’s notion of reparative reading is especially applicable for approaching queer YA literature. She writes, “[The fear of the reparative reader], a realistic one, is that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture; it wants to assemble and confer plentitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self” (149). The adolescent reader embodies the inchoate self in explicit ways, as the adolescent is constructed as the not yet fully developed subject. As Garcia illustrates, through the suppression and degradation of queerness in many YA texts, YA literature is inimical to the queer adolescent reader. However, through a reparative reading of certain YA texts, the possibility begins to emerge for YA literature to be a valuable means of queer representation.

This thesis will primarily focus on three YA authors whose writing has altered the terrain of queer YA literature in some way: Nancy Garden, Julie Anne Peters, and David Levithan.

Nancy Garden is best known for the novel *Annie on my Mind*, which is credited as the first novel in which a positive lesbian love story. Although YA literature is commonly known for romance narratives, queer romance was largely lacking before Garden’s novel. The focus on romance and affection between the two characters opened new possibilities for queer YA romance.

Julie Anne Peters is attributed with the first YA novel to feature a transgender character. *Luna*, published in 2004. While trans representation is still rare in YA literature, and while *Luna* has a number of flaws in its portrayal of trans people, Peters' novel deserves recognition for opening the door for greater trans representations. Ellen Wittlinger's *Parrotfish*, published in 2007, is largely considered a successor to *Luna*. Both novels depict trans character attempting to construct livable lives for themselves.

David Levithan holds an interesting role in the realm of YA lit. He is both a prominent and prolific author, having written or co-written twenty-one books in twelve years, as well the founding editor of PUSH, the young adult imprint of Scholastic Press. Levithan attempts to create new realities in his writing, as shown in his first novel, *Boy Meets Boy*, which has been labelled by many as a queer utopia.

These three authors have all contributed to the YA genre by publishing works that break certain rules and constraints that dominate YA literature. In a dialogue with trans actress and activist Laverne Cox, bell hooks remarked on the notion of safety, saying, "What I want is for people to feel comfortable in the circumstance of risk." For many authors, YA literature is the space of that risk, a place where they are permitted to explore topics and themes that may be considered taboo, especially for younger readers. As Julie Anne Peters says of her own writing, "Young adult literature is all about experimentation and risk-taking. There are no rules, no limitations, no literary expectation to overcome" (Peters 2004). However, this sentiment is problematized by a comment made by YA publisher Megan Tingley,

who edited Peters' novel *Luna*. Remarking on the increasing visibility of LGBTQ narratives in YA literature, Tingley says:

...it took Julie herself many years to feel ready to explore sexual orientation and gender identity in her work...When I broached the idea of her writing a lesbian love story, she was adamantly opposed. She was afraid such a novel might be a career ender and also expose her personal life in a way she wasn't comfortable with. (Tingley 2016)

Peters' hesitance in writing queer YA fiction reveals that there are rules that govern YA literature and risks that accompany the breaking of those rules.

In doing a reparative reading of these texts, my intent is in no way to erase the violent and oppressive history that has been working against queer representation. This history should and must be acknowledged. Sedgwick notes however that a reparative reading is not meant to ignore violence or oppression. She writes, "to practice other than paranoid forms of knowing does *not*, in itself, entail a denial of the reality or gravity of enmity or oppression" (128). I also do not intend to imply that these texts are above criticism, nor that the existence of these novels means that we should stop demanding more YA texts with informed, nuanced, and varied representations of queerness. I believe that this demand can and should coexist with recognition of already existing texts. In no way do I intend to argue with the notion that YA literature as a whole has failed to properly capture marginalized voices or to embrace the diverse wealth of YA authors, yet I believe that a small yet crucial part of the solution to breaking the heteronormative structures that dominate mainstream

YA literature is bringing attention to YA texts that, I argue, have fractured these structures in various ways.

How can we approach YA literature from a reparative position? What good does this do for readers, authors, and critics of YA literature? It is important to consider not what these novels are, but rather what they do. In her essay on reparative reading strategies, Sedgwick writes that she learned to, “open a space for moving from the rather fixated question Is a particular piece of knowledge true, and how can we know? to the further questions: What does knowledge *do*” (124). Sedgwick also notes that through a paranoid lens, the focus is on making pain explicit. Sedgwick comments on paranoia’s:

cruel and contemptuous assumption that the one thing lacking for global revolution, explosion of gender roles, or whatever, is people’s (that is, other people’s) having the painful effects of their oppression, poverty, or deludedness sufficiently exacerbated to make the pain conscious (as if otherwise it wouldn’t have been) and intolerable (as if intolerable situations were famous for generating excellent solutions). (144)

Although these novels may all be described for a number of reasons as positive or constructive novels, they do not pretend to depict or create worlds in which queerness is uncontended. None of these novels go so far as to create an oppressed/empowered dichotomy common in discussions of marginalized groups of people. Rather, what these novels do is depict the various ways in which queer characters negotiate challenging systems of power and socialization.

Chapter One

Love, Happiness, & Hope: *Annie on My Mind*

Introduction

Prior to the publication of Nancy Garden's *Annie on My Mind* in 1982, LGBTQ characters were pushed to the periphery of YA novels. *Annie on My Mind* has been lauded as the first YA novel to tell a happy love story between two same-gender characters. Nancy Garden said in an interview with Kathleen T. Horning for the anniversary publication of the novel, "*Annie* was the first teen novel with both a young lesbian (or gay) protagonist and a definitely happy ending" (252). *Annie on My Mind* was published as a time when gay or lesbian characters in YA literature were either nonexistent or tragic side characters.

Cart and Jenkins credit John Donovan's 1969 *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* as the first YA novel to depict a queer relationship. *I'll Get There* tells the story of thirteen-year-old Davy Ross, who must move in with his estranged, alcoholic mother after his grandmother, who had been raising him, dies. Davy's only comfort is his mother's dachshund Fred, until he begins to grow closer to his friend Douglas Altshuler. However, Cart and Jenkins assert, "it is a gross overstatement to describe the relationship between the boys as 'a love affair.' Indeed, love seems not to come into it at all" (14). The two have an ambiguously described sexual encounter and are found asleep and embracing by Davy's mother. When Fred is hit by a car and killed shortly after, Davy blames himself for the dog's death and is wracked with guilt. The novel ends with Davy

ultimately deciding that what he and Douglas did was wrong and ending their relationship.

Published over a decade later, *Annie on My Mind* tells a markedly different story. The novel is one extended flashback, told from perspective the perspective of teenager Liza. Liza, finishing her first semester at MIT studying architecture, tries to write a letter to Annie, whom she hasn't written to since the summer, having left Annie's numerous letters unanswered. Liza decides that before she can answer Annie, she must "sort out what happened" (5) since their meeting the November before. The two meet at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and begin a friendship that gradually develops into a romantic relationship. However, trouble hits when an administrator from Liza's school confronts them after a sexual encounter, leading to Liza's potential expulsion and the firing of two of Liza's school teachers. The novel has what has been called a "happy ending," as present-day Liza calls on the phone Annie and the two declare their love for each other and plan to meet over the holidays. But what does it mean to write a queer YA love story with a happy ending? What makes a happy ending for Liza and Annie? How is hope constructed in Garden's novel and what are the implications of that construction of hope for queer YA literature?

Love

The novel's attention on love has been a major point of praise for *Annie on My Mind* since its publication in the 80s. The focus on the love between two young women is particularly unique for a YA novel of the time and speaks

directly to the portrayal of homosexuality in YA novels up until the 1980s. Until the publication of *Annie on My Mind*, portrayals of homosexuality in YA literature tended to be centered on limiting homosexuality to sex. Cart and Jenkins remark on this matter, looking at six YA novels published in the 1980s that portrayed lesbian relationships. They write:

So what, in the context of these six novels, does it mean to be a lesbian?

Apparently it is simply a matter of same-sex physical intimacy, as there is little same-sex physical intimacy happening anywhere that the protagonist—and by extension the reader—can see it. (53)

In the novels Cart and Jenkins discuss, homosexuality is defined by a physical or sexual relationship, which is deliberately obscure in detail, with little or no consideration given to the emotional dimensions of such a relationship.

The alignment of homosexuality as love that occurs in *Annie on My Mind* marks a shift in the world of YA literature. Garden not only brings *Annie on My Mind* in line with the romance plots that make up much of YA literature, but speaks directly to the ideologies that have kept homosexuality on the periphery of YA. Liza herself comes face-to-face with what Cart and Jenkins calls, “the simplistic equation of homosexuality and the physical act of sex” (53). Realizing she has no idea what implications come with labelling herself gay, she turns to an encyclopedia, hoping it can shed some insight. Instead, she is left frustrated by the limitations of the encyclopedia’s definition, saying:

What struck me most, though, was that, in that whole long article, the word ‘love’ wasn’t used even once. That made me mad; it was as if whoever wrote the article didn’t know that gay people actually love each other. The encyclopedia writers ought to talk to me, I thought as I went back to bed; I could tell them something about love. (143)

Liza, looking for help in navigating the emotional dimension of her relationship with Annie, is left only with the notion that such emotionality is absent in same-gender relationships.

Liza meets this problem again when a particularly judgmental school administrator learns of her relationship with Annie and reports Liza to the school board. She says, “Ms. Baxter gave this incredibly lurid account of what she’d seen. It was awful. It made us sound like monsters, not like two people in love. That was the worst thing...It was as if everyone were assuming that love had nothing to do with any of this” (201). Equating homosexuality with love is a significant act for Garden’s novel. Garden’s novel falls in line with Berlant’s assertion of love as an organizing institution. Berlant writes,

However authentic and/or ironic individuals might feel when they feel the thing they call love, their attachment to it as a formal feeling that one can name, express, remember, and return to suggests its centrality. Even the most distanced or negating tone of voice toward love is a way of holding it close...I think about it as a kind of tattoo, a rhythm, a shape, timing. An

environment of touch or sound that you make so that there is something to which you turn and return. (2001 439)

Berlant asserts that love is a formal feeling that is marked by repetition.

