# Notes on an Anxious Genre: Toward an Alternative Pedagogy of Queer Young Adult Fiction

by

Derritt Mason

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**Abstract**

My dissertation brings theorists of queer childhood (Bruhm and Hurley 2004; Edelman 2004; Stockton 2009) into conversation with contemporary North American queer young adult fiction (queer YA), a genre that I suggest has come to bear a heavy pedagogical burden in the wake of recent intense media interest in queer youth suicide. Many queer YA critics evince a persistent investment in visibly LGBT characters as antidotes to the social alienation of queer youth; I argue that this emphasis on the didactics of visibility ignores how texts signify and circulate queerly in complex and productive ways. With the aim of enriching the array of critical approaches to queer YA, this dissertation proposes an alternative pedagogy of the genre—a pedagogy of anxiety—that charts the critical anxieties of queer YA critics and deploys them as a springboard for further analysis of gender, sexuality, identity, temporality, and the creative strategies YA characters use for making sense of themselves and the world around them.

Situating queer YA vis-à-vis its relationship to the genre of children's literature, the post-war rise of youth culture, and the "invention" of gay youth in the 1970s (Savin-Williams 2005), my first chapter provides an overview of queer YA from 1969 to the present day. I outline those critical anxieties surrounding visibility, transparent sexual identity, and affect that have been central to queer YA criticism for decades (Hanckel and Cunningham 1976; Cart and Jenkins 2006). Instead of attempting to "cure" the genre of these anxieties, I consider recent children's literature criticism (Gubar 2011), theories of queer temporality (Muñoz 2009), and psychoanalyst Adam Phillips' work on worry (1993) to argue for an embrace of queer YA as anxious genre: one perpetually uncertain about its own constitution; a genre whose paradoxical temporalities and provocative ambiguities are effectively approached through the "affective economy" (Ahmed 2004) of anxiety through which it circulates. In the following chapter, I combine

theories of queer pedagogy (Britzman, Luhmann 1998); Stockton's notions of delay and sideways growth; and the halting yet future-oriented temporality of anxiety to describe my pedagogical approach to queer YA. Crucial here are concepts of risk and reading: I explore the former through Isabelle Holland's *The Man Without a Face*, and conclude the chapter by illustrating the latter through two novels by Francesca Lia Block, which position anxious reading as a mechanism for composing rickety stories that make temporary sense of ourselves and our relations with others.

Interestingly, while critics of queer YA seem to have forgotten about the potential of queer anti-identities, the genre itself has not. My third chapter revisits John Donovan's groundbreaking *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* (1969)—disparaged by many contemporary critics for its ambiguous ending—to argue that the novel sets up queer YA "problem novel" (Cart 2010) conventions for decades to come and simultaneously demonstrates an anxious and subversive relationship to these same generic conventions. Through a cluster of three contemporary novels (Selvadurai 2005; Hand 2010; St. James 2007), I explore the queernesses and anxious temporalities of YA that are in excess of the teleology of "growing up," LGBT visibility and "problem novel" tropes: relationships with animals, cousin-love, and a risk-taking fetish, for example. These queer relations and forms of "sideways growth" (Stockton), which are trumped in the minds of critics by the presence of openly LGBT characters, provide rich possibilities for imagining and theorizing queer subjectivity and relationality.

My final chapter considers the *It Gets Better* anti-bullying project through the lens of children's literature, tracking the adult desires and anxieties that are contained within the project's repetitive narrative of progression. I argue that material evidence of young people writing back to *It Gets Better*—i.e. online fanfiction that mashes up the project with the popular

television show *Glee*—complicates Jacqueline Rose's (1984) argument about children literature's impossibility and the genre's untouched middle space between adult author and young reader. If children's literature has been neglected in the academy (Clark 2003), I argue that it's impossible to do so any longer given that the theoretical lenses of children's literature allow us to explore the textual and cultural manifestations of that perpetually provocative and anxious relationship between adult and child.

**Preface**

This thesis is an original work by Derritt Mason. Portions of Chapter 4 appeared as Mason, Derritt, "On Children's Literature and the (Im)Possibility of It Gets Better," *English Studies in Canada* 38.3-4 (2012): 83-104.

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## Introduction

Waiting for Utopia

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"Can Young Gays Find Happiness in YA Books?" ask Frances Hanckel and John Cunningham in response to the first four North American young adult (YA) novels featuring gay themes, including John Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*, published in 1969, and Isabelle Holland's *The Man Without a Face,* which followed in 1972. Writing in the *Wilson Library Bulletin* in 1976, Hanckel and Cunningham celebrate homosexuality's newfound presence in YA while lamenting the fact that the eight primary characters in these four novels contend with five pairs of divorced parents, including two alcoholics; four deaths, one by violence; and four car crashes that culminate in "one mutilation, one head injury, and five fatalities" (534). The important work of positively role modeling gay youth and properly educating heterosexual readers, Hanckel and Cunningham claim, is undone by the persistent twinning of homosexuality and hopelessness: "taken as a group," they write, "these novels have two salient characteristics: Being gay has no lasting significance and/or costs someone a terrible price" (532). For Hanckel and Cunningham, visible homosexuality in YA is important and groundbreaking; potentially harmful, however, is the shape this visibility takes.

To rectify this alarming trend, Hanckel and Cunningham propose a series of criteria for writing and evaluating gay YA novels. This ambitious set of recommendations, entitled "What to Do Until Utopia Arrives," calls for more visibly gay and lesbian characters in YA; fewer stereotypical, harmful consequences to a character's coming-out; less emphasis on "gayness" as major plot point; more illustrated children's books about homosexuality; "more realistic portrayals of affection and falling in love"; and "accurate, sympathetic pictures of gays for

nongays, so that they can learn to appreciate and not fear differences in sexual and affectational preference" (532-33). At the centre of these recommendations lies a familiar, linear model of growth, wherein a period of adolescent "crisis or conflict" ultimately results in "a positive self-identity" in adulthood (528). It is critical, Hanckel and Cunningham further claim, to combine the authentic experiences of gay youth with hope, "a hope that is life-affirming and encourages the reader to consider and develop a workable moral philosophy" (528); this hope would stick to gay youth, resignify what it means to be young and growing up gay, and provide young readers with the non-pathological role models that are integral to representing the "growth and development of gay identity as a valid life choice" (532). However, Hanckel and Cunningham's essay concludes anxiously and with uncertainty about whether or not the genre is on a trajectory that will see these desires fulfilled.

Thirty years later in 2006, Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins authored *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004*, a book-length volume dedicated to summarizing and assessing the pedagogical usefulness of the nearly 200 queer YA titles that were in circulation at the time. As these authors point out, the number of queer YA novels being published increased exponentially over the years, "growing from an average of one title per year in the 1970s to four per year in the 1980s to seven per year in the 1990s to over twelve titles per year in the early years of the 21st century," which indicates a rapidly growing market for and intensifying cultural interest in this genre of text (xvi). While Cart and Jenkins provide updated language and criteria for evaluating the broader array of novels available, their anxieties are strikingly similar to Hanckel and Cunningham's in spite of the three elapsed decades and massive North American cultural changes between their studies; utopia, it seems, has yet to arrive. Like Hanckel and Cunningham, Cart and Jenkins want to do away with

stereotypes and representations of depressed and suicidal queer youth who are also the perpetual and inevitable victims of anti-queer violence—what Eric Rofes calls the trope of "martyr-target-victim" (41)—and foster greater acceptance for queer youth through the transformative potential of fiction. Cart and Jenkins espouse a "continued belief in the power of books to help teen readers understand themselves and others, to contribute to the mental health and well-being of GLBTQ youth, and to save lives—and perhaps even to change the world—by informing minds and nourishing spirits," and like Hanckel and Cunningham, Cart and Jenkins privilege texts that "offer positive portrayals of homosexual characters" while dealing "compassionately and honestly with homosexual themes and issues," navigating that delicate dyad of authentic realism and an ostensibly utopian hope (xviii). Cart and Jenkins also share with Hanckel and Cunningham a desire for queer YA to follow the same forward-oriented, linear, teleological trajectory as queer youth themselves: the transition from troubled adolescence to a stable and sexually resolved adulthood. "Surely it is time for GLBTQ literature to abandon the traditional and too-easy equation of homosexuality with violent death," they argue; "Suicide has already more or less disappeared from the pages of GLBTQ novels as this fiction has made the transition from problem novel to contemporary realistic fiction. Now, like the rest of young adult literature," Cart and Jenkins insist, "it must continue to come of age *as literature*" (166).

Cart and Jenkins conclude *The Heart Has Its Reasons* in tandem with Hanckel and Cunningham by offering a series of recommendations that evince persistent anxieties about enduring invisibilities and the degree and shape of existing queer visibility in queer YA. Calling for "more GLBTQ books featuring characters of colour, more lesbian and bisexual characters, more transgender youth, and more characters with same-sex parents," Cart and Jenkins maintain that "the literature…needs to be more all-inclusive to offer a better reflection of the complexities

of the real world and to insure that all young readers might see their faces reflected in it" (165). They continue:

> [GLBTQ YA] needs to be evaluated on the basis of the authenticity of its portrayal of GLBTQ adults and teens and the world they inhabit but it also needs to be evaluated as literature. Does it offer multidimensional characters? Does it have a setting rich in verisimilitude? Does it have not only an authentic but an original voice? Does it offer fresh insights into the lives of GLBTQ people? Does it offer other innovations in terms of narrative strategy, structure, theme? Or is it the same old story, told in the same old way that readers have encountered countless times in the past? (166).

Cart and Jenkins' questions invite us to ask: what is an "authentic" and "original" GLBTQ voice? What constitutes a "fresh insight" into queer lives? What is the content of "the same old story," and why is it no longer of any use? Can these questions and objectives, resolute since the 1970s, ever be properly and completely answered and fulfilled, these anxieties entirely addressed?

My assertion in this dissertation is no, they cannot. This does not mean, however, that we should stop exploring them. Instead, it is productive to shift focus and consider not only why we are witnessing an explosion of interest in pinning down the most desirable representational strategies for the genre, but also how queer YA criticism functions as an illuminating index of the adult anxieties that surround the genre and the problems and questions regarding how adults do and/or should address queer youth. As I will illustrate in this dissertation, Hanckel and Cunningham and Cart and Jenkins are far from the only critics who demonstrate anxieties that speak to the forms of visibility in and the generic maturity of queer YA. In conversation with these critics, and compelled by the recent amount of media attention focused on queer youth and

the genre of literature that aims to address them, my dissertation has three broad objectives at its core. First, I suggest that investments in visibility and forward-oriented, teleological growth are not the most pedagogically rich, rewarding, or productive ways of approaching queer YA; I argue that invisible, subtle, latent, and sideways-oriented queernesses are as worthy of attention as visible manifestations of nonheterosexual relations in queer YA. Next, I demonstrate how queer YA texts and characters themselves often anxiously oppose the models of visibility and growth privileged by queer YA critics, instead valuing delay over growth and the infirm grounds of queerness over the stability and teleology of sexual identity. Crucial to my argument is the concept of anxiety—its materialization in criticism and literature, complex temporalities, and productivity as critical lens—and an embrace of queer YA as an anxious genre: a genre constantly uncertain about its own constitution, a perpetually shifting body of texts that looks nervously to the future while simultaneously turning backward and sideways to other texts and genres in order to understand itself. Along these lines, this project involves a reconsideration and recuperation of some early queer YA titles seen by contemporary critics as too harmful, too laden with stereotype and negative affect to be of any current didactic value to young readers. Third, I pursue an investigation of children's literature—the larger field in which critics typically situate YA—and the applicability of its theoretical approaches to cultural texts outside the genre itself. In particular, I examine Dan Savage and Terry Miller's anti-bullying YouTube project, *It Gets Better*, which has much in common with the didactic aims of queer YA according to the genre's critics. Like Cart and Jenkins, I believe in the transformative power of texts, broadly speaking; maximizing the benefits of this power, however, requires deeper consideration of its theoretical and pedagogical stakes.

Before elaborating further on my conceptualization of queer YA as anxious genre, I will provide some background on the queer theories of childhood and adolescence that comprise the foundation of this dissertation.

**Growing Up and Growing Sideways: The Queerness and Queer Theories of Childhood and Adolescence**

I am not the first to consider the queerness of adolescence or challenge normative models of "growing up": in recent years, queer theory has developed a close relationship with children and adolescents—in particular, the figural "Child"—building on Freud's psychoanalytic writings on child sexuality.[1] Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley's *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* (2004), and Kathryn Bond Stockton's *The Queer Child, or, Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (2009) broke new ground and ushered in queer childhood studies as an exciting new branch of queer theory that considers the multiple ways children—figural, fictional, and real—embody and perform queer movements, desires, and relations, and/or signify in opposition to queerness. These theorists highlight the semantic queernesses of children alongside the multiple contradictions and paradoxes inherent to our cultural understandings of the child.[2] Bruhm and Hurley, for example, identify a "dominant narrative about children: first, children are (and should

[1] See "Infantile Sexuality," part of Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905).
[2] Through the multiple definitions of "child" in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, we get a distinct sense of the term's slipperiness: (1) a young human being below the age of puberty or below the legal age of majority; (2) an unborn or newborn human being; (3) a son or daughter of any age ("Child"). Instability is contained within even the first definition: not only does the legal age of majority fluctuate given cultural contexts, but according to this definition, the category "child" also describes what might be otherwise known as youth, adolescents, teenagers, and/or young adults. Taken together, all three *OED* definitions allow for a "child" that could be anything from a foetus to a senior citizen. Although this dissertation focuses primarily on the category of "youth," which I will explore shortly, queer theory's interrogation of the child and its relationship to the temporality of "growing up" are central to the theoretical work I undertake.

stay) innocent of sexual desires and intentions. At the same time, however, children are also officially, tacitly, assumed to be heterosexual" (ix). Stockton points to how contemporary children are legal paradoxes: they are seen as incapable of consenting to their own sexual activity, yet they can be tried as adults when their crimes are deemed heinous enough to warrant it (*Queer Child* 16). These tensions inherent to the figure of the Child—between innocence and experience, purity and sexuality, helplessness and agency—are precisely what have attracted the interest of queer theorists.

Summarizing queer theory's contribution to childhood studies, Kenneth Kidd argues that there are "two traditions of child relation in queer theory, one concerned with queering the child, or exposing the child's latent queerness, and the other more interested in underscoring the Child's normative power" ("Queer Theory's Child" 183). These theoretical camps, Kidd points out, are not mutually exclusive, although some critics are more invested in one perspective over the other. In *No Future*, which belongs to the latter camp, Edelman argues that the Child is central to what he calls "reproductive futurism," the heteronormative ideology that structures how we think about politics (2). For Edelman, the Child—as symbol of the future—is the figure upon which all political decisions are based and justified, and so queerness should negate the child, or name "the side of those *not* 'fighting for the children,' the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism" (*No Future* 3). But for the other camp—theorists like Stockton, Bruhm, and Hurley—the ambiguities that have haunted childhood since the eighteenth century are precisely what make the child inherently queer; the "queer child" is a method for conceiving (of) the child that embraces these ambiguities while strategically evading definition through the deconstructionist theoretical mechanisms of queer

theory.[3] For Bruhm and Hurley, the temporality of childhood allows space for a child's queer desires to manifest themselves: children's queer behaviour is (generally speaking) acceptable so long as it is "rationalized as a series of mistakes or misplaced desires" experienced while growing up into heterosexual adulthood (xiv). Yet, like Edelman, Bruhm and Hurley also recognize the child's symbolic heft: how the child functions as "a metaphor, a kind of ground zero for the edifice that is adult life and around which narratives of sexuality get organized" (xiii).

Similar to Bruhm and Hurley's queer child who may deviate en route to adulthood, childhood for Stockton is a space of "sideways growth," where the cubic mass of children's desires and erotic investments sits outside forward-moving narratives of progression from childhood through adolescence into heterosexual adulthood (*Queer Child* 7). Sideways growth is moreover a space of delay, wherein children negotiate an ambivalent relationship to growing up by engaging in sideways relations with a range of queer objects that resist the normative forward trajectory that finds its telos in adulthood. For Stockton, sideways growth "suggests that the width of a person's experience or ideas, their motives or their motions, may pertain at any age," which further blurs the boundaries between categories of age, "bringing 'adults' and 'children' into lateral contact of surprising sorts" (*Queer Child* 11). Stockton argues that all children are queer, yet the gay child illuminates the queerness of all children: the gay child feels herself

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[3] There is a significant body of work that explores the cultural ambiguities of children in and around the Romantic era, when investment in "childhood" as cultural category intensified through changes in the legal status of children (especially in terms of labour and criminality). Increased medical interest in puberty and its attendant incoherencies also served to heighten adult anxieties about the hazy boundaries between child- and adulthood. See, for example, Anja Müller's *Fashioning Childhood in the Eighteenth Century* (Ashgate, 2006), Richard C. Sha's *Perverse Romanticism* (John Hopkins UP, 2009) and my own "Raising Jack Perverse: On Childhood, Perversity, and James Hearne's Case" (*Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* 3.1, 2011).

growing towards a "question mark"—an uncertainty about the possibility of a future queer self, given heteronormativity's pervasiveness—that often motivates her sideways relations (*Queer Child* 7). What gives us access to the queerness of children is fiction: the historical archive, for Stockton, is inadequate for the telling of stories about queer children (*Queer Child* 2). As a result, the queer child exists as a kind of fiction herself, one created by adult authors and the retrospective imaginings of adult queers who reflect on their own proto-gay childhoods. In this way, Stockton's view of queer childhood as fictional is similar to Jacqueline Rose's argument in *The Case of Peter Pan, or, The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (1984), wherein Rose argues that the Child of children's fiction is only ever the product of adult desires and anxieties: this Child "sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver), but where neither of them enter the space in between" (1-2). For Rose, who will become important to my broader discussion of children's literature in chapter four, there is no real child to whom children's literature is addressed (1). Stockton's theories, which are also integral to this dissertation, will be further elaborated upon in subsequent chapters.

As rich as the corpus of queer childhood studies has become over recent years, Kidd points out that queer theory rarely addresses itself to the field of children's literature ("Queer Theory's Child"). Indeed, Stockton, Bruhm and Hurley, and Edelman's volumes leave texts written ostensibly for young audiences largely unexamined. And noteworthy queer theorists working outside of queer childhood studies—like Sara Ahmed, José Esteban Muñoz, and David Halperin—have recently produced exciting and original critical work with the notions of happiness, hope, and risk, terms that have circulated in queer YA and criticism since the genre's inception. Yet, the fruitful conversations occurring within the disciplines of queer theory and

children's literature are, at present, largely insulated from one another. "While children's literature scholars know their queer theory," Kidd explains, "queer theorists don't seem to know much about children's literature" ("Queer Theory's Child" 184).

One broad objective of this dissertation is to partially fill this void and put queer theory—specifically, queer theories of childhood and pedagogy—into conversation with YA. Part of my project involves expanding Stockton's work into the realm of queer YA and considering what "growing up" and "sideways growth" look like in conversation with the genre and its attendant anxieties. While many critics insist that queer YA should represent youth who progress from martyr-target-victims to out-and-proud gay adolescents, it is noteworthy that the genre itself contains so many narratives and characters that evince strong attachments to delay and resist cohesive identities. In chapters two and three, for example, I return to Donovan and Holland's novels from the 1960s and 70s to elucidate how their characters are attached and attracted to delay instead of growth, and desire sexual ambiguity over gay identity. Chapter three explores some more recent novels, including Shyam Selvadurai's *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* and Elizabeth Hand's *Illyria*, to further contemplate the erotics of delay. In chapter four, I consider the usefulness of sideways growth as a trope for tracking the circulation and adaptation of Dan Savage and Terry Miller's *It Gets Better* anti-bullying YouTube project.

My examination of anxiety's temporality lends an affective dimension to Stockton's spatial/temporal metaphor: I explore anxiety as an affect that attends sideways growth, consider how and what characters seem to feel as they simultaneously grow and attempt to delay growth, and describe this rhythm as mirroring the temporality of anxiety. Anxiety, in this dissertation, constitutes the "affective economy" (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*) in which queer YA and its criticism circulate. In my first three chapters, I illustrate how anxiety, which looks towards the

future with what Adam Phillips calls "an ironic form of hope" (56) while simultaneously "attempt[ing] to arrest the passage of time" (48), is a useful lens for putting the temporal and affective structures of queer YA into conversation with one another. While Stockton's analysis is moreover limited to child-populated texts written by and aimed at adults, my fourth chapter further considers sideways growth and delay in relation to spaces that are largely youth-created: those of online fanfiction communities. And while Rose's interest in how adult desires come to constitute children's fiction deeply informs my first chapter, in which I examine those critical anxieties that swirl about queer YA, my fourth chapter will also push at the limits of Rose's claims; through my exploration of fanfiction, that chapter aims to probe those points of contact between adult-authored texts and young audiences, the space between adult/child that Rose argues remains unentered by either group. Throughout this dissertation, anxiety assumes a variety of different forms and surfaces in multiple spaces: in queer YA criticism, as critics attempt to stabilize the didactic aims of the genre; in the temporalities of growth and relationality that queer YA characters demonstrate; in the reading practices that I describe as fundamental to a pedagogy of anxiety; and in the relationship between the genre of queer YA, as described by critics, and the texts themselves, which circulate in defiance of how critics imagine their didactic effects.