Liza and Annie's relationship is also significant because the novel's emphasis on love does not come at the expense of their sexual relationship. In *Public Sex*, Pat Califia tackles the issue of the erasure of sexual pleasure from depictions of lesbian relationships. Addressing Adrienne Rich's 1980 essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in which Rich writes about the erasure of lesbian relationship within the institution of heterosexuality, Califia writes, "Rich's essay is a brilliant example of the way our society denies, punishes, and ruthlessly eliminates lesbianism. But she seems every bit as afraid of lesbian lust as the people and institutions who hunt us down" (16). Even in a work detailing the erasure and subjugation of lesbian relationships, Califia argues, there is a resistance to existence of lesbian sex. This resistance comes up in *Annie on My Mind* when Liza's mother learns of the relationship between Liza and Annie. She says, "...what I think I'm trying to say is that feeling—sexual feelings—can be all mixed up at your age. That's normal. And it's normal to experiment" (187-88). She later remarks to Liza's father, "adolescent friendships are like that—intense—beautiful" (190). Liza's mother erases her relationship with Annie by describing it as an "intense" friendship.

Liza's parents' response mirrors that of Davy's father in *I'll Get There*.

Davy tells us, "My father goes on to tell me that a lot of boys play around in a lot

of ways when they are growing up, and I shouldn't get involved in some special way of life which will close off other ways of life to me" (173). Readers responded in a similar way to Davy and Douglas' relationship. Cart writes, "For the most the reviewers interpret Davy's homosexual encounters with Altschuler as being little more than a routine rite of passage, a lonely boy's reaching out for friendship—instead, the same interpretation Davy's father seems to apply" (13).

Annie on My Mind manages to emphasize love without denying Liza and Annie a sexual relationship. The novel contains a clear, though not explicit, sex scene. Liza says:

I remember so much about that first time with Annie that I am numb with it, and breathless. I can feel Annie's hands touching me again, gently, as if she were afraid I might break; I can feel her softness under my hands—I look down at my hands now and see them slightly curved, feel them become both strong and gentle as I felt them become for the first time then. I can close my eyes and feel every motion of Annie's body and my own—clumsy and hesitant and shy—but that isn't the important part. The important part is the wonder of the closeness and the unbearable ultimate realization that we are two people, not one—and also the wonder of that: that even though we *are* two people, we can be almost like one, and at the same time delight in each other's uniqueness. (146)

The exploration of their sexual relationship is hindered by a lack of privacy. Each instance of physicality that occurs in a public space is accompanied by a remark

observing their surroundings. When they exchange Christmas present outside Liza's house, she says, "I looked around for people and then kissed the end of [Annie's] nose; it was almost dark, and besides, I didn't really care if anyone saw us" (111). Later, she says, "Annie flung her arms around my neck and kissed me, even though there were four kids galloping down the snowy path from Clark Street to the Promenade" (112). Unable to use either of their homes with comfort, Liza and Annie turn to the home of two teachers for whom Liza has agreed to house-sit. The house becomes a space of safety for Liza and Annie, a space where they can safely and securely act out their desires and insecurities.

Happiness Scripts & the Happy Queer

I argue that *Annie on My Mind* concerns itself with happiness beyond good feeling and focuses instead on happiness as a paradigm of a heteronormative structure. In her work on happiness, Sara Ahmed separates her consideration of happiness from good feeling. She asserts that happiness begins from outside the subject. She writes about happiness as an orientation toward certain objects which are presumed to be happy objects, objects that are presumed to be the means to happiness. Ahmed writes, "It is not just that we become happy *about* something, as a feeling in the present, but some things become happy *for us*, if we imagine they will bring happiness *to us*" ("Happy Objects" 33). By orienting oneself toward those objects, one is given the promise of one day attaining happiness. Happiness is an endpoint, a goal toward which we strive. In this way, happiness becomes that which is not present. Rather, it is a potentiality, something to come.

Ahmed writes, “Happiness is an expectation of what follows, where the expectation differentiates between things, whether or not they exist as objects in the present” (41). Happiness is therefore constructed as anticipatory. When we aim for these objects, we aim for happiness.

These happiness objects are circulated as social goods, constructing a coherently oriented community. She writes:

When we feel pleasure from such objects, we are aligned; we are facing the right way. We become alienated—out of line with an affective community—when we do not experience pleasure from proximity to objects that are already attributed as being good. (37)

Ahmed designates those who are out of line affectively “affect aliens” (37). Affect aliens, Ahmed asserts, are affectively oriented in the “wrong” way. For affect aliens, happy objects are not promises of happiness.

Ahmed uses the notion of the happy family as an example of a happy object. Though the family holds no inherent qualities as an object, Ahmed claims that the family is constructed as happy due to a shared orientation. She writes, “The family would be happy not because it causes happiness, and not even because it affects us in a good way, but because we share an orientation toward the family as being good, as being what promises happiness in return for loyalty” (38). It is the shared orientation toward the family as a means of happiness that constructs the happy family.

Ahmed also writes about “happiness scripts,” which she describes as “providing a set of instructions for what women and men must do in order to be happy, whereby happiness is what follow being natural or good” (*Promise* 59). Happiness scripts shape social relations by dictating what count as recognizable modes of living. Following those scripts leads to happiness; deviating from those scripts leads to unhappiness. Ahmed writes:

Happiness scripts are powerful even when we fail or refuse to follow them, even when desires deviate from their lines. In this way, the scripts speak a certain truth: deviation can involve unhappiness. Happiness scripts encourage us to avoid the unhappy consequences of deviation by making those consequences explicit. The ‘whole world,’ it might seem, depends on subjects being directed in the right way, toward the right kind of things. To deviate is always to risk a world even if you don’t always lose the world you risk. (91)

We see happiness scripts at play in *I’ll Get There*, when Davy’s father warns him against, “[getting] involved in some special way of life which will close off other ways of life to me” (173). By “other ways of life,” Davy’s father means heterosexual modes of living.

Ahmed goes on to describe happiness scripts as “straightening devices, ways of aligning bodies with what is already lined up” (*Promise* 91). Happiness scripts work to orient the subject in a manner that is socially agreeable. Ahmed notes:

...for a life to count as a good life, it must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one's futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course. The promise of happiness thus directs life in some ways rather than others.

("Happy Objects" 41)

Happiness, in this sense, is not about good feeling but about working toward certain objects that are promised to cause happiness. However, expectations of happiness can often cause unhappiness. Ahmed illustrates this using the example of the unhappy queer. She writes, "The unhappy queer is here the queer who is judged to be unhappy: the judgment of unhappiness creates unhappiness, in the very performance of the failure to recognize the social viability of queer relationships, in its failure to recognize queer love" (*Promise* 93). Ahmed directly tackles happiness in *Annie on My Mind* in relation to the speech act, "I just want you to be happy," a sentiment expressed by Liza's parents.

To Ahmed, the unhappy queer is unhappy because they are told they will be unhappy. This scene of the unhappy queer plays out explicitly in *Annie on My Mind* when Liza's dad learns about her relationship with Annie. He says to Liza:

I have to say to you I've never thought gay people can be very happy—no children, for one thing, no real family life. Honey, you are probably going to be a damn good architect—but I want you to be happy in other ways, too, as your mother is—to have a husband and children. (191)

Liza's father frames her unhappiness as an inevitability, a natural consequence of a lifestyle that deviates from the happiness scripts that Ahmed describes. "The father makes an act of identification with an imagined future of necessary and inevitable unhappiness...the queer life is already constructed as unhappy" ("Happy Objects" 42). In this context, the sentiment, "I just want you to be happy," as Ahmed notes, is actually a desire for the object of the sentiment to be properly affectively aligned with the speaker. Liza's father desires her to be happy by insisting she orient herself toward the proper objects that promise happiness, such as a heterosexual family structure.

By refusing to align herself properly, Liza becomes a cause of unhappiness for those around her, an issue with which she struggles. The reader learns that this is why she hasn't written to Annie since the previous summer, when she says:

I read somewhere the other day that love is good as long as it's honest and unselfish and hurts no one. That people's biological sex doesn't matter when it comes to love; that there have always been gay people; that there are even some gay animals and many bisexual ones; that other societies have accepted and so accept gays—so maybe our society is backward...I keep stumbling on just one statement: as long as it hurts no one. (161)

Despite Liza's assertion that Annie is what makes her happy, Liza sees the ways that their relationship is causing unhappiness for others, and therefore questions the goodness of their relationship. Ahmed notes that for the queer subject,

happiness can come at the expense of the unhappiness of others. She writes, “Although we can live without the promise of happiness, and can do so ‘happily,’ we live with the consequences of being a cause of unhappiness for others” (“Happy Objects” 44). In this sense, Liza and Annie are affect aliens, killing the happiness of those around them. Liza’s father says to her, “I want you to know that I’ll go along with whatever you decided to do; Liza, I’ll support you, whatever’s true” (189-90). Despite her father’s assertion of supports, his word usage, focusing on what Liza decides, frames the situation as a choice for Liza. She can choose her relationship with Annie and cause her parents unhappiness or she can choose to relinquish her relationship with Annie and instead follow the “normal” path laid out in front of her, the path presumed to lead to happiness.

Liza’s life is bound up with lives of those around her, particularly her parents. Ahmed writes that children tend to bear a particular burden when it comes to happiness, saying, “The child thus has a happiness duty... The duty of the child is to make the parents happy and to perform this duty happily by being happy or by showing signs of being happy in the right way” (*Promise* 59). Though Liza is certain that Annie makes her happy, she struggles with the idea of being a source of unhappiness for her parents. If their relationship is the cause of so much unhappiness, can *Annie on My Mind* really be called a happy novel? Ahmed is cautious of portrayals of the happy queer. She writes, “The risk of promoting the happy queer is that the unhappiness of this world could disappear from view” (105). Ahmed is cautious of depictions of the happy queer that simply align the

queer subject with heteronormative structures. However, Ahmed also writes, “To be happily queer can also recognize the unhappiness that is concealed by the promotion of happy normativity” (117). In this way, Ahmed constructs happiness in a way that is divorced from heteronormative expectations.