**Queer Theory, Reading, and Pedagogy**

Given that my dissertation draws on many terms with ambiguous definitions, especially "queer" and "young adult," I feel it necessary to take a further step back and describe how I understand the operation of these terms. While "queer" has come to be deployed as an identity-based placeholder that describes non-normative sexualities and modes of gender presentation—often appearing in lieu of bulky acronyms like "LGBTTQI": Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual,

Transgender, Two-Spirited, Queer/Questioning, Intersex—"queer" via queer theory aims, broadly, to unsettle and challenge popular conceptions of and investments in identity and normalcy. Queer theory distinguished itself from gay and lesbian studies, its academic predecessor, through a commitment to disrupting the notion of identity, an embrace of sexual shame as the ground for collectivity, and a recuperation of not only the gay and lesbian voices absented from the canon, but also modes of relationality—public sex, cruising, kinks and fetishes, activism in the face of HIV/AIDS—that have been demeaned and labelled perverse.[4] In her introduction to a 1991 special issue of *differences* entitled "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities," Teresa De Lauretis coins queer theory to "convey[] a double-emphasis—on the conceptual and speculative work involved in discourse production, and on the necessary critical work of deconstructing our own discourses and their constructed silences" (iv). "'Queer,'" De Lauretis continues, "juxtaposed to the 'lesbian and gay' of the subtitle, is intended to mark a certain critical distance from the latter, by now established and often convenient, formula" (iv). In *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, Annamarie Jagose builds on the rich corpus of queer theory that appeared in De Lauretis' wake—including key texts by Judith Butler on gender performance (1993) and Edelman on the discursive production of homosexuality (1994)—by offering an

[4] Gay and lesbian studies appeared in the 1970s and focused primarily on the integration of gay and lesbian histories that had been previously omitted from academic discourse. It tread the same waters as the homophile (or gay rights) movement from the 1950s and 60s, and was invested in promoting visibility, civil rights, and tolerance for gays and lesbians. Queer theory, uninterested in tolerance and springing from the more radical gay liberation and lesbian feminist movements, seeks to prove the pervasiveness of queerness, demonstrate the impossibility of clarifying the murky waters that surround sex and sexuality, and expose stable categories of sexual identity as fantastic products of pervasive heteronormative ideology. See Jagose's *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, which provides a comprehensive overview of queer theory's emergence in the context of social and political changes in the latter half of the twentieth century. See also Berlant and Warner (1998), Bersani (1989, 1995), Duggan (2002), Sedgwick (2003, 2008), and Warner (1999), among many others cited throughout this dissertation, for more on the politics of sexual shame, respectability, public sex, HIV/AIDS, and queer theory's interrogation of normalcy and normativity.

appropriately loose definition of "queer." "Queer," Jagose writes, "describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire," relations that claim heterosexuality as the normative model for sexual being (and are often described in queer theory as "heteronormativity") (3).[5] Within queer theory, however, there are debates and discussions about what kind of work queer should be doing and how the term should signify, while still recognizing that elasticity and fluidity are queer's constituent characteristics.[6]

My use of "queer" in this dissertation follows queer theory's commitments to disrupting instead of reinforcing notions of stable and coherent identity, and to reclaiming texts and relational modes that queer YA critics have ignored and/or pushed to the margins. With a queer hermeneutic in mind, I will argue that most criticism of queer YA overlooks the productive influence of queer theory and instead privileges the visibility of certain kinds of (hopeful, resolved) LGBT identity. I also intend "queer" to inflect upon and *queer* (as a verb) YA itself—as I will soon explain in-depth, I envision YA as an incoherent and perpetually shifting body of texts: queer YA as anxious genre is queer in its representation of non-normative gender and sexuality *and* its resistance to easy description, definition, and coherence; queer YA is anxious in its perpetual turns back and forward in attempts to describe and define itself *and* its provocation of so much critical anxiety surrounding the way adults are (or should be) addressing and

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[5] Jagose's definition draws on Sedgwick's frequently cited description of queer: "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning where the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically" (*Tendencies* 8). As Edelman writes in *No Future*, "queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one" (17).

[6] See, for example, the conversation between Edelman (who sees queerness as standing in opposition to what he calls "reproductive futurism" (2)) and José Esteban Muñoz (for whom queerness is allied with a hopeful futurity); I address these two theorists and their views on queerness and temporality in chapter one.

representing youth. Anxiety, here, both complements and supplements queerness: anxiety speaks to the affective economy through which the genre circulates, while itself evincing a queer temporality that places delay and forward-oriented growth in tension with one another. Anxiety points to a crucial and relatively unaddressed affective dimension of queerness in the context of queer YA, one that I focalize—in chapter one—through queer theories of childhood and temporality.

With these queer and anxious methodologies in mind, I resist a definition of queer YA that hinges on visibly LGBT characters. I do not seek to cogently define queer YA but instead track, explore, and probe the anxious motions and queer relations that accumulate around and inside texts including but not limited to those that might be contained within a volume like Cart and Jenkins'. I have selected texts that are ostensibly about and for young people, and generate and/or speak to the attendant anxieties of the adult/youth address.[7] My chosen texts include early works of queer YA that contain purportedly harmful messages (Holland and Donovan's novels, as discussed in chapters two and three); contemporary texts that turn back to and draw upon such

[7] Here, I have *Homographesis* (1994) in mind, in which Edelman deploys "gay" to "unpack[] representations of gay male sexuality in terms of the anxieties condensed therein about the logic of representation as such" while simultaneously critiquing and destabilizing "gay" as identity category (xiv). "That the interrogation of identity proceeds in the name of the identity it sets out to interrogate testifies…to the importance…of resisting the temptation to set aside any pre-defined space for a fantasmatically coherent and recognizable…'gay' identity," Edelman writes, "while continuing…to affirm the energies—always potentially *resistant* energies—that can be mobilized by acts of gay self-nomination that maintain their disruptive capacity by refusing to offer any determinate truth about the nature or management of 'gay' sexuality" (xv). Although the stakes are quite different in my argument—I cannot conflate the critical discourse surrounding queer YA with the numerous violences and forms of management to which gay, lesbian, and trans-identified people have been subject—I am proceeding, similar to Edelman, in the name of "queer YA" to critique and resist the notion of a coherent "queer YA." Drawing on and springing from the way critics such as Cart and Jenkins have "managed" queer YA by categorizing and assessing its texts according to visibility and the imagined didactic success of the genre's deployments of visibly LGBT characters, I aim to challenge and explode the boundaries of the genre that provides the very foundation of this dissertation.

problem novels to tell their stories (James St. James' *Freak Show*, chapter three); texts where characters engage in queer reading (Francesca Lia Block's *Weetzie Bat* and *Baby Be-Bop*, chapter two); texts that do not focus on visibly LGBT characters, but remain nonetheless decidedly queer (Elizabeth Hand's *Illyria*, chapter three). Although my first three chapters focus primarily on texts that would fit comfortably (and, for the most part, are included) in a visibility-based anthology like Cart and Jenkins' (with the exception of *Illyria*), I begin with visibly queer YA in order to, in my fourth chapter, step outside the genre to demonstrate the usefulness of my queer YA-inspired approach to other popular texts, in particular the *It Gets Better* project and online fanfiction. These texts evince the anxious qualities of queer YA and are part, I argue, of the genre's sideways growth. My overall objective is not to argue against the importance of having openly LGBT characters in YA. Instead, I want to illustrate how queer YA criticism can be productively influenced by the anti-teleological and anti-identitarian politics of queer childhood theory, and an elaboration of queer reading and pedagogical practices that span a messy body of texts.

Theories of queer pedagogy are also vital to this dissertation. In chapter two, drawing on theorists including Susanne Luhmann, Deborah Britzman, and Adam Phillips, I propose a pedagogy of anxiety that has, at its centre, risk and a temporal tension between stasis and futurity. I locate, in queer YA, examples of what Britzman calls "risking the self" ("Queer Pedagogy" 94), where the foundational narratives of certain characters' self-understanding are put into question through queer relations and reading, desires for both growth and delay, and moments of teaching and learning. Chapters two and three further explore the multiple ways queer YA characters interact with texts in ways that exceed straightforward engagements with representations of LGBT identity: instead of merely depicting characters who learn "what queer

looks like" from texts, queer YA often represents scenes of queer reading where characters resist the sexual resolution and coherent identities privileged by so many critics, valuing instead delay, uncertainty, the strange temporality of anxiety, and the erotics of reading. My discussion of queer pedagogy in chapter two spans several texts, including *Weetzie Bat*, *Baby Be-bop*, and Holland's *The Man Without a Face*. I advance the argument that, even if queer YA critics don't explicitly use the term, anxious pedagogy is already at the heart of queer YA criticism since many writers rehearse anxieties about what, specifically, queer YA can and should teach its imagined young audiences. This anxiety, I maintain, should be named as such and discussed.

Four overlapping paradigms of pedagogy structure my discussion of the topic. First is the idea that books are pedagogical objects—that they teach by virtue of being read. This paradigm is perhaps better articulated under the banner of didacticism: for many critics, queer YA is designed to teach and should be teaching young audiences lessons about how to overcome adolescent strife and confidently assume an LGBT identity.[8] In many cases, this understanding of the didactic function of queer YA relies on an understanding of the function of literature that simplifies the complicated, unchartable interactions between reader and text.[9] As I illustrate throughout this dissertation, I understand the relationship between text and reader as in excess of this didactic model—what I call, in chapter two, "the didactics of visibility"—wherein critics assume the representation of visibly LGBT characters will teach young people "how to be

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[8] In addition to Hanckel and Cunningham and Cart and Jenkins, as discussed earlier in the introduction, see my discussion in chapter one of critics that include Hughes-Hassell et al, Trites, Crisp, Rothbauer, Wickens, and more.

[9] This didactic view of literature recalls nineteenth century critic Matthew Arnold's philosophy of liberal self-cultivation in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). For Arnold, liberal subjects are to be perpetually invested in their own self-improvement, and art is an essential part of this improvement process. Arnold's work influenced a range of educational theorists; see, for example, W.F. Connell's *Educational Thought and the Influence of Matthew Arnold* (Routledge, 1950, 2002). Many thanks to Lauren Berlant for indicating this connection.

queer." Instead, I explore the ultimately unknowable complexities of reading, teaching, and learning.

Along these lines, the second paradigm involves psychoanalytic theories of pedagogy, which consider the dynamic and unpredictable encounter between student, teacher, and text while rendering distinct the boundaries between banal didacticism and the always anxious, always unknowable scene of pedagogy. I draw on Britzman, Luhmann and others to move away from a visibility-oriented, gay and lesbian studies-style approach and its notion of "knowable subjects." Instead, I consider the relationship between pedagogy and reading practices, and argue, as Luhmann writes, that "queer shatters the hopes associated with representational inclusion of lesbians and gays in curricula as a viable strategy against homophobia or as a strategy of subversion" (124). My third pedagogical paradigm, however, does focus on a different type of visibility: the representation of scenes of pedagogy in queer YA. In chapter two, I employ Stockton's discussion of Henry James' *The Pupil* to locate an aesthetic of anxious pedagogy in the teacher/student relationship in Isabelle Holland's *The Man Without a Face*. Central to this section are theories of risk, one of those ostensibly negative signifiers that frequently attaches itself to queer youth, who are often described as "at-risk" of various unfortunate events, behaviours and conditions: depression, bullying, suicide, risky sexual behaviour, drug use, etc.[10] Recently, however, queer theory has considered the positive and pleasurable effects of risk: Tim Dean and David Halperin, for example, have both authored noteworthy monographs on the subject.[11] Building on ideas present in chapter two, I aim

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[10] See Hong et al., Hong and Garbarino, Goldman, and my detailed discussion of risk in chapter two.

[11] See Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy* (UChicago, 2009) and Halperin, *What do Gay Men Want?* (UMichigan, 2007). Psychoanalysis is another discourse that revisits risk: see, for example,

throughout my dissertation to put queer theory, psychoanalysis, and sociological models for adolescent risk into conversation in order to challenge the notion that risk is inherently negative. In multiple texts, beginning with Holland's novel, I explore how "risking the self" (in Britzman's words) through queer readings and relations leads to transformative reconfigurations of self and an openness to queer relationality. In turn, this challenges popular notions of queer adolescence, which, as I will demonstrate, emerged as a category partly vis-à-vis sociological studies of at-risk demographics.

Although my dissertation is concerned with all three of these overlapping paradigms, my primary objective related to pedagogy is perhaps best articulated through a fourth paradigm: one in which I map and theorize a pedagogy alternative to the didactics of visibility. This alternative pedagogy, which I describe as a pedagogy of anxiety, brings together a number of key concepts, questions, and shifting forms of anxiety: the anxious critical dialogue that surrounds queer YA; queer theories of affect and temporality; the anxieties contained within the genre itself, i.e. those characters and scenes of reading that evince the stall-and-start temporality of anxiety; and the instability and incoherence of queer YA as genre. What I hope to begin articulating is a new approach to queer YA that moves us beyond visibility and teleology, enhances our critical perspectives on YA and children's literature more broadly, and brings together a range of relevant discussions to enrich and enliven the ways we imagine teaching and learning in relation to queer YA.

**Reading and Writing (About) Queer Youth**

Unlike "child," the category "youth" has a fairly recent history: it began circulating sometime in the early twentieth century (Baxter, *The Modern Age*; Cart, *From Romance*; Savage,

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Adam Phillips' *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored*, which I discuss in relation to *The Man Without a Face* in chapter two.

*Teenage*). Like "child," "youth" is a slippery, queer term that resists concretization, and in this dissertation I intend "youth" to signify broadly. Generally suggesting an ambiguous space somewhere between child- and adulthood, youth in some cases seems to extend well into the latter.[12] Youth is also frequently deployed as a synonym for other words used to describe the same life stage: teenager, adolescent, and the term that circulates mostly as a descriptor for a genre of fiction, young adult. All of these terms, however, generally indicate a space somewhere in the middle of a progressive narrative of growth from childhood into adulthood, the space that queer YA, broadly speaking, attempts to address. This narrative of growth, which my dissertation aims to interrogate and disrupt, has its roots in G. Stanley Hall's two volume *Adolescence*. Hall's study, first published in 1904, was the first to offer a solid age-based definition of the transitional space it seeks to describe: people between the ages of 15-24. As Michael Cart writes, prior to the release of Hall's study, people were certainly aware that puberty indicates an interval between child- and adulthood; many children joined the workforce when they were as young as ten years old, however, propelling them quite early into a version of adulthood (*From Romance* 3-4). Hall famously attributes two characteristics to adolescence: first, his theory of "recapitulation," which describes the growth of a child into adulthood through adolescence as a mirror of the evolution of the human race. In other words, prior to adulthood, children in Hall's view are essentially savages who require indoctrination to become civilized human beings: adolescence is the appropriate time for schooling and various forms of discipline to take place (including corporal punishment, if necessary) (Cart 4). Second, Hall coins the term "storm and stress" after the German *Sturm und Drang* to describe the emotional tempestuousness

[12] See, for example, Canada's Youth Employment Strategy, which extends the definition of youth to 30 years of age: www.youth.gc.ca (last accessed 27 Mar 2014).

of adolescence. The three key components of storm and stress, according to Hall, are conflict with parents, a propensity for risky behaviour, and mood disruptions (Cart 4). Although Hall's theories have been challenged and critiqued by many, the affiliation of teenagers/adolescents/youth with storm and stress persists, especially in discussions about at-risk youth and teen angst more generally.[13]

The "teenager," on the other hand, came into being several decades after the adolescent; as Jon Savage points out in *Teenage: The Prehistory of Youth Culture*, the word "teenager" wasn't used until the post-WWII era, when it was coined by advertisers to describe a new market segment that reflected the increased spending power of young people between the ages of 14-18 years (xv). From there, "teenager" grew into an identity category that shares many of the same traits that Hall ascribes to adolescents. Cart indicates, however, that neither Hall nor advertisers used the term "young adult"—instead, this category seemed to emerge, like "youth," from the discourse of therapists, youth workers, and educators (*From Romance* 4). In 1957, "young adult" became primarily associated with the literary when the American Library Association formed a Young Adult Services Division, teenagers/youth/young adults became a desirable literary market, and YA a marketable genre of literature (Cart 7).

In *The New Gay Teenager*, Ritch Savin-Williams traces the "invention" of gay youth in the 1970s and 80s, and the subsequent emergence of what he calls the "suicidal script" of gay youth identity through the 80s and 90s (58). When medical and sociological researchers first became invested in the issues confronting gay teens, Savin-Williams explains, the subjects of their studies were mostly homeless, hustlers, delinquents, and other "at-risk" adolescents (62).

[13] One of Hall's first and fiercest critics was Margaret Mead, who argues in her anthropological study *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) that Hall's view of adolescence is socially and culturally specific to North America, a contextualization that Hall entirely fails to address.

As a result, gay youth came to signify as what Rofes calls martyr-target-victims: the inevitable and perpetual victims of depression, anxiety, suicide, and anti-gay violence. In order to obtain funding for necessary public services, researchers would emphasize these multiple vulnerabilities of gay youth, and the trope of martyr-target-victim entered sociological and medical discourses. Today, as I have noted, this twinning of queer youth and victimization remains strong and persistent.[14] For a contemporary example, we need look no further than the *It Gets Better* project. Although *It Gets Better* has enabled many queer adults to share their growing-up stories with young people, the project operates under the assumption that queer adolescence is plagued by a storm and stress of the most vicious variety, and that growth into adulthood will necessarily provide a refuge from anti-queer bullying and violence (more on this in chapter four). Clearly, homo- and transphobia are persistent and pernicious problems; queer youth continue to contend with physical and symbolic violences on numerous levels. However, I intend to illustrate how queer YA provides richer versions of risk and queer youth that complicate the reductive narratives that Savin-Williams and Rofes describe.

As Susan Driver writes, "'queer youth' is an always, already contradictory and imperfect notion, simultaneously challenging restrictive categorizations while constructing new subjects and sites of regulation and resistance" (2). Similarly, I understand "queer youth" to suggest young people who step outside of heterosexuality and normative gender, and a queered category of age that embraces the haziness of those boundaries between child- and adulthood. Instead of suggesting a coherent definition, "queer youth" presents us with a collection of analytical tools

[14] Rofes notes that as he was developing a course on "Gay and Lesbian Issues in Schools," he struggled to find pedagogical materials that took him beyond Matthew Shepard, Brandon Teena, and other queer youth who had been murdered. While his students had powerful emotional reactions to the material, in particular to discussions about Shepard's torture and murder, Rofes expresses concerns that his queer students identified closely with Shepard's martyrdom (43-44).

for considering how and where these different age-related categories are put into discourse: as market segments, literary genres, tumultuous life stages, the products of sociological/psychological analysis, and sticky signifiers that circulate through fiction, criticism, and theory, signifying futurity, sexuality, resistance and subordination, growth and delay. These complex and contradictory notions of "child," "youth," and "young adult"—all expected to signify in particular ways but constantly resisting stable signification—become all the slipperier when they are tapped in hope of defining literary genres.

**Reading and Thinking Children's Literature and Queer YA**

Although my first chapter will explore the development of YA in more depth, I would like to situate my dissertation in relation to the broader field of children's literature and its attendant body of criticism. Part of my conception of queer YA as anxious genre entails a refusal of a coherent definition for the genre; this approach follows recent work on children's literature criticism by Marah Gubar, author of the 2011 essay "On Not Defining Children's Literature." Gubar opens her piece with Roger Sale's observation that "everyone knows what children's literature is until asked to define it" (209); indeed, since children literature's formal academic inception in the 1970s, many critics have striven to formulate a definition for this slipperiest of disciplines, but this work has proven tenuous. Moreover, critics have been consistently anxious about the overall function of children's literature. According to Peter Hunt, for example, "the study of children's literature brings us back to some very fundamental concerns: why are we reading? What are books *for*?…[T]he books may be pleasant, yes, but essentially they have to be *useful*" (*Understanding* 11). For Karín Lesnik-Oberstein, the definition and function of children's literature are bound up "in evolutionary terms"; "consciously or unconsciously," she writes, "children's literature is described as progressing towards an ever better and more accurate

inclusion of the 'child' in the book" ("Essentials" 24).[15] This narrative of progression, which I investigate and critique in chapter two, is also central to critical accounts of queer YA.

Paying a high degree of attention to strategies for representing the child inside the book and the effect of these representations on the outside child reader is known as "childist" criticism of children's literature.[16] This genre of criticism is perhaps best exemplified by Aidan Chambers' 1985 essay "The Reader in the Book," which advances the claim—as described by Neil Cocks—"that criticism of Children's Literature has for too long neglected the child reader and in doing so has failed to understand the meaning of that literature. It claims that through this willful avoidance criticism has irresponsibly blinded itself to the needs of children to whom this literature is directed and has been unable to keep up with developments in contemporary critical practice" (94). Chambers' call for paying increased attention to the material needs of the child reader stands in sharp contrast to Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan*, which, published one year prior to Chambers' essay, argues for the impossibility of children's fiction and, by extension, the child reader herself. This fundamental tension—between the material child reader and her existence as a product of adult anxieties and desires—continues to echo in children's literature criticism. In

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[15] Other critics comment on the temporality of children's literature, but in different terms: Kimberley Reynolds, for example, argues that "because writing for the young has a future orientation, there is often a freshness and urgency to the storylines of children's fictions that correspond to the fact that their target readers are generally encountering ideas and experiences for the first time" (3). Another primary goal of this dissertation is to assert that, contrary to such claims about future-orientation, many queer YA novels are quite ambivalent about the future, evincing instead anxious desires for delay and sideways growth.

[16] Although she avoids using the term "childist criticism," Reynolds identifies "five forms" of children's literature studies, most of which have the child reader and the fictional child at their centre: "those that trace the history of children's book[s]; attempts to define children's literature and identify its characteristics; works that consider the relationship between children's literature and critical theory; studies that explore what children's literature does to its readers by, for instance, encoding ideological assumptions or disseminating strategies for resisting them; and analyses focussing on the ideas of the child and childhood inscribed in children's texts and critical works about them" (1).

her *Children's Literature: New Approaches*, published in 2004, Lesnik-Oberstein argues that children's literature criticism has been caught up in improving existing strategies for finding the ideal book for the child reader. She poses the question: can we talk about children's literature without mentioning the "child" on the genre's other end? Her collection of essays attempts to do just that: engage in criticism of children's literature without attention to the notion of a "real" child reader, focusing instead on what Edelman calls—in *No Future*, published in the same year as Lesnik-Oberstein's collection—the figure of the Child.

*No Future* is a landmark queer theory text and a groundbreaking contribution to the still-burgeoning field of queer childhood studies. Edelman concentrates solely on the figural Child and its position at the heart of all politics: its circulation, traction, and power as the fundamental avatar of reproductive futurity. Much contemporary queer childhood theory is in dialogue with Edelman, and children's literature criticism and theory are following suit. Recent work by Gubar, Robin Bernstein, and Karen Sánchez-Eppler—which I discuss more thoroughly in chapter four—responds to both Rose and Edelman by pushing for a recognition of the material child at the other end of children's literature and exploring the ways we can potentially interrogate what Rose calls the untouched middle space between adult author and child reader.[17] This is not, however, childist criticism's pursuit of the ideal book for the child reader: Gubar, Bernstein, and Sànchez-Eppler consider the complex, messy, and often queer reading practices of young people; how young readers provide material evidence of their adherence to and subversion of the figural, fictional Child and its attendant narrative of forward-oriented growth vis-à-vis children's

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[17] Reynolds has also leveled critique at Rose: "Of particular concern to me," she writes, "is the fact that Rose sees the child in children's literature (and by extension, children's literature itself) not as embodying the disruptive and creative force of [Jean-François] Lyotard's monster-child, but as having an innately conservative effect on what can be written for children" (3).

literature. The figure of the Child as embodiment of reproductive futurism might indeed be the anti-queer, as Edelman points out, but many children, both fictional and real—in their queer desires, practices, relations, resistance to growth, and sheer strangeness and unknowability—are material manifestations of queerness; children are, in a sense (and as Stockton argues), the ultimate queers. I propose that we call this collision between queer theory and children's literature "queer childist criticism," and I draw particular inspiration from its methodologies in my fourth chapter, when I consider how online fanfiction communities, created and populated by young people, toy with the television show *Glee* and the *It Gets Better project* to engage with and write about desire, pleasure, and delay. My methodology in this dissertation follows Rose in that I am interested in adult desires and anxieties surrounding the representation of youth in queer YA and the way adult critics theorize the pedagogical relationship of these books to their imagined young queer audience. I depart from Rose, however, through my interest in material queer reading practices—in what readers can potentially do with what they read, and how queer YA texts represent scenes of reading. Overall, this dissertation is less about "what books are good for young people"—although I do attend closely to what other critics say along these lines—and more interested in: how can we chart the queerness of children both fictional and real as manifested through and in relation to queer YA? How and why do some texts lend themselves to queer reading? I move away from the notion of "good" and "bad" books, while rendering hazy the genre of queer YA, to think more about how reading and pedagogy can be queered (see chapter two).