Ahmed’s notion of happy objects relates heavily to Berlant’s work in “Cruel Optimism.” Berlant theorizes on the relationships individuals hold with objects of desire, where the objects hold the promise of something other than the object. She writes, “proximity to the object means proximity to the cluster of things that the objects promises” (20). Just as Ahmed writes that happy objects can be the cause of unhappiness, Berlant asserts that our attachment to these objects of desire can be inimical to our well-being. The notion of “cruel optimism” names the relationship with these objects rather than anything inherent to the object itself. Berlant writes:

What is cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects who have *x* in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object or scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the *content* of the attachment, the continuity of the form of it provides something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world. (21)

The subject’s relationship to these objects then is a relationship based on potentiality. It is a relationship based what the object promises to bring about, just as happy objects are those which are presumed to bring about happiness.

Ahmed asserts that there are ways to break from the way these relationships are constructed. She recognizes that there is the potential to be happily queer in a way that rejects, if not actively subverts, heteronormative constructions of happiness. Ahmed notes that most normative happy endings are “about the coincidence of happy objects” (“Happy Objects”46). However, Garden’s novel does not end this way. Rather than resolving itself by Liza’s parents coming to terms with their daughter’s sexuality and accepting her, *Annie on My Mind* resolves itself by the promise of Liza and Annie reuniting. The novel’s ending focuses on the continuation and deepening of Liza and Annie’s relationship, despite it potentially causing unhappiness for others. Ahmed writes:

To be happily queer might mean being happy to be the cause of unhappiness (at least in the sense that one agrees to be the cause of unhappiness, even if one is not made happy by causing unhappiness), as well as to be happy with where we get to if we got beyond the straight lines of happiness scripts. (*Promise* 115)

Liza rejects her happiness duty toward her parents. Liza separates herself from the social obligation to be a happiness-cause for her parents and accepts her role as a cause of unhappiness for her parents.

Hope as Fracturing & Repairing

Garden was very careful to write a story that had a happy ending where happiness is not dependent on the erasure of struggle or pain. In writing about portrayals of gay and lesbian characters in YA literature, Garden remarks,

The tendency now in new GL books for kids is to either avoid homophobia altogether, showing the world as we hope it soon will be (and in some places very nearly is), or to make it a minor part of the story. That tendency is laudable and mirrors positive changes in the real world. But I think there will always be a place for stories of GL struggle—coming out, dealing with homophobia, etc. (Garden 2005, 29)

Garden's novel is a love story, yet it is a love story in which love is challenged by misguided parents, intolerant school administrators, and misunderstanding friends. *Annie on My Mind* ends with the promise of a reunion between Liza and Annie, but perhaps more important is Liza accepting her place as an unhappiness-cause, refusing to allow the happiness script to dictate her relationship with Annie. As Ahmed writes, "The freedom to be unhappy would be the freedom to live a life that deviates from the paths of happiness, wherever that deviation takes us. It would thus mean the freedom to cause unhappiness by acts of deviation" (*Promise* 195). The ending of Garden's novel is happy precisely because it reconciles itself with unhappiness.

Ahmed notes there is value to happy queer loves stories. She writes that, "reading about characters who are happily queer in the face of a world that is unhappy with queer lives and loves can be energizing, can give us hope" (118). *Annie on My Mind* is arguably the first hopeful queer YA love story. Sedgwick notes that hope can be a potentially damaging thing. She writes:

Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates. Because the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did. (146)

While hope can be painful, it can also be invigorating, as it opens the reader to broader possibilities. Just as Sedgwick writes about the benefits of reparative reading as being “additive and accretive” (149), hope is a means by which one adds. As Anderson writes, “hope matters because it discloses the creation of potentiality or possibility” (733). In the context of *Annie on My Mind*, hope is important because it renders possible what was previously unimagined.

While happy endings can be looked upon as facile imaginings, they provide access possibilities that are otherwise unattainable. In *The Principle of Hope*, Ernst Bloch writes:

The deceivability of the happy end drive merely says something against the state of its reason; this, however, is as teachable as it is improvable. The deception represents the good end as if it were attainable in an unchanged Today of society or even the Today itself. But just because knowledge destroys rotten optimism, it does not also destroy urgent hope for a good end...More than once the fiction of a happy end, when it seized the will, when the will had learnt both through mistakes and in fact through hope as well, and

when reality did not stand in too harsh contradiction to it, reformed a bit of the world; that is: an initial fiction was made real. (443)

Rather than disavowing the fiction of the happy end, Bloch asserts that such a fiction provides the shape and shadow of what is possible, as well as the spurring to make such a fiction real.

Anderson writes, “certain types of becoming hopeful pose the question of what will come to be by dimly outlining the contours of something better and therefore enacting potentialities and possibilities” (749). *Annie on My Mind* was the first YA novel to outline those possibilities, opening the door for future YA authors. The aligning of Annie and Liza’s relationship with love, as well the construction of happiness divorced from social obligation, are crucial to why *Annie on My Mind* resonated so heavily with its readers, while its position as a hopeful novel laid out new possibilities of future YA authors in constructing queer narratives.

Chapter Two

Performance & Perception: Experiencing Gender in *Luna & Parrotfish*

Introduction

YA novels with trans characters present a different critical problem than novels such as *Annie on My Mind* that deal with sexuality, mainly due to how few there are in comparison. Because of the scant amount of texts with trans characters, each text holds that much more weight. While YA novels with gay and lesbian characters have become more prominent since *Annie on My Mind* in the 80s, novels with trans characters have only come into the mainstream since the early 2000s. *Luna*, written by Julie Anne Peters and published in 2004, is the first YA novel with feature an explicitly trans character with a major role in the narrative. Three years later, in 2007, Ellen Wittlinger's novel *Parrotfish*, the second YA novel with a trans protagonist, was published. These novels emphasize the importance of trans-specific language in nuanced and meaningful depictions of transness. They also, I argue convey gender as the intersection of identity, performance, and experience.

Two of a Kind: *Luna & Parrotfish*

Prior to the publication of *Luna*, trans characters appeared only in YA short stories. The only major YA publication to have a trans character was Carol Plum-Ucci's 2002 novel *What Happened to Lani Garver*, although Lani is never explicitly described, by themselves or by others, as trans. Rather, Lani presents as gender ambiguous and has largely been named by readers as trans.

Luna is narrated by Regan, a teenage girl whose sister, Luna, is transgender. Regan is the only person who knows about Luna's trans identity, as Luna only dresses and presents as a woman at night. Luna then tells Regan of her wish to transition and live fully a woman. Since it is told through Regan's perspective, much of the focus of the novel is on Regan's thoughts, feelings, and worries on her sister's transition, rather than on Luna's personal experience as a trans woman.

Though it has been heavily praised for its depiction of a trans character, *Luna* is problematic novel. As the first of its kind, *Luna* suffers from an issue common with early queer YA literature. As Cart and Jenkins aptly write:

Though Peters and her publisher are to be applauded for their courage in addressing this previously 'untouchable' subject, the novel suffers from a tendency common to ground-breaking fictional treatments of previously unacknowledged issues: it's driven by the 'problem' rather than by the characters themselves. (139)

Cart and Jenkins label *Luna* as a problem novel. The notion of a problem novel came into existence during the 60s and 70s, as an increasing number of YA novels focused on a particular problem, rather than the characters or the plot. Cart defines the young adult problem novel as a novel that is subject-oriented, more focused with the topic of the novel than with the story or the characters. *Luna* is fueled by the "problem" of Luna's gender. Much of Luna's speaking in the novel is in the form of lengthy monologues about her discomfort in her assigned gender and her wish to live her life

fully as a woman rather than compartmentalize herself. Subsequently, Luna reads as a one-dimensional character.

Despite its problems, as a foundational novel, *Luna* does things that previous novels simply did not. *Luna* is a novel in which a trans person is a main character who explicitly names themselves as transgender. And unlike *What Happened to Lani Carver*, which ends with Lani missing and possibly dead, Peters novel ends with Luna leaving home in the hope of finding a more accepting environment where she can live as herself. Given the fate of trans and gender non-conforming characters in prior YA texts, the ending of *Luna* marked new possibilities for trans characters. *Luna* provides the blueprint for narratives that depict the livability of trans lives *Luna*, though problematic, had laid the foundation for more nuanced, complex portrayals of trans youth.

Three years after *Luna* came Ellen Wittlinger's novel *Parrotfish*. *Parrotfish* is narrated by Grady, a high school junior who has just come out as transgender to his family and friends. The novel follows Grady's transition as he navigates the various reactions of those around him and figures out for himself what it means to live as a man. *Parrotfish* is largely considered a predecessor to *Luna*. Wittlinger herself says so in an interview with YA author CJ Bott, remarking, "Julie Anne Peters deserves a boatload of credit for blazing the trail in writing about transgender teens. My initial thought was just to write another book on that subject, because, after all, would we be satisfied with only one book on any other subject?" (86). Even so, there are a number of notable differences between the two novels. Unlike *Luna*, *Parrotfish* is narrated by

a trans protagonist, Grady. Also unlike *Luna*, in which the trans character can only live as their identified gender at night, *Parrotfish* brings the transition process into the daylight, beginning immediately after Grady's decision to live as a man. While much of *Luna* is concerned with Luna's profound longing to live as a woman and the unyielding world that prevents her from doing so, *Parrotfish* concerns itself with Grady's uncertainty with what it means to live as a man. *Parrotfish* has been applauded for telling a story from the perspective of a trans character, unlike *Luna*, in which the narrator is the sibling to a trans character. *Parrotfish* has been described as a narrative with a more complex storyline and greater character development than *Luna*, while also being more optimistic in its storytelling. While Luna must leave home in order to find a livable situation, Grady manages to reconcile with his home environment. However, this optimism has also been a source of criticism for *Parrotfish*. Elizabeth McNeil writes of Grady's relative ease transitioning, as compared to Luna's experience, saying, "this all-encompassing transformation could be read as somewhat too idealistically or glibly posited" (90).