My turn to the materiality of young readers is prompted by an increase in media attention paid to queer youth suicide—particularly in the fall of 2010—which made brutally tangible the existence of young queers on the other side of queer YA. This dissertation raises the questions:

how do we understand the function of literature—and, more broadly, cultural texts—in an era when stories of queer youth bullying and suicide permeate our headlines? How do queer YA critics articulate their anxious visions of how the genre can potentially remedy the crisis confronting queer youth? What pedagogical purposes do critics attribute to queer YA and why? Moreover, I ask: can we keep in mind Lesnik-Oberstein, Rose, and Edelman's important points about the imaginary/figurative child, moving away from a discussion of "good books" as determined by visibility and teleology, while still recognizing the potential of fiction and queer pedagogical practices to improve the material lives of queer youth?

Although the bulk of my analysis is, as I mentioned, focused on queer YA books, I depart from a more traditional notion of the genre and consider how and why anxieties that manifest themselves in queer YA criticism also surface in other media concerned with the adult/youth address. I call for a Stockton-inspired "sideways" approach to genre that renders genre hazy: an understanding of queer YA as an anxious genre that bleeds beyond the scope of print literature, not a readily defined and contained set of texts that is expected to signify in particular ways and perform specific didactic functions. Integral to this approach is the suggestion, following Gubar, that the quest for a definition for children's literature (or, in my case, queer YA) is futile. Gubar splits critics of children's literature into two categories—the "definers" and the "antidefiners"—and argues that there is a productive middle ground between the two, the space of not defining (210). Attempts to define the field, Gubar argues, do it a disservice: they over-simplify and flatten the genre in a way that limits the breadth of potential criticism. Besides, Gubar says, even if a coherent definition for children's literature could be produced, "any definition attentive to the glorious messiness and multiplicity of children's literature would be so long, implicated, and qualified that it would be of no value to us" (214). Antidefiners, on the other hand (of which

Rose is perhaps the most well-known), in arguing for the “impossibility” of children’s fiction, “cut young people out of the picture entirely: by their reckoning, nothing that actual children write, say, or do has any place in discussions of what constitutes children’s literature” (Gubar 212).

Gubar intervenes precisely in the middle ground between the definers and the antidefiners. Just because we can’t properly define children’s literature, she writes, doesn’t mean that it can’t exist. To prove her point, she summons Wittgenstein’s theory of “family resemblance” (212). Using the category “games” as an example, Wittgenstein argues that although types of games vary inordinately from one another (card games, Olympic games, the game of catch) they are still nonetheless all games. The point is to “look” closely at each game, and “see” how they resemble or differ from one another, instead of assuming similarities or differences based on their shared category (212). By applying this theory to children’s literature, Gubar argues, we can establish a “constellation of criteria” for making assessments across texts: “the best approach we can take,” she writes, “is to proceed piecemeal, focusing our attention on different subareas and continually striving to characterize our subject in ways that acknowledge its messiness and diversity” (212). Whereas “not defining” might initially sound like a cop-out, it actually entails a rigorous approach to the genre that can open up avenues for productive exploration of and intervention in the constitution of children’s literature and its criticism.

So, as I have already done with “child,” “queer,” and “youth,” I will not attempt to concretely define “queer YA,” but will work to specifically track the anxious signifiers that accumulate around the term. By thinking queer YA in these terms, I multiply its critical potential and pedagogical possibilities as an index of anxieties that accrue around how adults should address youth, as well as the perceived pedagogical force behind this moment of address. I hope

to move beyond a conception of queer YA as a genre that should be grounded in visibility and coherent sexual identity, arguing instead for a trans-media approach to reading and pedagogy that complicates and enhances the way we—as scholars and teachers—think and write about queer YA, children's literature, and genre.

**Notes on an Anxious Genre: An Outline**

"As crucial as it is to resist and alleviate the forces that put children at risk and intensify childhood's discontents," writes Nat Hurley, "it is equally important to attend to the shapes, forces, and genres that these discontents assume and generate—and to consider as well the conditions under which broader social discontents themselves emerge in the guise or image of childhood" ("Childhood" 6-7). Following Hurley, the first chapter of this dissertation examines both the "discontents" of queer youth—the crisis of bullying and suicide in which they ostensibly find themselves—and tracks the adult anxieties about visibility and identity that circulate in and around queer YA criticism as a result of this crisis. I recognize the importance of visibly queer characters in YA before arguing for an approach to the genre that moves beyond visibility. Drawing on queer and psychoanalytic theories, I make the case for an embrace of queer YA as anxious genre, where the temporality of anxiety—an uncertain but hopeful turn towards the future that is in constant tension with stasis and delay, what I call the "queer double-take"—plays a fundamental role, and the boundaries of queer YA are imagined as always in the process of being defined.

In my second chapter, "Rethinking Queer YA: Toward a Pedagogy of Anxiety," I outline theories of queer pedagogy as they relate to queer YA. I argue for the significance of the unrepresented and/or unrepresentable in queer YA: those moments that are elliptical, literally or figuratively, that relate to the instability of the queer signifier as opposed to teleological models

for visible and resolved sexual identity. I propose an anxious model for reading through Francesca Lia Block's *Weetzie Bat* and *Baby Be-bop*; Block's two short novels, I argue, position reading as a mechanism for composing rickety stories that make temporary sense of ourselves and our relations with others. I conclude the chapter with a discussion about risk and pedagogy vis-à-vis Isabelle Holland's *The Man Without a Face*, disparaged by contemporary critics for its stereotypes and negative affect. These critics, I argue, ignore the novel's potential to illustrate a productively queer and anxious pedagogical model.

Chapter three, "Turning Back and (Not) Coming Out: The Anxious Relations and Generic Double-Takes of Queer YA," builds on the previous chapter to consider the parallels between the temporality of anxiety, "coming-out" narratives, and the double-takes of queer YA characters and the genre itself. With a particular focus on scenes of reading where characters engage with non-visibly-queer texts, I open with at look at John Donovan's groundbreaking *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*, arguing that the novel's anxious rhythms and representation of reading and relationality evince productive queernesses in excess of those identified by critics. I then turn to a pair of novels that contain characters who have complicated relationships to delay, growing up, and growing sideways: Shyam Selvadurai's *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* and Elizabeth Hand's *Illyria*. Like *I'll Get There*, these novels make anxious turns backwards towards previous texts and genres that do *not* contain visibly queer characters in order to mediate and narrate their contemporary queer themes. I conclude with an examination of James St. James' whimsical *Freak Show*, which turns back to and "camps" the YA problem novel in order to critique and prove the impossibility of queer YA critics' claims that the genre should represent the "reality" of queer youth. Together, this cluster of texts subverts what queer YA critics suggest is the primary pedagogical function of the genre: providing queer youth with

visible role models and reinforcing a linear, hopeful narrative of progressive growth from adolescence into adulthood.

My fourth and final chapter, "Children's Literature and Sideways Growth: The Case of *It Gets Better*" keeps Stockton's theories and a pedagogy of anxiety in-hand while taking a step back to consider, broadly, the genre of children's literature and the applicability of its critical lens to popular texts that evince anxieties about the moment of pedagogical address between adult and child/youth. Specifically, I examine *It Gets Better* as a work of children's literature, tracking the adult desires and anxieties that are contained within the project's repetitive narrative of progression. I argue that *It Gets Better* is (im)possible: following Rose, the project's impossibility stems from its political failure and the flattened version of queer youth it imagines; it succeeds and is rendered "possible," however, given its "sideways growth"—its success as cultural discourse through widespread circulation across media, as well as the amount of anxious adult critique it generates. Following Stockton, I probe those spaces of "lateral contact" between adult and youth that *It Gets Better* creates, arguing that material evidence of young people writing back to *It Gets Better* complicates Rose's argument about the untouched middle space between adult author and young reader. In online fanfiction that mashes up *It Gets Better* with the popular television show *Glee*, I locate narratives that echo, reinforce, and critique the project's emphasis on visibility, stability, and teleology, while highlighting the importance of an approach to children's literature that accounts for how texts "grow sideways" across genre and media.

Ultimately, in this dissertation, I call for a more expansive, self-reflexive, and affective body of criticism and fiction about and for queer youth, one that would yield alternative pedagogies of queer YA that do not depend on the reductive assumption that merely representing

certain kinds of visibly queer characters will have desirable didactic effects. Following Gloria Filax, who argues that queer work entails “noticing, questioning, and refusing how the notion of ‘the normal’ is produced,” I refuse a version of queer adolescence that hinges on visibility and the narrative of progression that many critics place at the centre of queer YA (xv). Instead, I argue for the importance of an approach to queer YA that does not limit itself to visibility and teleology, one that also engages with queer world-making, the imagining and enabling of new forms of sociability and relationality, and the critique of hetero- and homonormative narratives of growth and development.

## Chapter One

Notes on an Anxious Genre

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### Queer Youth in Crisis and the *It Gets Better* Moment

I begin with three vignettes.

**One**. Fall, 2010. Suddenly, it seems, the media is saturated with images of young queers who are taking their own lives, driven to tragic extremes by relentless bullying. In the span of three weeks, five American teens kill themselves ("Raymond Chase"). Their names are manifest in print and digital ink, newspapers, magazines, and online memorials. Billy Lucas. Asher Brown. Seth Walsh. Raymond Chase. And, in perhaps the most widely-publicized case, Tyler Clementi, the Rutgers student who leaps to his death from the George Washington Bridge after his roommate records and broadcasts footage of Clementi's sexual encounter with another man (McKinley). NBC News reports a "suicide surge" (Crary). Celebrity blogger Perez Hilton declares that "America [is] In CRISIS!". Although sociologists, health care workers, and educators have perceived queer teens as being at risk of suicide for decades, it seems that for the first time since Matthew Shepard's torture and murder in 1998, the general public is being made aware of the multiple forms of violence many young queers confront on a daily basis. Students fight difficult battles for the right to form gay-straight alliances at their schools (Wallace). Community leaders initiate anti-bullying policy and legislation reform. And on September 21, 2010, the day before Tyler Clementi would take his own life, American writer Dan Savage and his partner Terry Miller launch the *It Gets Better* YouTube project, which invites adults to submit videos that offer messages of hope and encouragement to gay teens. As the *It Gets Better* website states: "The *It Gets Better* Project was created to show young LGBT people the levels of happiness, potential, and positivity their lives will reach—if they can just get through their teen

years. The *It Gets Better* Project wants to remind teenagers in the LGBT community that they are not alone—and it WILL get better" ("What is…?"). Before the end of *It Gets Better*'s first week, one thousand videos have been uploaded to the project's YouTube channel (Savage 1).

**Two**. September 28, 2011. In an interview on CBC's talk show *Q*, YA authors Rachel Manija Brown and Sherwood Smith claim that literary agents asked them to "de-gay" their novel to make it more marketable ("Is young-adult…?"). In response, Brown and Smith go public. "There is a very real issue in young adult novels that there are very, very few books with gay characters," Smith asserts. Brown speaks at length about how she perceives fiction as having the power to save lives: "I think that when you cut certain types of people out of fiction…you're sending the message to teenagers saying that what they are inherently is so terrible that it can't be talked about and can't be portrayed, and I think that's really soul-crushing. There've been a number of [gay teen] suicides; LGBTQ teenagers do have a much higher suicide rate because of prejudice, and I don't want to add to that prejudice." The *Q* interview is a follow-up to a post by Brown and Smith on the *Publishers Weekly* blog entitled "Say Yes to Gay YA," which receives the greatest number of single-day hits in the website's history and draws over 40,000 views in three days, as well as a defensive response from the agents in question (Fox, "Authors" and "Riposte"). "We would love to start this conversation," writes Joanna Stampfel-Volpe of the Nancy Coffey Literary Agency; "let's discuss" (Fox, "Riposte").

**Three**. October 9, 2011. In a *New York Times* opinion piece entitled "No More Adventures in Wonderland," Maria Tatar decries the current state of children's literature as being too dark, too violent, too lacking in "imaginative play." "It is hard not to mourn the decline of the literary tradition invented by [Lewis] Carroll and [J.M.] Barrie," she writes, arguing that the *Harry Potter*, *His Dark Materials*, and *Hunger Games* series deliver unto children "an

unprecedented dose of adult reality…sometimes without the redemptive beauty, cathartic humor and healing magic of an earlier time.” If only contemporary authors spent as much time with children as Carroll and Barrie did, Tatar asserts, their books would better reflect what children actually want in their stories. She concludes: unlike other authors, Carroll and Barrie “fully entered the imaginative worlds of children—where danger is balanced by enchantment—and reproduced their magic on the page. In today’s stories, those safety zones are rapidly vanishing as adult anxieties edge out childhood fantasy.”

The messages: queer youth are in crisis. Fiction is failing as a potential remedy. The genre of children’s literature is doing the wrong thing. Overall, these three vignettes demonstrate—on the part of adults—a persistent investment in and continuing anxieties about what children and youth are doing and reading, how what they read affects what they do, and how adult anxieties shape stories for young people.

This chapter responds to the indictments of our culture’s address to queer youth that find themselves at the heart of these three vignettes. It seeks to address the ostensible present crisis in which queer youth find themselves, explore the relationship of this crisis to a genre of fiction aimed at young queers, and argue that the adult anxieties that swirl around these conversations about queer youth and the books they (do or do not, should or should not) read is an intensified version of a conversation that has defined children’s literature since its inception. Together, these vignettes describe a cultural moment in the progressive narrative of queer YA and its attending body of criticism—what I call the *It Gets Better* moment, after the project that so aptly describes it—wherein the visibility of certain themes and identities in YA becomes a priority. In the absence of these themes and characters—or in the presence of other, undesirable ones—YA critics become quite anxious.

As I argue in this chapter, however, this anxiety should not only be recognized and explored, but embraced as a fundamental constitutive characteristic of queer YA and its criticism. I believe there is a productive critical lens that emerges from the identification of the tensions inherent to queer YA surrounding visibility, pedagogy, sexuality, and queerness, and the use of these anxieties as a springboard for further analysis. Although there exists a massive body of work on the notion of anxiety, I draw primarily on Adam Phillips' discussion of the term in *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored*, in which he suggests that anxiety and worry have a particular temporal orientation that looks to the future while simultaneously attempting to enact delay.[18] I will discuss anxiety and Phillips in-depth later in this chapter; crucial, however, is his description of anxiety as an affect produced through a relation to an uncertain future. This strikes at the core of what queer YA critics are so anxious about: the troubling and precarious relationship between queer youth, queer visibility in YA, and the impossible-to-parse

[18] Psychoanalysis has a great deal to say about anxiety. In the *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* (2005), Francisco Palacio Espasa defines anxiety as "an unpleasurable affect in which the individual experiences a feeling of danger whose cause is unconscious" (99). Freud wrote at length on anxiety in a number of works, including *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) and *Three Essays on Sexuality* (1905), in which he characterizes anxiety as the affective effect of various forms of repression. Freud later complicated this claim in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926), arguing instead that repression can function as a cause and/or result of anxiety. Espasa points out that, for Freud, "object-loss becomes the prototype of later anxieties," which Freud delineates as "anxiety at the loss of the love of the object, castration anxiety, and anxiety at the loss of the love of the superego" (Espasa 99). Lacan, conversely, sees not lack but fulfillment as the source of anxiety: "But should all the norms, that is, that which makes for anomaly just as much as that which makes for lack, happen all of a sudden not to be lacking, that's when the anxiety starts," he writes (42), insisting that "anxiety isn't about the loss of the object, but its presence. The objects aren't missing" (54). In this dissertation, I am less interested in positioning anxiety as an unconscious critical response to queer YA; in other words, although it might be an interesting thought experiment, I don't find it particularly productive to "diagnose," psychoanalytically speaking, critics of queer YA as having anxiety produced by a particular relation to object-loss/lack of lack as manifested via queer YA. For my purposes, the psychoanalytic genealogy of anxiety, centred on the unconscious, is less relevant than Phillips' discussion of the temporality of worry and anxiety.

pedagogical effects of YA on the real-life behaviour of queer youth. Critics, in other words, are anxious about the uncertain future of queer YA: if the genre does not contain enough visibility, or the wrong kinds of visibility, what potentially harmful future effects will it produce in young queer readers?

Much of queer YA's anxious affect emerges from what Peter Hunt describes—in the broader context of children's literature—as "a tension between what is 'good' in the exploded abstract, what is good for the child socially, intellectually, and educationally, and what we, really, honestly think is a good book" (15). As I will demonstrate, critical opinions vary widely on the constitution of "good" and "good for," although what is "good for" queer YA's imagined audience seems to be the subject of most critical anxiety and debate. Outside the world of adult criticism, however, young people are constantly in the process of making texts into queer children's literature and YA: defining, on their terms, what texts constitute the genre. For one queer reader, the latent queernesses of *The Wizard of Oz*, for example—which would not, under the aegis of Cart and Jenkins, be sufficient to classify Baum's text as queer YA—will have far more significance than a text with characters who openly claim a gay or lesbian identity. This is why I am uninterested in establishing and perpetuating a genre called, to borrow the title of Cart and Jenkins' book, *Young Adult Fiction With Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content*, a genre whose boundaries are delimited based on the visibility of LGBT themes, identities, and characters, and whose critical approval is contingent upon content that disavows the stereotypes and negative affect of earlier queer YA titles. Instead, in this chapter I want to imagine an anxious queer YA, a genre constantly unsure and uneasy about its own constitution, a genre that raises questions about how we teach and learn sexuality through reading, a genre that recognizes and demonstrates how queer reading practices exceed the way many critics assume texts are read. In

other words, the current pedagogical imperative to teach readers "what queer looks like" is a far less interesting and productive invitation than a call to read queerly, to identify with and across and in opposition to categories of sex, gender, and sexuality, to think queerness on queerer terms.

Queer YA is at its most fascinating and provocative, I believe, when it is given space to contain texts with visible queernesses *and* those latent queernesses that provide powerful opportunities for reading in all kinds of creative, non-normative ways; when early titles aren't dismissed wholesale for their association of queerness with loneliness and despair, but are rather mined for the other queer relations they represent; and when we leave the genre open for constant redefinition. This is an anxious and risky model: risky because it risks finding queerness anywhere and everywhere; risky because it threatens to disrupt how we conceive of queer YA; risky because it reclaims and reinvigorates titles that some critics have deemed potentially harmful by contemporary standards; risky because it lends queer YA the capacity to disrupt sedimented models for relationality and imagine new ways of being. And these risks, no doubt, will continue to produce anxiety well into the future of the genre.

My goal in this chapter, and the dissertation as a whole, is to take up queer YA for the purpose of doing away with how contemporary critics conceive of queer YA. I will begin this chapter by tracing, briefly, the emergence of queer YA, mapping its lineage in relation to children's literature and determining how we arrived at our *It Gets Better* moment. This map will include an overview of the critical anxieties that are endemic to children's literature and specific to queer YA. I will then explore the arguments made in support of visible queernesses in YA, agreeing with most of them, before arguing and illustrating why allowing queer YA to be anxious is the most productive and pedagogically rewarding way of conceptualizing the genre.

**Young Adult Fiction With Visible Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content: An Overview (1969-Present)**

North American YA with visible queer content emerges from the convergence of several forces, many of which have been outlined in the introduction: (1) the post-war identification of teenagers as a new target market and the subsequent development of YA; (2) the "invention" of gay youth in the 1970s; (3) as Kidd ("Introduction" 114) points out, "the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s"; and (4) the rise of the "problem novel," which could be described as a thematic subgenre of YA more generally. Michael Cart's *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism* provides a thorough and lucid overview of the genre's evolution, the ambiguities of terms like "teenager," "child," and "young adult," as well as the slippages between them. Cart traces the post-war invention of the teenager—a concept heavily influenced by Stanley Hall's theories on adolescence—alongside "the introduction of the term *young adulthood* into [the] professional vocabularies" of therapists, youth workers, and educators, noting that the popularization of these new categories of age "may have been instrumental in the American Library Association's decision to form, in 1957, the Young Adult Services Division (YASD)" (7). Cart claims that after the publication of Helen Boylston's *Sue Barton Student Nurse* in 1936 and Maureen Daly's *Seventeenth Summer* (which was originally intended to be an adult novel but became a successful crossover title) in 1942, publishers began actively marketing their titles to youth markets (11). "Our salient discovery within the last decade," said Eugene Gilbert, head of the New York-based Youth Marketing Company in 1945, "was that teenagers have become a separate and distinct group in our society" (qtd in Cart 13).[19]

[19] Kent Baxter draws a more subtle, anxiety-based distinction between the adolescent and the teenager: "the 'teenager' can be seen in texts throughout the twentieth century as the 'real' adolescent," he explains, "the specter of our worst fears of what this ever-present demographic

While YA was beginning to distinguish itself from children's literature, it nonetheless retained (and still retains) an anxious relationship to pedagogy that has been part of children's literature for centuries, certainly since seventeenth century philosopher John Locke described the child as *tabula rasa*, "white Paper, or Wax, to be moulded and fashioned as one pleases," and literature—especially for the Romantics—became integral to this moulding process (265).[20] There is also considerable overlap between children's literature and YA and books for adults: children read YA, young adults read children's literature and books for adults, adults read YA and books for children. One difference between the genres, however, at least in the years when YA was beginning to develop, is that YA was heavily influenced by texts like Hall's *Adolescence* and Robert J. Havighurst's theory of developmental tasks (1948-53). Cart describes the latter as follows:

> if teenagers are to successfully climb the ladder of personal development from childhood to adulthood, they must successfully complete seven distinct life tasks: (1) achieve new and more mature relations with age mates of both sexes; (2) achieve masculine or feminine social roles; (3) accept their physiques and use their bodies effectively; (4) achieve emotional independence of parents and other adults; (5) prepare for marriage and

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population could become if left uncontrolled and unsupervised and the dark side of that 'ideal' adolescent upon whom we pin all our hopes for the future" (13).

[20] As Thacker and Webb point out, "The fascination with childhood and a desire to recapture an innocent apprehension of the world are key features in any definition of Romanticism. …The [Romantic] emphasis placed on the unsullied freshness of childhood…must be seen as a key factor in the creation of a literature that directly addressed children as audience, through a direct appeal to the imagination" (13). Indeed, the eighteenth century saw the publication of massive amounts of material written for and about children, including collections of didactic poetry and prose that aimed to produce proper and well-mannered adults out of the potentially perverse, *tabula rasa* child: see, for example, Sarah Trimmer's *Fabulous Histories* (1786), Maria Edgeworth's *The Parent's Assistant* (1796), and George Burder's *Early Piety* (1799). See also Thacker and Webb (2002) and Samuel F. Pickering Jr.'s *Moral Instruction and Fiction for Children, 1749-1820* (University of Georgia Press, 1993).