Though McNeil's point, that portraying a trans experience too optimistically ignores the history of violence and oppression that colors the lives of many trans people, is valid, I disagree with McNeil's reading. Wittlinger notes that she very specifically wrote a positive ending for *Parrotfish*, which was inspired by a trans youth, Toby Davis, a friend of Wittlinger's daughter. She remarks, "In my novel, *Parrotfish*, Grady's coming out, while painful in certain respects, is also full of the humor of living with a big, rowdy family whose members basically love each other.

Toby asked me for a positive ending, and I think the story earns” (Bott & McNeil 86). Toby also comments on the positivity of *Parrotfish*, saying, “Here, for the first time, is a book with hope for its transgender character. Grady is not going to get killed, or even beat up. He’s not lamenting how tragic is it to be transgender, he’s just trying to live his life honestly and make sense of his wacky family” (86). While there is hope in *Luna*, it is hope that requires Luna to leave, whereas the hope in *Parrotfish* allows Grady to negotiate life at home. To say that *Parrotfish* is too optimistic, as McNeil suggests, is also to imply that trans narratives function only as tragedies. While reflecting the harsh realities facing trans people, and trans youth in particular, is important, there is room for narratives that insist on the livability of trans lives.

By narrating the story from the perspective of a trans character, *Parrotfish* does things that *Luna* simply cannot as a story told from a sibling’s perspective. While it’s important to acknowledge that trans bodies are extremely objectified and fetishized by cis audiences, the means by which one relates to and inhabits their body is a crucial aspect to how one’s gender is formed and experience. This is a sentiment that Julia Serrano expresses, saying, “We delude ourselves into believing that the shell itself is not important, not connected to our consciousness, that it’s merely a vessel that contains us, or a vehicle that we move about with our minds. But the truth is, our bodies are inseparable from our minds” (2007 220). *Parrotfish* validates Grady’s physical experience of inhabiting his body, such as when Grady gets his period. He says, “Already kids were whispering about me as I passed them...*Freak. Mutant. Pervert.* And now I was a boy who had just started his period and was

probably bleeding all over his jockey shorts. Yeah, that was normal” (59). This event is not portrayed as one that undermines Grady’s identity. Rather, starting his period exacerbates Grady’s existing struggle with the way his gender and his body are perceived by others and the way their perceptions contradict his own internal sense of gender.

This issue arises again when Grady’s friend Sebastian suggests that Grady remove his shirt after being spilled on. Grady thinks, “I knew he was trying to help, but had it occurred to him what would happen if I had to take off my shirt in public? Just because I wanted to live as a boy didn’t mean my body had morphed overnight” (79). In this way, *Parrotfish* depicts a physical discomfort that doesn’t solely come from the body, but rather from the way the outside world perceives and reacts to the body, a notion that Serrano reinforces, saying, “I realized that for me, being trans had little to do with sexual desire or social gender; it was primarily about the physical experience of being in my own body” (2007 216). The novel also portrays gender as something both subconscious and practiced, while also addressing its materiality. While Grady asserts repeatedly that he is a boy, he also uncertain at times how to inhabit the world as a boy. When speaking about clothing, Grady remarks, “I knew that that was the kind of person I was: a crew-socks-wearing person, not an ankle-socks-wearing person” (105). The material markers of gender hold much significance in Grady’s life, even if he cannot articulate exactly why.

Many differences between the books derive from the different transition processes that the novels are depicting. *Luna* depicts a male-to-female transition

process, while *Parrotfish* depicts a female-to-male transition process. While there are no essential aspects to either of these processes, there are distinctive differences that should not be ignored. These processes are not only portrayed as different, but portrayed as holding different social significance. McNeil comments on this difference between the two texts, saying, “the female to male (FTM) transition in *Parrotfish* is constructed as less socially problematic than that of the male to female (MTF) transformation in *Luna*, and Grady’s family and community more tolerant. As a result, the gender change in *Parrotfish* is slightly more easily negotiated” (90). Simply put, *Parrotfish* concerns itself with masculine rather than feminine expression, and is subsequently exempt from certain more contentious issues of gender expression. In *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, Julia Serrano writes about the misogyny unique to the experience of trans women, who must contend with embodying femininity in a misogynistic society. Serrano asserts that much of the struggle for her as a trans woman was not the process of embodying or performing femininity, but rather how femininity is perceived and degraded in a society that holds masculinity as more valuable. She writes, “I find that those who wish to ridicule or dismiss me do not simply take me to task for the fact that I fail to conform to gender norms—instead, more often than not, they mock my femininity” (3). As Serrano notes, criticisms of femininity are used to invalidate the identities and experiences of trans women. Serrano later remarks, “in a world where femininity is so regularly dismissed, perhaps no form of gendered expression is considered more artificial and more suspect than

male and transgender expressions of femininity” (5). Trans women not only contend with misogyny, but also with the criticism that their femininity is fake or artificial.

This preoccupation with the femininity of trans women comes up in troubling ways in *Luna*. Luna’s deliberate performance of femininity is regularly contrasted with her sister Regan’s failure to perform femininity. Regan says:

Ever since I started school, I felt like I had this older sister to live up to. She was smarter, nicer, prettier—or would’ve been if she could dress the part. Liam’s footsteps were way too big for me to follow in. I kept tripping on his high heels. (31)

While this could be read as a way of asserting that there are no intrinsic or essential gender qualities based on assigned gender and that femininity is not something to be imposed on people, this contrast can also be read as an assertion of the artificiality of Luna’s gender. Regan regularly describes Luna’s various wigs and clothing, and even that way Luna practices certain feminine manners. Regan says:

He was girl-gawking, which is what I called it, where he sat mesmerized studying how girls talked and gestured and moved. Absorbing, memorizing, imitating. He had Aly down perfectly. The way she tossed back her head when she laughed. Bit her bottom lip when she was worried, or deep in thought. The way she crossed and uncrossed her legs, tucked them underneath her. Played with her ponytail. He could sit in front of my mirror and do her for hours. (55-56)

While this idea of practicing one's gender comes up in *Parrotfish*, in the ways in which Grady expresses his uncertainty in what it means to act like a boy, *Luna's* language portrays it as an act or artificiality. Luna's expression is also used in troubling ways to legitimize her gender. Luna is better able to embody femininity than her cisgender sister, the implication being that this proves how much of a woman Luna really is. Is Luna's quest for femininity an acknowledgment of the material reality of gender or an assertion of the artificiality of feminine trans women?

Gender Performativity

Luna and *Parrotfish* were both written by cis authors, seemingly aware of their privilege in writing about trans experiences. In an interview with fellow YA author Cynthia Leitich Smith, Peters notes that she was hesitant to write *Luna* after sitting in on a support group meeting for trans people, saying, "I felt fictionalizing the lives of these people was trivializing their struggle." Peters also remarks on her decision to tell the story from the perspective of Luna's sister Regan. She says:

The major [literary challenge] was my stubborn bias in favor of authentic voices in LGBTQI literature. I'm not trans. I never will be. My authenticity bias couldn't be compromise. To be authentic and honest, the narrator, the main character, would need to act in the role of observer. I decided to create a sister for Luna, Regan. Regan would be Luna's confidante throughout life and in that way she could see, and relate to the reader, the childhood manifestations of being born transgender.

The danger of these two books, and of YA literature written by cisgender authors about trans characters, is the risk of what Serrano refers to as “ungendering,” a phenomenon where, “gender-variant people are used as a device to bring conventional notions about maleness and femaleness into question” (2007 195-96). Expounding upon her issues of ungendering, Serrano writes about her skepticism of uses of the theory of gender performativity, originally posited by queer theorist Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*. Butler’s goal was to destabilize conventional notions of gender in relation to queer gender expressions and how those expressions are delimited by heterosexual biases. As Bettcher explains, “in queer subculture gender practices do not always have the same meaning that they do in mainstream cultural contexts” (11). Butler’s theory divorces gender practices from gender identity. Butler asserts that gender is something we do, something historically and culturally constituted, rather than either ontological inevitability or individual choice. Butler writes:

The act that gender is, the act that embodied agents *are* inasmuch as they dramatically and actively embody and, indeed, *wear* certain cultural significations, is clearly not one’s act alone. Surely, there are nuanced and individual ways of *doing* one’s gender, but *that* one does it, and that one does it *in accord with* certain sanctions and proscriptions, is clearly not a fully individual matter. (1988 525)

Butler's theory subverts the notion that gender exists prior to the body. By describing gender as performative, Butler asserts that behavior constructs an identity rather than identity dictating behavior.

However, Butler's theory has been challenged by trans theorists and activists who take issue with the way in which the theory of performativity can be and has been used to invalidate trans identities. As Bettcher writes, "The tension involves [Butler's] account of gender identity as socially constructed as well as her account of subversion (on the one hand), and the importance of gender identity and gender realness to some trans people (on the other hand)" (14). In the preface to the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble*, it becomes clear that Butler demonstrates awareness of the ways in which her theories have been used to reify systems of gender enforcement rather than allow for alternative means of conceptualizing and perceiving gender. Butler herself warns against theories that too strictly regulate gender. Butler writes, "feminism ought to be careful not to idealize certain expressions of gender that, in turn, produce new forms of hierarchy and exclusion" (viii). Bettcher notes that in *Bodies that Matter*, Butler:

...clarifies that instead of a kind of voluntary theatricality donned and doffed by a pre-existing agent, gender performance is constitutive of the agent itself...What is strictly fictional, for Butler, is the view that there are unified cores which exist prior to gendered behavior. (12-13)

Indeed, in *Undoing Gender*, Butler explicitly contends with misappropriations of her theory of gender performativity, writing, "the transsexual desire to become a man or a

woman is not to be dismissed as a simple desire to conform to established identity categories” (8).

In writing about her experiences as a trans woman, Serrano takes issue not strictly with Butler’s theory, but with the ways in which Butler’s work has been misused by theorists and academics to police gender expression and to invalidate the identities of trans and gender non-conforming people. Serrano writes, “Some of the more extreme variations of this theory leave little room for intrinsic gender inclinations, leaning toward the notion that our gender and sexual identities are merely unconscious repetitions of the socialization and gender norms that have been foisted upon us” (2007 191). Bettcher writes that there were those who initially approached Butler’s theory as “a kind of gender volunteerism” (12). By asserting that gender is wholly performative, Serrano argues, theorists render invalid the identities of trans people who experience gender as an internal reality. Serrano writes:

...many academics have focused on the transsexual transition process to argue that gender does not arise ‘naturally,’ but that it is learned, practiced, and performed. However, these same academics tend to overlook (or dismiss outright) the fact that most transsexuals experience a lifelong self-knowing that they should be the other sex. This self-knowing exists despite the overwhelming social pressure for a person to identify and behave as a member of their assigned sex, which strongly suggests that there are indeed natural and intrinsic gender inclinations that can precede and/or supersede social conditioning and gender norms. (2007 210)

She writes that many queer and feminist academics tend to target trans and gender non-conforming bodies to destabilize gender conventions while exempting cisgender and gender-conforming bodies from such scrutiny, which naturalizes the “normality” of cis bodies and invalidates the experiences and identities of trans people

Both *Luna* and *Parrotfish* bring into question conventional gender norms and the way in which gender is perceived and felt in various ways. *Parrotfish* opens with Grady’s cousin having just been born and his mother declaring, “It’s a boy...A healthy baby boy!” (2). Wittlinger comments on the decision to open the novel this way, saying, “I felt there had to be a baby present to remind us how immediately we want to identify a new person as ‘boy’ or ‘girl.’ I wanted that baby there in the first chapter so we couldn’t deny it—it’s the first thing everybody asks when a baby is born” (Botts & McNeil 87). From the beginning, *Parrotfish* sets itself up to be a novel that contends with how gender is assigned and enforced from birth through adolescence and adulthood. Similarly, the parents in *Luna* grapple with the tension that arises from strictly enforced gender roles. Regan, on observing the tension between her father and mother, says, “He wasn’t crazy about Mom’s job. Specifically, her elevating her own status from Wife and Mother to More Significant Other. Not that he was sexist or anything, just boring and conventional” (7). In this way, Regan’s parents serve to undermine larger gender conventions.

Butler’s theory also had the effect of conflating the actor with the audience in the performative process. She writes, “the *appearance of substance* is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social

audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (1988 520). She also asserts, “The authors of gender become entrenched by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one’s belief in its necessity and naturalness” (522). Serrano argues that such an assertion provides substantial fodder for cissexist theorists to discredit the experiences of trans people by insisting that their gender is contrived or artificial. She writes, “I will try to show some ways in which reified and naturalized conceptions of gender might be understood as a constituted, and, hence, capable of being constituted differently” (2007 520). A misappropriation of Butler’s theory would require the actor to alter the performance and their means of embodying gender in order to destabilize binary gender construction.

Serrano, however, in her essay “Performance Piece,” shifts her focus from the actor to the audience, to the eyes perceiving the performative subject. Butler’s theory notes this distinction, as she writes, “[Beauvoir] emphasizes that the body suffers a certain cultural construction, not only through conventions that sanction and proscribe how one acts one’s body, the ‘act’ or performance that one’s body is, but also in the tacit conventions that structure the way the body is culturally perceived” (1988 523-24). Here Butler asserts that perception plays a role in how bodies are culturally situated. Rather than writing in terms of performativity, Serrano writes about the importance of emphasizing perception in discussions of gender. She argues that, “social gender is not produced and propagated because of the way we as individuals ‘perform’ or ‘do’ our genders; it lies in the perceptions and interpretations of others”

(2007 193). Those perceptions may affect the subject's behavior and how they subsequently embody their gender. Serrano notes that while her behavior didn't change throughout her transition process, the way she was perceived and treated did change. This change in the way others treated her subsequently altered the way she embodied her identity as a woman. She writes, "My identity evolved out of a million tiny social exchanges where others made it very clear to me that my status in the world...was that of a woman and not a man" (222).

Luna and *Parrotfish* stray away from the damaging process of ungendering that Serrano describes by treating gender as deeply felt internal knowledge that both Luna and Grady experience, or, to put it in Serrano's terms:

While I do not believe that there is an impenetrable wall that separates women from men, or queers from straights, I believe that one exists between our own *experiential gender*, which we live, feel, and experience firsthand, and the gender of others, which we merely perceive or make presumptions about but can never truly know in a tangible way. (113)

Both *Luna* and *Parrotfish* serve to critique the system of gender enforcement rather than questioning the identities of their trans characters. Speaking of her own experience, Serrano writes:

Most people whose physical and subconscious sexes coincide generally fall rather seamlessly into womanhood and manhood; as a result, they take for granted the identity of woman or man. My gender identity always felt more like a puzzle that I had to put together myself, one in which many of the

pieces were missing, where I had no clue as to what the final picture was supposed to be. (216)

This feeling of gender as a puzzle, of something incomplete, is a feeling that Grady expresses frequently in *Parrotfish*. While explaining his reasoning for choosing his name, Grady says, “It’s a name that could belong to either gender...Also, I like the gray part of it—you know, not black, not white. Somewhere in the middle” (6).

Grady feels a sense of ambivalence toward gender, even while asserting his identity as a boy. He says, “the truth was, inside the body of this strange, never-quite-right girl hid the soul of a typical, average, ordinary boy” (9). Rather than treat this as a contradiction, between Grady’s ambivalence and his certainty, the novel treats these sentiments as valid responses to a world that strictly enforces gender expression in a way that is difficult or impossible for some to negotiate. Although Grady is certain of his identity as a boy and how to embody that identity for himself, he is uncertain of how to embody this identity in relation to the perceptions and reactions of others.

Grady’s story also encapsulates the precariousness of certain gender labels. He says, “although I was happy with the identity of ‘boy,’ I wasn’t at all sure about making the transition to ‘man’” (75). Serrano expresses a similar hesitance with the label “woman,” saying, “I completely avoided the word ‘woman’ because it seemed to be too weighed down with other people’s expectations—expectations that I wasn’t sure I was interested in, or capable of, meeting” (2007 217). This delineating of labels as cultural and historical markers arises in Butler’s work, when she elucidates Beauvoir’s claim of becoming a woman by saying:

To be female...is a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have *become* a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman,' to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project. (1988 522)

The way Grady embodies his gender is affected by the perception of others and by the social and cultural weight of the label "man."

Language & Legibility

As previously mentioned, the explicit use of gender-related language plays a very important role in *Luna* and *Parrotfish*. The deliberate use of terms such as "transgender" and "gender dysphoria" brings issues of gender expression and embodiment to the forefront of these novels. Serrano recognizes the importance of this kind of language and responds to the argument that transgender-specific language reinforces the notion of intrinsic differences between transgender and cisgender people, thereby contributing to the marginalization of trans people. She says:

I do not believe that transsexuals and cissexuals are inherently different from one another. But the vastly different ways in which we are perceived and treated by others, and the way those differences impact our unique physical and social experiences, lead many transsexuals to see and understand gender very differently than our cissexual counterparts. And while transsexuals are extremely familiar with cissexual perspectives of gender (as they dominate in our culture), most cissexuals remain largely unfamiliar with trans

perspectives. Using only words that cissexuals are familiar with in order to describe my gendered experiences would be similar to a musician only choosing words that nonmusicians understand when describing music. It can be done, but something crucial would surely be lost in the translation. (2007 34)

Serrano emphasizes the importance of language. “To have an illuminating and nuanced discussion about my experiences and perspectives as a trans woman, we must begin to think in terms of words and ideas that accurately describe that experience” (34).

The notion of the importance of language to facilitate nuanced discussions comes repeatedly into play in the narratives of both *Luna* and *Parrotfish*. Regan finds herself explaining certain terms at several moments, such as when Luna comes out as trans to their friend Aly:

‘He’s a girl. He’s trans. Get it?’

Aly frowned a little. ‘Trans what?’

Right. She didn’t know the lingo. ‘Transgender,’ I told her. (190)

Later, Regan says, “There’s all kinds of psychological mumbo jumbo and names for this stuff. Dysphoria, Gender Identity Disorder, I don’t know. She can explain it better than me” (192). Regan’s role as a supportive sister is marked by awareness of such terms, though her knowledge of them is clearly incomplete.