> family life; (6) prepare for economic careers; and (7) acquire a set of values and an ethical system as a guide to behaviour (i.e., develop an ideology that leads to socially responsible behavior) (23-24).

YA would ostensibly guide young adults through this "period of transition, of moving upward from one stage of development to another," acting as "a ladder—or, more precisely, a rung on a ladder between children's and adult literature" (Cart 23).[21]

Cart describes the thematic tensions of YA as existing between his two titular poles: romance and realism. "Urban settings and youths," he explains, "remained largely invisible in YA fiction until the social upheavals of the violent 1960s," so early YA novels tended towards the romantic: they described the experiences of "middle- and upper-middle-class kids, who lived, for the most part, in all-white small towns" (16-17). Writing in 1968, Maia Wojciechowska critiques romantic YA authors who "keep going back to their own turn-of-the-century childhoods, or write tepid little stories of high school proms, broken and amended friendships, phony-sounding conflicts between parents and children, and boring accounts of what they consider 'problems'" (qtd in Cart 26). In the 1960s, authors and critics began pushing for

[21] Baxter sees the rise of adolescence under Hall's aegis as the product of adult anxieties: "These commonplace beliefs about the development stage construct adolescence as a significant threat unless the energies and desires associated with it are correctly funneled into a productive, and morally acceptable, activity. Additionally, as with the work of Hall," Baxter continues, "the literature surrounding these youth movements becomes a way to both articulate and contain anxiety over 'modern sexuality'" (7). We can therefore imagine the invention of adolescence and the subsequence emergence of YA as a mirror of the Romantic-era invention of childhood and the creation of a new literature for children, and understand the creation of both genres as having fundamental ties to adult anxieties. As Baxter argues, "'understanding, 'defining,' and 'depicting' this path [from child to adulthood]…has also become a way to control it. Whether the path has taken the form of 'storm and stress'…or Nancy Drew, the depiction has been a way both to define a seeming threat and to provide a possible solution to this threat. As such, the adolescent has always been defined by the adult that he or she will become—or, rather, the adult we want him or her to become" (11). Baxter's text provides further evidence for how anxiety is a useful lens for thinking adolescence, youth, and YA.

increased "realism" in YA in order to better realize the genre's pedagogical objectives. In 1966, George Woods, a children's book editor with the *New York Times Book Review*, wrote:

> One looks for modernity, boldness, for realism. The teen-age novel, especially, should grapple with the delights and dilemmas of today's teen-agers. Delicacy and restraint are necessarily called for, yet all too often this difficult problem is resolved through avoidance. A critic in touch with the world and aware of the needs of the young expects to see more handling of neglected subjects: narcotics, addiction, illegitimacy, alcoholism, pregnancy, discrimination, retardation (qtd in Cart 26).

The result, as Cart describes it: "[I]n the late sixties, YA literature was in a hectic period of transition from a literature that had traditionally offered a head-in-the-sand approach to one that offered a more clear-eyed and unflinching look at the often unpleasant realities of American adolescent life" (29). As the "problem novel" became a popular YA subgenre, authors on many occasions were overzealous in their representation of harsh teenage "reality." In these texts, the focus is not on "the richness of their settings or the complexities of the characters," as Cart writes, but rather on the social issues that plague their tragic protagonists (33). An often-cited example is the anonymously-penned *Go Ask Alice*, a novel written in the style of journal entries about a young girl who accidentally ingests LSD at a party and is sent on a downward spiral of drug addiction, homelessness, and prostitution, while enduring rape and forcible confinement in an insane asylum before eventually dying of a drug overdose.

Since homosexuality was considered a social issue at the time and, as I have described in the introduction, medical and sociological researchers were in the process of defining a new demographic of "at-risk" gay teens, gay youth made ready fodder for problem novels. This "only exacerbated the tendency to regard literature with gay content as belonging in the 'problem

novel' category," explain Cart and Jenkins, "which robbed homosexuals of individuality and perpetuated stereotypes" (18). Like Hanckel and Cunningham, Cart and Jenkins are less interested in the reasons for the apparition of gay characters and themes in YA novels and more so invested in critiquing the negative stereotypes endemic to the genre and promoting a positive and hopeful pedagogical framework. Cart and Jenkins' survey of gay/lesbian/queer YA from 1969-2004 is the first book-length archive of its kind, and although they do acknowledge pre-1969 adult titles that attract younger audiences and deal (albeit sometimes only incidentally) with homosexuality, Cart and Jenkins do not consider the stakes of defining an archive with boundaries that depend entirely on the explicit visibility of gay themes and characters.[22] "Young adults have many questions and much misinformation about homosexuality," writes Jenkins in a 1993 article version of her co-authored book, "and reading is one of the few private ways for adolescents to gather information about this subject" (148). This point is absolutely accurate, as is her and Cart's critique of negative stereotypes. What it ignores, however, is how readers of all ages read queerly and relate to texts in ways that do not necessarily rely on characters with explicitly represented non-normative genders or sexualities. In other words, it is a striking omission—albeit an understandable one, given the scope and intention of Cart and Jenkins' important project—to exclude texts whose queerness is not necessarily visible and to ignore the varying strategies for reading that young people might employ, including reading practices that might attribute less importance to stereotype and negative affect. I will return to a discussion of visible and latent queerness later in this chapter, and to queer reading practices in chapters two and three. First, I would like to consider what has already been written on YA with visible

[22] Examples of gay-themed crossovers include Maureen Daly's *Seventeenth Summer* (1942), J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), and John Knowles' *A Separate Peace* (1960) (Cart and Jenkins 5-7).

gay/lesbian/queer content. “[T]hese books, taken as a whole,” Jenkins writes, “may be examined as a body of literature representing choices made by writers, editors, and publishers as the appropriate portrayal of gay/lesbian characters and themes in books for a young adult audience” (148). I want to consider not only *what* was/is deemed appropriate, but also consider how these anxious conversations about appropriateness have come to define the genre as something that will, so long as it is subject to such rigid expectations about visibility, be seen by critics as perpetually failing in its alleged pedagogical objectives.

**The Generic Anxiety of Queer YA**

By looking at queer YA over the past few decades, Jenkins explains, “one may gain a historical understanding of what has and has not changed in the explicit and implicit messages to several generations of young adult readers” (148). As I outlined in my introduction, very little has changed in terms of the hopes and expectations associated with queer YA and what the genre is perceived to be delivering. Critics and educators often accuse authors of perpetuating negative stereotypes and associations between homosexuality and untimely death, but as I illustrated at the beginning of this chapter, authors occasionally turn around and point their fingers at editors and publishers for refusing to produce books that represent queerness in certain (generally, positive) ways, if they represent queerness at all. These editorial tendencies are not unique to queer YA. In the early days of queer literature, unhappy endings were a publisher prerequisite. Sara Ahmed illustrates this point through an interview with lesbian pulp author Vin Packer regarding her 1952 novel *Spring Fire*: “‘You might have a good story there,’ Dick [Packer’s publisher] said, ‘but… you cannot make homosexuality attractive. No happy ending…’ In other words, my heroine has to decide she’s not really queer… ‘That’s it. And the one she’s involved with is sick or crazy” (*Promise* 88). Ahmed goes on to neatly summarize the homophobic

sentiment behind these requested revisions: "Queer fiction in this period could not give happiness to its characters *as* queers; such a gift would be readable as making queers appear 'good': as the 'promotion' of the social value of queer lives, or an attempt to influence readers to become queer" (*Promise* 88). Some queer YA authors have admitted to facing similar pressures from their publishers. In reference to her 1972 novel *Sticks and Stones*, which features the quintessential gay-character-involved-in-a-car-crash plot point, Lynn Hall writes:

> I wanted [protagonists] Ward and Tom to love each other, to live happily ever after, and that was the way I ended it. But the publishers would not let me do it. In their words, this was showing a homosexual relationship as a possible happy ending and this might be dangerous to young people teetering on the brink. One editor wanted me to kill Tom in a car accident! At least I held out for a friendship in the end, one which might or might not develop into something more, depending on the reader's imagination (qtd in Hanckel and Cunningham 534).[23]

Regardless of who's to blame for the doom and gloom, the overwhelming concern when it comes to queer YA is that we (as authors, teachers, publishers, and audiences) move as far away from the dark and depressing early days of queer literature as possible and begin representing young queers to young queers in a more hopeful light. For queer YA publishers in the 1970s and 80s, providing too much hope to queer youth through the representation of happy gay relationships was a source of harm: this hope would be a false hope, since real life for young queers was decidedly unhappy, and YA has an ostensible obligation to the truth. Currently, especially for critics of queer YA, not enough hope—or too much hopelessness—is understood to have a

[23] This also marks an interesting moment of apparent collusion between pedagogy and the market. Publishers wanted to avoid teaching young people that they could be gay and happy, as Sara Ahmed, Hanckel, and Cunningham point out, but they presumably wanted to do so because this message, in theory, wouldn't sell very many books.

similar harmful effect on young queer readers, perpetuating the stereotype that they are sentenced to unhappy lives as martyr-target-victims.

In my introduction, I provided an overview of the queer YA themes promoted by Hanckel and Cunningham in their piece from 1976 (honesty, realism, hope) and how many of these concerns are echoed by Cart and Jenkins in their 2006 overview of the genre. Now, I would like to map how and where, exactly, these critical anxieties continue to manifest themselves in discourse about queer YA. These anxieties, as I mentioned earlier, are intensified forms of those that circulate around children's literature more broadly, those same anxieties seen in Tatar's *Times* piece: books for young people are failing to strike the appropriate balance between fantasy and reality, and are therefore teaching the wrong things. "Literature produced for children has always been influenced by debates originating in the eighteenth century," write Deborah Cogan Thacker and Jean Webb; "[t]he desire to protect innocence or to control wayward thoughts; to balance education and enjoyment; and to preserve childlike qualities into adult life is familiar in the most contemporary of contexts" (14). Hunt also writes at length on how adult concerns work to define children's literature, explaining that adults read children's books in four different ways simultaneously. One of these reading strategies involves "reading *on behalf of a child*, to recommend or censor for some personal or professional reason. The criteria used here may certainly register the implied readership, and lead to an intellectual judgement as to whether the book in question is appropriate to that readership" (47). Contrary to Oscar Wilde's claims about the uselessness of art, Hunt suggests that "children's books are defined as much by 'good for' as by 'good'; and, again by definition, that which is useless cannot be good for the child-reader" (56). Here we see echoes of Rose's argument about the impossibility of children's literature: adult perspectives and desires about usefulness, pedagogical or otherwise, shape our

understanding of the genre. Futurity is as much a concern as utility: properly trained children make the best and most productive citizens.[24] As Hurley and Bruhm explain, "[i]f writing is an act of world making, writing about the child is doubly so; not only do writers control the terms of the worlds they present, they also invent, over and over again, the very idea of inventing humanity, of training it and watching it evolve" (xiii). This is a large burden for a genre of literature to bear, and in critical accounts of children's literature, it is a burden that continually makes itself manifest.