Similarly, although Grady is clearly familiar with trans-specific language, as he mentions LGBTQ books and websites as part of his transition process, he is not

the first character to use such language. Rather, it is his gym teacher, Ms. Unger, who, after Grady informs her of his name change, remarks, “You’re transgender, aren’t you?” (49). She later remarks, “And you’re not the first one” (50). Ms. Unger’s familiarity with trans issues comes as a comfort to Grady, who says, “I was surprised at what a relief it was to be able to talk to somebody who knew about this, who wasn’t terribly shocked by the whole idea” (50). Ms. Unger’s use of trans specific terms allows their conversation to be more nuanced and more directly address Grady’s needs as a student. In *Excitable Speech*, Butler writes of how language constructs bodies as legible:

Language sustains the body not by bringing it into being or feeding it in a literal way; rather, it is by being interpellated within the terms of language that a certain social existence of the body first becomes possible. To understand this, one must imagine an impossible scene, that of a body that has not yet been given social definition, a body that is, strictly speaking, not accessible to us, that nevertheless becomes accessible on the occasion of an address, a call, an interpellation that does not 'discover' this body, but constitutes it fundamentally. We may think that to be addressed one must first be recognized, but...the address constitutes a being within the possible circuit of recognition and, accordingly, outside of it, in abjection. (5)

Though Ms. Unger is a generally supportive figure in the novel, her knowledge of trans specific language is meaningful to Grady in the way it allows his identity to be recognizable. Serrano also remarks on the benefits of treating language as a mutable

thing. In her own writing, she decides against including a glossary of trans specific terms, writing:

...a potential problem with the glossary approach is that it gives the impression that all of these transgender-related words and phrases are somehow written in stone, indelibly passed down from generation to generation...Even the terms that are used frequently today are regularly disputed, as individual transgender people may define words in a slightly different manner or have aesthetic or political preferences for certain words over others. (2007 23)

These novels treat language as something dynamic, meaningful in living terms rather than in strictly academic or abstract terms.

The treatment of gender as a fluid construct can have two disparate effects. On the one hand, a focus on gender fluidity and gender as construction can be used to deny trans people their identities, while also accusing trans people of reinforcing patriarchal norms. On the other hand approaching gender as fluid can allow for greater freedom of expression and expanded possibilities for living one's gender. In *Undoing Gender*, Butler writes:

The task of all of these movements seems to me to be about distinguishing among the norms and conventions that permit people to breathe, to desire, to love, and to live, and those norms and conventions that restrict or eviscerate the conditions of life itself. Sometimes norms function both ways at once, and sometimes they function one way for a given group, and another way for

another group. What is most important is to cease legislating for all lives what is livable only for some, and similarly, to refrain from proscribing for all lives what is unlivable for some. The differences in position and desire set the limits to universalizability as an ethical reflex. The critique of gender norms must be situated within the context of lives as they are lived and must be guided by the question of what maximizes the possibilities for a livable life, what minimizes the possibility of unbearable life or, indeed, social or literal death. (8)

Although these novels do not (and cannot) fully encapsulate the experience of being transgender, *Luna* and *Parrotfish* depict the various ways that Luna and Grady experience their gender and negotiate their own desires and identities with the expectations from those around them. In “Performance Piece,” Serrano writes, “Instead of trying to fictionalize gender, let's talk about the moments in life when gender feels all too real...Let's stop trying to deconstruct gender into nonexistence, and instead start celebrating it as inexplicable, varied, profound, and intricate” (88). These novels depict the ways that Luna and Grady, in their own particular situations, negotiate their gender experiences and work to construct livable lives for themselves. For Luna, that means removing herself from her home situation and looking outward. For Grady, it means learning to navigate his home environment. While these novels are limited in their means of representing the experiences of trans youth, any consideration of the limitations of these novels must also come with a demand for more texts with representations of trans characters. And while it's possible for

cisgender authors to write nuanced and informed depictions of trans characters, having trans narratives written by trans writers is crucial, and an area where YA is still lacking.

Chapter Three

Constructing New Realities: Happiness & Utopia in *Boy Meets Boy*

Introduction

In his predominantly critical look at trends in Young Adult literature, *Critical Foundations in Young Adult Literature*, Antero Garcia offers a surprisingly favorable view of YA author David Levithan. After detailing the “problematic representation of LGBTQI characters” (91) in YA literature, Garcia reports that he is “intrigued by the trajectory of David Levithan’s novels” (91). He writes, “In the decade that he had been publishing books, Levithan's stories have become more fluid in their depictions of gender and identity” (91). It’s no surprise that Levithan has captured Garcia’s attention, or that Garcia approaches Levithan’s work with such optimism. Levithan holds an interesting role in the world of YA literature. He is both a prominent and prolific author, having written and co-written twenty-one books in twelve years, as well as an editor of YA literature. Levithan is the founding editor of PUSH, a young adult imprint of Scholastic Press. PUSH is notable for publishing edgy and dark material and on its website writes that it prides itself on seeking out “new voices to ring out the complicated truth of today.” Levithan has become a force of his own, carving out his own space in the world of YA. His first novel, *Boy Meets Boy*, published in 2003, was widely acclaimed as a masterful love story between two teenage boys living in a world that takes creative leaps in constructing reality, presenting a kind

of alternate reality where the lines of sexuality and gender blur in fascinating and ultimately joyous ways. About the novel, Garcia remarks, “It is playful, silly, touching and campy” (91). Michael Cart shares Garcia’s enthusiasm for Levithan’s work, writing, “*Boy Meets Boy* employs a breathtakingly good mixture of realism and fantasy in its creation of an idealized world in which sexual differences are not castigated but celebrated!” (160).

Boy Meets Boy, as well as many of Levithan’s other novels, draws heavily off the legacy of Nancy Garden by creating a story about the love and romance between two non-heterosexual characters. Given his role in the world of YA publishing, Levithan is very much aware of this legacy of queer YA literature. In an article for OUT Magazine written for the ten year anniversary of the publication of *Boy Meets Boy*, Levithan comments on the path that had been paved for a new wave of queer YA authors in 2003, saying, “Many writers before us—Nancy Garden, Jacqueline Woodson, Francesca Lia Block, to name a few—had battered the dam and weakened it for us. So when our books were published in a wave that crested 10 years ago, the dam couldn’t help but break.” As an author, Levithan is aware of his position in the history of YA publishing. He is attentive to the work done before him to create the environment necessary for the publication of a novel like *Boy Meets Boy*, and mindful of that fact that his novel stands as part of a greater tradition of queer YA literature and will pave the way for new writers and forms of queer YA, in the same way that Garden did before him.

The Queer Utopia of *Boy Meets Boy*

Boy Meets Boy tells the story of Paul, a gay teenage boy living what he admits is a charmed life. In the opening sequence, as Paul goes out to a concert with his friends on a Saturday night, he says, “I move through the crowd with ease, sharing nods and smiling hellos. I love this scene, this floating reality” (2). From the beginning, Paul’s world is framed through lyrical, idyllic language, giving the sense that this world is not quite like our own, but beautiful nonetheless. The reader follows Paul as he navigates high school, has a falling out with his friend Joni, supports his friend Tony, who must contend with homophobic parents, and meets and falls in love with a boy named Noah. As Cart writes:

The heart of the story...is Paul’s meeting—and falling head over heels in love with—a new boy, Noah, who is an artist and a free spirit. The two proceed to fall out of love (to the reader’s distress) but then, sweetly, to fall back in love. There is no sex involved but there is lots of hugging and kissing and even more heart-warming, deeply satisfying expressions and manifestations of loving and caring. In its acceptance and celebration of human differences, this is one of the most important gay novels since *Annie on My Mind* and it represents a near-revolution in social attitudes and the publishing of GLBTQ books. (145)

Cart explicitly draws the connection between *Boy Meets Boy* and *Annie on My Mind* that many YA critics have drawn as novels that approach queer relationships with an eye toward love and intimacy rather than hardship and misery.

Boy Meets Boy has often been categorized as a utopian novel. In their critical examination of the evolution of queer representation in YA literature, Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins write, “*Boy Meets Boy* is a realistic story of the ins and outs of high school life and relationship, yet it is set in a utopian world in which the difference between heterosexual and homosexual attractions and love are about as significant as the difference between blondes and redheads” (15).

What does it mean to label the world of *Boy Meets Boy* a utopia? How does this label affect a reading of the novel? The study of utopias and utopianism is a burgeoning discipline that has had to combat a number of misunderstandings. In the introduction to their book, *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults*, Carrie Hintz and Elain Ostry write, “A popular use of the term ‘utopian’ is as a means to dismiss an impractical scheme or vision, but this usage fails to do justice to the seriousness of the body of utopian writing and utopian thoughts, as well as the variety of purposes for which utopian works are written” (2). In this way, a utopia can be brushed aside as trivial indulgence in unreachable goals. Utopian constructions are commonly denigrated for a lack of realism. In *The Concept of Utopia*, Ruth Levitas notes that utopia is a particularly slippery concept. She writes, “And what is utopia for? Does it help to change the world or to stabilise existing societies? Although we may initially think we know what

utopia is, when we try to define it, its boundaries blur and it dissolves before our eyes” (2). Both the definition and purpose of utopia are elusive. Though I understand the concern in narrowing their scope of examination, I’m less interested in prescribing boundaries around what can or cannot be considered utopian literature and more interested in the drive behind labelling *Boy Meets Boy* as utopian and what that label does to the novel and to the works of queer YA literature that came before and after *Boy Meets Boy*. What does it mean to create a utopia, or a queer YA utopia in particular?

In “Sexual Fantasy: The Queer Utopia of David Levithan’s *Boy Meets Boy*,” Amy Pattee examines the characteristics of a literary utopia. She writes:

...utopian literature can be considered any articulation of a social or political ideal that takes the ‘real’ world outside of the text into consideration as its fictional utopia is constructed. By presenting us with a fictional but recognizable ideal society, utopian fiction encourages active critique of the ‘real’ world outside its own literary boundaries. (157)

She writes, “Part of what a literary utopia does, then, is describe and normalize desire and, at the same time, build consensus around that desire” (168). Pattee asserts that a literary utopia, as exemplified in *Boy Meets Boy*, normalizes modes of desire by placing them at the forefront of the world. The romance between Paul and Noah is placed at the forefront of the novel, not delegated to the sidelines.

However, Pattee also argues that Levithan’s use of utopia is a necessity in creating a queer love story like the one in *Boy Meets Boy*, a means of escaping the

“compulsory heterosexuality” (159) constructed and reconstructed in the majority of YA texts. She writes, “In young adult literature, perhaps more so than in adult literature, homosexual romance requires a utopian setting for the romance’s conclusion to be considered genuinely blissful” (159). She argues that a story such as the one in *Boy Meets Boy* could not exist in a piece of YA literature that asserted itself as contemporary realism or grounded in reality. Pattee justifies her assertion by citing Christine Jenkins’ survey of queer YA literature from 1969 to 1997, in which Jenkins writes, “Given the gender-role restrictions, the prevalence of heterosexism and homophobia, and the perceived necessity of the closet, a YA novel in which, say, same-sex couple could freely walk hand in hand in public would hardly be considered a work of contemporary realism” (311).

Interestingly, Jenkins here refers to the expectation of queer YA literature and the perception of such literature as realistic or not. The notion of realism is particularly contentious when discussing queer YA literature. Garcia notes the pushback against Levithan’s novel for its lack of believability, writing, “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” (91). William Banks tells a similar story of teaching *Boy Meets Boy* in the classroom. He writes:

When I teach David Levithan’s debut novel *Boy Meets Boy*, students find it humorous and interesting (in that voyeuristic ‘that’s kinda weird’ way); they love the narrative voice and its attitude and they find the incongruity

of the drag-queen-star-quarterback both wonderfully exaggerated and oddly critical of the gendered world of football/team sports. Yet they are also quick to say, ‘But this book is too unrealistic! That would never happen!’ (34)

Narratives of queerness are preceded by the expectations of queerness as tragedy.

The assertion that utopia is a requirement for queer romance in YA literature diminishes the capacity and the intentionality of Levithan’s fictional worlds. Pattee writes:

Utopian fictions work to critique an existing social structure or condition by, ironically, refusing to refer to the critiqued element. Instead, by describing an ideal social or political circumstance, the utopia calls attention to or makes visible the conditions that disallow the emergence of this ideal. (169)

I argue that Levithan’s novels do something more complicated than this. To say that a utopian structure is required in order to craft a romance narrative between two gay teen boys trivializes the power and purpose of the world that Levithan has constructed. Rather, I argue that in writing *Boy Meets Boy*, Levithan has participated in what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner have termed, “queer culture building,” which they go on to explain is “not just a safe zone for queer sex but the changed possibilities of identity, intelligibility, publics, culture, and sex that appear when the heterosexual couple is no longer the referent or the privileged example of sexual culture” (548). Queer culture goes beyond being a

setting in which queerness is accepted and assimilated within an already heterosexist structure, but rather actively questions and deconstructs dominant ideologies of conceptualizing subjectivity and the subject's orientation to the world around them. Berlant and Warner argue, "Heterosexuality involves so many practices that are not sex that a world in which this hegemonic cluster would not be dominant is, at this point, unimaginable. We are trying to bring that world into being" (557).

Levithan, I argue, through *Boy Meets Boy*, is also trying to bring that world into being by creating the world which Paul and his friends inhabit. Levithan has been very explicit about his intention in writing for and about queer youth. In his Out Magazine article, Levithan writes, "The desire to write the novel, ultimately called *Boy Meets Boy*, came from wanting there to be a new kind of queer young adult literature. I was happy to be gay, and I wasn't finding very many characters in YA (or any other media) who felt the same way." Levithan is also very much aware of the mixed reception of his world. He goes on to say:

It made me sad—but not really surprised—when I was touring around in 2003 to find that for some people it was a radical notion to have a happy romantic comedy about two boys. Even some older gay readers were critical of the book for not being realistic, to which I would explain: You don't have to write a book in order to reflect reality. You can also write a book to create reality. Most teen readers, I found, understood this, because they were living their lives to create reality, not merely reflect it.

Levithan emphasizes the importance of a multiplicity of narratives for queer youth. His novel put forward a narrative previously missing from YA literature. *Boy Meets Boy* cannot encapsulate every experience of queerness but it does mark a shift in the form of queer YA narratives. Levithan is very aware of his writing's historical positioning in YA publishing. In an interview with fellow YA author Malinda Lo, Levithan remarks, "many of us have broken free of the misery plot that was prevalent in LGBT YA—which is not to say that the misery plot is in any way invalid or nonreflective of some LGBT teens' experience. But for so long, it was the only plot being offered...and that's not the case now at all." Levithan sought to create a world that playfully tackles the expectation of queer youth and subverts those expectations, opening a new path for queer YA literature.

Happiness & Good Feeling

Ahmed's theories of happiness are again useful for unpacking how happiness is constructed and functions in *Boy Meets Boy*. In her examination of *Annie on My Mind*, Ahmed writes, "queer life is already constructed as unhappy" (42). She later goes on to say, "the unhappy queer is made unhappy by the world that reads queers as unhappy" (43). Pattee, in her reading queer YA novels, employs the same affective trick with which these novels must contend in presuming that the queer life is an unhappy life. To say that a queer romance can only manifest in a utopian construction is to deem what is a valid and an invalid queer experience.

Pattee's writing also seems to be predicated on the assumption that happiness and utopia are intrinsically linked. However, utopian constructions are more complicated than this, as Rebecca Carol Noel Totaro writes in her essay, "Suffering in Utopia: Testing the Limits in Young Adult Novels." Totaro examines the perceived divide between utopia and dystopia, noting, "The division seems clear: utopias eliminate affliction while dystopias increase it; this is a false dichotomy, however, and if we move beyond the automatic impulse to define utopia as perfect and dystopia as evil, then we can examine these terms more critically" (127).

Happiness, as Ahmed notes, is particularly fickle. She writes, "Happiness can arrive in a moment and be lost by virtue of its recognition. Happiness as a feeling appears very precarious, easily displaced not only by other feelings, but even by happiness itself, by the how of its arrival" (33). Happiness is also anticipatory, predicated on expectations for the future. Ahmed asserts:

Happiness is an expectation of what follows, where the expectation differentiates between things, whether or not they exist as objects in the present... This is why happiness provides the emotional setting for disappointment even if happiness is not given: we just have to expect happiness from 'this or that' for 'this and that' to be experienceable as objects of disappointment. (41)

In Levithan's writing, utopia is not unmitigated happiness. If the expectation of the queer child in unhappiness and the nature of utopia is an ideal society,

Levithan blends these two notions together in *Boy Meets Boy*. Levithan's world allows space for multiple modes of reality. Ahmed mentions her worry that theoretical considerations of good feeling will come at the expense of bad feelings. She worries about "the very distinction between good and bad feelings that presumes that bad feelings are backward and conservative and good feelings are forward and progressive" (50). *Boy Meets Boy*, however, embraces such bad feeling rather than rejecting it. Levithan's utopia allows for, and even embraces, the bad feelings that Ahmed is afraid of rejecting. Tony tells Paul, "I love being with you and Joni and the rest of the group. I love being a part of that. But I can never really enjoy it, because I know that at the end, I'll be back here. Sometimes I can forget, and when I can forget, it's bliss" (151). For Tony, the expectation of happiness while being with friends is disturbed by his inevitable return home.

The emotional climax of the novel occurs when Tony calmly confronts his mother, only to immediately lose his composure once his mother leaves. Levithan writes, "He smiles, too. Then his smile falls and all of a sudden he is sobbing. He is shuddering and shaking and gasping. He has kept all this white noise inside him, and now some of it is coming out. His face is newborn raw, his arms wrap around his body" (155). The climax of the novel, rather than focusing on Tony finding happiness within or outside of the family structure, is a moment of Tony embracing bad feeling. Ahmed writes, "it is the very exposure of these unhappy effects that is affirmative, that gives us an alternative set of imaginings of what might count as a good or better life" (50). This is precisely where the potential of

Boy Meets Boy lies. Rather than ignoring existing modes of social repression, Levithan builds a world where over-the-top idealism exists next to them. Banks writes, “In presenting a ‘modern fairytale,’ Levithan disrupts mythical constructions that continue to pervade American culture, particularly myths about gender, sexuality, and religion, and creates a space in a critical pedagogy for reenvisioning the options before us” (34).

Boy Meets Boy, for example, opens with Paul going out on a Saturday night and explaining the unique social scene of his town. Paul tells us, “There isn’t really a gay scene or a straight scene in our town. They got all mixed up a while back, which I think is for the best...Most of the straight guys try to sneak into the Queer Beer bar. Boys who love boys flirt with girls who love girls” (1). Early on in the novel we are thrust into a kind of world where normative boundaries regarding sexuality and gender are blurred and that this blurring is source of joy and comfort for the characters. Levithan’s world, in fact, is borderline fantastical, as we are introduced to the motorcycling-wielding cheerleader team and the six-foot-four cross-dressing football quarterback/homecoming queen named Infinite Darlene. Paul tells us:

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. (16)

Boy Meets Boy begins with the protagonist Paul “rescuing” a friend from religious, overprotective parents for a Saturday night out. Paul tells us, “Tony is from the next town 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” (1). Despite the “utopia” that Levithan has created, Tony exists in a realm outside these possibilities. Tony’s decision toward the end of the novel to remain at home, despite Paul’s insistence that he run away and create his own life away from his parents, is a contradiction in Ahmed’s terms. Ahmed writes, “Maintaining public comfort requires that certain bodies ‘go along with it,’ to agree to where you are placed. To refuse to be placed would mean to be seen as trouble, as causing discomfort for others” (39). By confronting his mother, Tony disrupts the comfort of the household. Yet he refuses to go as far as leaving the household. He tells Paul, “I know that’s not right, Paul, but that’s the way things are. And right now, I’m going to have to work with the way things are” (157).

The reader also learns that Paul himself had to go through a process of gaining his parents’ acceptance from a young age, yet all we are told of that process is Paul’s statement, “It took my parents a couple of years. But eventually they got used to it” (10). He later tells us “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. The usual series of crushes, confusions, and intensities" (13). The novel's success lies in these seemingly inconsistent realities—that Paul's experience as a gay adolescent is both different and the same to the normative, heterosexual script for adolescence.

Pattee's conceptualization of *Boy Meets Boy* as utopia overlooks the discomfort created by these inconsistencies. A utopian construction reflects the failings of the current, dominant system, rather than the feasibility of the construction. Levithan presents the reader with a world that is similar, nearly identical, to the world outside the novel. However, despite the resemblances, there is still an undeniable distance between the two worlds. The space between the two creates both discomfort and excitement. Asserting that *Boy Meets Boy* is utopian because it presents at the forefront a happy queer couple ignores the discomfort and dissonance, as well as how that discomfort and dissonance can be productive.

In privileging and legitimizing certain modes of conceptualizing difference, Levithan builds worlds where love and intimacy are dominant modes of being, drawing toward Lauren Berlant's theorizing of love. In "Love, A Queer Feeling," Berlant examines constructions of love that pose it as "the core feeling of being and life, a primary feeling of sociality" (436). Garcia asserts that the question of love is present in almost all of Levithan's novels, writing about the "central question that...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" (92). Levithan's privileging of love over other modes of being allows the characters to create space in which their identity as a relationship to the world around them is indisputable. Berlant writes:

But rather than being overwhelmed by the opacity of big feeling, the word *love* dignifies the narratives that mark it. It holds open the possibility that, beyond all cynical knowledge and wisdom, reason and optimism might not be opposites--that there might be forms of nonviolent intimacy that will structure reliably what a life is, what fulfillment feels like, and what a text about people's lives will say. It will say 'love is condition of possibility, not the end of a story,' and in so saying it turns repetition into a condition of living, and love plots into genres of realism. (439-40)

In Berlant's writing, love is defined by repetition, by the turn and return to a nameable and expressible form of feeling. Berlant writes, "Love approximates a space to which people can return, becoming as different as they can be from themselves without being traumatically shattered; it is a scene of optimism for change, for a transformational environment" (448). Within Levithan's novel, love is a means through which characters can find or create space for creative re-imaginings.

Levithan grounds his work with what Pattee would argue to be more "realistic" constructions, such as Paul's relationship with his ex-boyfriend Kyle. The reader is introduced to Kyle immediately after being introduced to Infinite

Darlene. Paul says, “Kyle is the only straight boy I’ve ever kissed. (He didn’t realize he was straight at the time)...He said I’d tricked him. He said it to everyone” (18). Paul also tells us that he was once tackled by two high school wrestlers. At first confused by the attack, he says, “I realized that their grunts were actually insults—queer, faggot, the usual” (13). Paul is not surprised at their insults, which he describes as “the usual,” but surprised that they are being used against him. This casual insertion of such an incident stands in stark contrast to the idyllic world we’ve come to imagine. Levithan doesn’t imagine worlds where discrimination, prejudice, and violence don’t exist. Rather, he imagines worlds with greater space for acceptance and worlds that put alternate modes of conceptualizing difference at the forefront of his novels and legitimizes these modes.

Turning Toward the Past

I argue that Levithan’s narratives ground themselves in emotional reality while allowing space for creative reimagining, an idea that bell hooks explicates in “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness.” hooks writes, “We are transformed, individually, collectively, as we make radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world” (209). Levithan’s novels, and *Boy Meets Boy* in particular, allow reader and character the space to re-imagine their relationship to the world around them and how they are oriented in that world. *Boy Meets Boy* is

transformative because of its blending of realities, allowing for negative affect as well as creative reimaginings.

Levithan's urging toward a possible future that we see in *Boy Meets Boy* is takes a more drastic turn in his later writing. In 2013, ten years after the publication of *Boy Meets Boy*, Levithan published *Two Boys Kissing*, a novel that tells the story of two boys, Craig and Harry, who attempt to set the world record for longest kiss. With the help of their friends and family, the two boys live-stream the event and quickly become a symbol of hope and a site of contention for those watching. The novel is narrated by a Greek chorus of the generation of gay men lost during the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s, "shadow uncles" (3), as they refer to themselves, who are also watching Craig and Harry and those whose lives are connected to the two boys in various ways.

The narrators open the novel by linking their lives in the 1980s to the seemingly impossible present of these teenagers. They say, "Trust us: There is a nearly perfect balance between the past and the future. As we become the distance past, you become a future few of us would have imagined" (1). The narration locates the novel in a particular historical position, carrying the weight of the past while rushing forward toward the future. It is this kind of linking to the past that Ahmed considers crucial to a more affectively complex feminist politics. Ahmed writes:

The demand that we be affirmative makes those histories [of injustice] disappear by reading them as a form of melancholia (as if you hold onto

something that is already gone). These histories have not gone: we would be letting go of that which persists in the present. To let go would be to keep those histories present. (50)

By ignoring the injustices of the past, she argues, we ensure that those injustices remain alive and present. *Two Boy Kissing* refuses to ignore that history. In fact, the historical positioning of *Two Boys Kissing*, the connecting of these two generations, is intrinsic to the substance and capacity of the novel. In his interview with Malinda Lo, Levithan remarked on his thinking behind the narrative choice, saying, “I feel my gay generation is really a hinge generation...I liked the idea of using that hinge to some effect — trying to see how the generation above mine would see the generation below mine, and in doing so paint a picture of how it was then and how it is now.” Levithan explicitly created a novel in which the past informs the progress of the present. After a character in *Two Boys Kissing* is prevented from committing suicide, the narrators go on to imagine the future this character will have and how that future holds their legacy as a generation, saying, “We can see that future self. Even if you can’t. We can see him. He is made up not just of your present soul, but of all of our souls, all our possibilities, all our deaths. He is the opposite of our negation” (187). In *Two Boys Kissing*, the present is as much a utopia to the narrators as the world of *Boy Meets Boy* is to the reader.

The novel itself advocates that embracing the injustice of the past can be a productive and useful means of imagining the future rather than solely

burdensome. The narrators say, “We are a spirit-burden you carry... We try to make it as light a burden as possible. And at the same time, when we see you, we cannot help but think of ourselves... We sewed ourselves, a thread’s width, into your history” (1). The past is intrinsically linked to the fabric of the present, a sentiment that the novel both opens and ends with, as the narrators conclude the novel saying, “We are gone, and maybe our spirits are gone, too, as the ones who knew us stop remembering us so often, or come to join us. But the spirit of that strength—it carries through. It is there for the taking. You just have to reach for it and find it” (154). Levithan is able to make this kind of affirmative turn while wholly embracing a history of inequality and injustice.

With novels such as *Boy Meets Boy* and *Two Boys Kissing*, Levithan has forged a space of radical potential for the future of queer YA literature. As Levithan says in *Out Magazine*, “As with so many things, what once seemed like hopeful thinking now feels beautifully inevitable.” At the time when *Annie on My Mind* was published, a novel like *Boy Meets Boy* seemed impossible, yet because of authors like Nancy Garden and Julie Anne Peters, as well as a number of others, *Boy Meets Boy* not only exists, but is an widely celebrated piece of YA literature. Levithan has succeeded in creating a novel full of love and hope and beauty that relies heavily on the struggle and tragedy that came before and thoroughly embraces this reliance, not as a burden, but as another instance of hope.

Conclusion

In their article, “Beyond Relevance to Literary Merit,” Soter and Connors argue that YA literature deserves to be recognized as a genre with literary merit. They write, “If we ever expect young adult literature to find a place in the classroom, then those of us who work in the trenches or who have a passion for thoughtful, smartly written books must be willing to subject it to the same high standards we hold for adult literature” (66). However, critical considerations of queer YA texts can be challenging because of the limited number of texts that exists. Miller elucidates this point, writing, “When there are so few books to choose from, it becomes difficult to critique a genre for fear of limiting resources and accessibility for a group of readers who desperately need these novels” (84). When there are so few queer narratives, to criticize seems to discredit them entirely, further limiting the number of viable queer texts. This is the value of the reparative process and why it is particularly valuable as a means of examining queer YA literature. Though the reparative process, we are able to find value in existing queer narratives while also demanding for a multiplicity of queer narratives in future YA publications.

In his article “Literacy, Sexuality, and the Value(S) of Queer Young Adult Literature,” William Banks contends that queer narratives for adolescents are important because they provide modes for conceptualizing queer experiences. He comments on:

the value of narratives to help give our lives structure, to cast our experiences in language and to provide a context for our seemingly individual experiences. These structures render certain kinds of experiences possible; by viewing

characters coming out to both resistant and accepting parents, friends, and teachers, young readers can see the possibilities available to them. (34)

Annie on My Mind also affirms the importance of texts for LGBTQ youth. To better understand their experiences, Liza and Annie share the book *Patience and Sarah* by Isabella Miller, a novel with gay characters originally written as YA but published for adults in 1969. Liza says:

I did read the book, and Annie reread it, and it helped us discuss the one part of ourselves we'd only talked around so far. We read other books, too, in the next week, trying to pretend we weren't there when we checked them out of the library, and we bought—terrified—a couple of gay magazines and newspapers. I felt as if I were meeting part of myself in the gay people I read about. Gradually, I began to feel calmer inside, more complete and sure of myself, and I knew from the way Annie looked as we talked, and from what she said, that she did also. (144)

Queer narratives, such as the ones to which Liza and Annie turn, provide a context in which the two girls can situate themselves. These textual representations of queerness become crucial points by which Liza and Annie establish queerness as part of their identities, as both individuals and as a couple. The texts examined in the previous chapters are important not just because of the queer narratives, but because these narratives are constructed to make possibilities that were previously closed off in YA literature visible. As Banks writes, “The texts we read make certain kinds of lives possible by presenting us with myths, values, and images that remind us of the options before us” (34).

YA texts such as the ones discussed above, though not without flaw, render possible new modes for constructing queer narratives. As Sedgwick writes, “What we can best learn from such practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them” (150-51). The YA genre, as a genre marked by heterosexism, may be inimical to queer narratives, but the texts above illustrate that there is value to be found in existing queer YA texts. Searching for the value that exists in these texts not only reflects the texts themselves, but also the possibilities they opened for queer YA literature in the future.

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