In the case of queer YA, critics use a variety of criteria to establish what is "good for" young readers, queer or otherwise. As we have already seen, for the likes of Hanckel and Cunningham, Cart and Jenkins and others, this entails a delicate balancing act between fiction, realism, hope, and honesty. Cart and Jenkins also call for movement away from the martyr-target-victim trope and the representation of a wider variety of non-normative sexual and gender identities: "we clearly need more GLBTQ books featuring characters of color, more lesbian and bisexual characters, more transgender youth, and more characters with same-sex parents. The literature, in short, needs to be more all-inclusive to offer a better reflection of the complexities of the real world and to insure that all young readers might see their faces reflected in it" (165).[25] Overall, critics desire three pedagogical effects from realistic, hopeful, and inclusive queer YA. First, they hope for what Trites describes as "a bibliotherapeutic effect on the teenage reader,"

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[24] Part of this "training" involves dealing with the touchy subject of sex, which is another source of anxiety for YA critics. Catherine Tosenberger has written on this, arguing that "while YA literature has gradually allowed itself to become more sexually explicit, there is still a strong imperative toward pedagogy—inculcating 'correct' attitudes about sexuality to an audience deemed in need of education" (332).

[25] Such pedagogical aspirations for a realistic YA are in tension with Tatar's argument that children's literature should be a space for fantasy. Realistic or fantastic? Reading for reality, or reading for unreality, newness, and difference? These issues speak to anxieties that pervade YA and, more broadly, children's literature.

who is "promise[d]…freedom from past restraints, freedom from continued repression, freedom from narrow-minded discourse" (43). In other words, queer YA should help young martyr-target-victims escape—if only momentarily—their harsh realities. As Sandra Hughes-Hassell et al write in a 2013 study that echoes Hanckel and Cunningham: "The isolation and despair LGBTQ youth experience places them at high risk for a variety of other problems including homelessness, substance abuse, and suicide. …So where can young people who identify as LGBTQ turn for support, safe space, confidential access to information, and materials that speak to their lives? Schools and public libraries" (2). The second desired effect of queer YA is that it have broad pedagogical reach, fostering acceptance of queer youth on the part of heterosexually-identified readers. Cart and Jenkins ask: "Could [queer YA books] perhaps play a positive didactic role in acquainting young readers with realistically portrayed gay/lesbian characters? And could those readers' imaginations be pushed a bit further to see such characters from an empathetic, rather than simply a sympathetic, perspective? Could a young reader not simply feel *for* gay and lesbian people but also *with* them?" (xx). Third, and also implicit in the above, is a desire for queer YA to somehow illustrate for young people what being queer looks like. This is perhaps the most interesting, complicated, and problematic critical desire that circulates around queer YA, and the one that most clearly echoes Rose's point that children's literature can only ever be about adult desires regarding children: it is precarious to suggest that adult authors can accurately portray queerness, in all its complexity, to young people through the creation of fictional young queer characters. As Kevin Kumashiro points out, "every novel…provides only a partial perspective," so "using novels to learn the truth about others is problematic" (43). This fantasy about queerness' representability is also articulated by Bruhm and Hurley's claim that authors of children's literature are repeatedly inventing an idea of inventing children: similarly, queer YA

reflects adult ideas about what queer youth look like and how they behave, and what young queers should supposedly be learning about queerness itself.

When critics assume that young readers learn about sexuality and queerness from books in a unilateral way (book contains representation of queerness, representation teaches the reader), they posit a reductive didactic relationship between text and reader. It is too easy to presume, in other words, that simply because a book contains visible representations of queerness, it will succeed in teaching readers what queerness "looks like," especially in the very specific ways that critics assume it will. Yet, many critics make the assumptions that I outline here. Crisp and Knezek, for example, write that non-heterosexual characters and themes in YA "not only teach heterosexual young people about gay males but also provide gay males with images of possibilities for their own lives" (78). Elsewhere, Crisp notes that "accurate depictions of GLBTQ people are profoundly important for youth of all sexual identities," taking for granted that "accurate" might mean something radically different depending on the person, especially when it comes to queer adults vs. teenagers, and that claims to "accuracy," like Cart and Jenkins' call for authenticity and realism, requires certain representations of queerness to be held up as inaccurate, inauthentic, unrealistic ("Trouble" 219). Cart and Jenkins maintain that queer YA "needs to be more all-inclusive to…insure that all young readers might see their faces reflected in it" (165). And most strikingly, Hughes-Hassell et al write: "LGBTQ-themed literature provides LGBTQ teens with the opportunity to understand what it means to be queer, to learn gay social norms, to vicariously experience the coming out process, to know they are not alone, to connect with others like them, to find positive role models, and, perhaps most importantly, to affirm the fact that they are normal"—a heavy pedagogical burden indeed for any genre to bear (4). The problem with these claims is not limited to the fact that, for many queers, "what it

means to be queer" entails rejecting the concept of normalcy altogether. Hughes-Hassell et al also subscribe to the problematic belief that "queer," and the significance of being a young queer, is something transparent: a thing that can be read, learned, understood, and easily communicated through literature. "What it means to be queer"; "accurate" representations of queerness; the ability to "reflect" queerness: all of these statements maintain that queer YA represents the unrepresentable and teaches the unteachable. These critics prescribe and defend the pedagogical effects of queer YA while simultaneously engaging in nervous rehearsals of queer YA's repeated failure to produce these very effects. In other words, critics are constantly—yet unknowingly—pointing to the anxieties and impossibilities of the very genre in which they are so heavily invested.[26]

In her 1998 analysis of several gay YA titles, Trites describes what she calls "the limits of queer discourse at work in adolescent literature: as a group [these novels] show how a genre can become more aware of a social issue without necessarily providing the reader with transformative experiences" (144). Trites argues that gay YA is structured upon a contradiction: the liberation promised by the visibility of gay characters is undercut by their repression in the narrative. She explains: "[T]he genre has a well-entrenched tradition of delegitimizing its own agenda. All too often, gay YA literature parallels the cultural traditions of repression that have long stigmatized homosexuality" (149). These claims are accurate but also present several problems. First, it is difficult to measure the degree to which readers may or may not have

[26] One site of particularly intense anxiety is how HIV/AIDS is represented in children's literature and YA. Two sides of this conversation can be seen in Robert McRuer's "Reading and Writing 'Immunity'" and Crisp's piece on *Rainbow Boys*. For McRuer, the gay male body is evacuated from children's literature about AIDS to such an extent that it provides incomplete sex education and does a potentially fatal disservice to readers. For Crisp, *Rainbow Boys* yokes HIV/AIDS and the gay male body so tightly together that harmful stereotypes are propagated.

"transformative experiences" when reading queer YA; as I will show in chapters two and three, even YA novels typically understood to be riddled with stereotypes and negative affect may present opportunities for productive queer readings. Next, it is problematic to make claims about the "agenda" of an entire genre. As I have previously illustrated, authors, agents, and publishers of queer YA have priorities that might align or conflict with one another: *Sticks and Stones* author Hall, for example, wanted her characters to live happily ever after, while one of her publishers wanted to kill off a gay character. Which supposedly realistic or least harmful agenda is the one that emerges as representative of the text, let alone the genre to which the text belongs? And again, the ultimate pedagogical effect of the book is unmeasurable and will vary from reader to reader: for one young reader who places less weight on the narrative's ending, an early gay YA title like *Sticks and Stones* might be very transformative indeed; for another, it might be tragic and depressing. Instead of subscribing to Trites' argument about how queer YA undoes itself, I argue that it is the critics of queer YA who anxiously delegitimize the ostensible agenda of queer YA, not the queer YA texts themselves, for it is the critics of queer YA that establish the agenda of queer YA. In other words, it is the circulation of queer YA texts that produces the genre's anxiety and perceived failures; these attributes are not inherent in queer YA. I therefore understand queer YA as circulating in and producing what I call, following Sara Ahmed, an affective economy of anxiety—I will elaborate upon this concept in the latter parts of this chapter.

For example, as we have seen, critics regularly demand "realism" from queer YA, but remain vague as to what constitutes a realistic narrative. In spite of the dire portrait of queer youth painted by Hughes-Hassell et al in their study, most critics maintain that queer YA does not need to contain excessive amounts of homophobia to reflect reality. As Paulette Rothbauer

writes in her 2002 survey of Canadian queer YA, echoing Hanckel, Cunningham, Cart and Jenkins,

> [t]he elements of the coming-out story are predictable: fear, confusion, and self-loathing on the part of the lesbian or gay character; and disbelief, resistance, intolerance, harassment, and abuse on the part of family members, friends, and peers. …More to the point, there is very little that is uplifting or affirming in any of these novels or short stories that might speak to young lesbian and gay readers about the possibilities that exist after the initial coming-out process (23).

Corrinne Wickens describes a shift in the content of realism from homosexuality itself, in the early days of queer YA, to a contemporary thematic focus on homophobia:

> While the central problems in books with gay and lesbian characters historically has been homosexuality, in many contemporary LGBTQ novels homophobia is the overarching ‘problem.’ As such, authors have sought to promote inclusion of nonnormative sexual and gender identities and to present such characters as positive, ordinary, cool, even *normal*. In order to problematize homophobia, however, authors frequently create antagonists with homophobic attitudes and behaviours (153).

Although we cannot dispute the fact that homophobia exists, critics seem to agree that too much “reality” represented as homophobia is harmful, unrealistic, or a combination of the two. Crisp explains:

> Within the growing canon of gay young adult literature, authors who rely upon homophobic discourse may hope that their work will educate readers about the ‘problem’ of homophobia, but the recurring reliance upon homophobia as a literary mechanism to engender ‘realism’ in literature simultaneously implies that homophobia is too large an

> issue to confront and is ultimately bad, but inevitable behaviour. …Because intolerance is so regularly heard and seen, readers and producers of children's and adolescent texts are conditioned to accept homophobia and homophobic discourse as a 'normal' part of life. Authorial commitments to 'realism' repeat and thereby strengthen homophobia ("From Romance" 339).

Although he remains tangled in the genre's paradoxes and contradictions, Crisp is the critic who comes closest to explicitly articulating the anxieties surrounding queer YA. With Knezek, he takes up Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and James Howe's *Totally Joe* to explore the tension between reality and fantasy in queer YA, pointing out that critics desire an impossible balance between these two poles: "While *Perks* has been hailed for its 'realism,' *Totally Joe* has been referred to by readers and critics as 'idealized': it seems that because the novel presents a character comfortable in his sexual identity and whose queerness does not result in the abandonment of family and friends, the novel appears (for some readers) to be a 'fantasy of acceptance'" (78). While many critics call for a movement away from stereotype and homophobia in queer YA, this call is nonetheless an anxious one: as Crisp points out, some readers remain fearful of completely relinquishing homophobia-as-realism and the subsequent production of "idealized" queer YA texts that would risk, presumably, misleading queer youth about their own realities.

Alex Sanchez's popular *Rainbow Boys* trilogy and Crisp's critique of this YA series nicely illustrate these tensions. The three novels—*Rainbow Boys*, *Rainbow High*, and *Rainbow Road*, published in 2001, 2003, and 2005 respectively—tell the stories of three gay high school-aged friends named Jason, Kyle, and Nelson. Each chapter is told from the perspective of one of the three characters, each of whom represents a different moment on the spectrum of outness: at

the beginning of the series, Jason is a closeted jock with a girlfriend; Kyle is out to a few close friends but not his family, and he's secretly in love with Jason; Nelson is out and proud and has a crush on Kyle. The books are enormously popular and frequently used in North American classrooms: "To say that the books are beloved almost seems un understatement," explains Crisp; "readers across a range of sexual identities and ages and from a variety of professional backgrounds (i.e. students, critics, scholars) have affirmed them as both realistic in their portrayals and positive in their content" ("Trouble" 215). While many critics agree that the *Rainbow Boys* series succeeds in striking a solid honesty/hope balance, Crisp spends nearly forty pages pointing to the series' many pitfalls: in his view, the books contain far too much realism—or rather, dangerous stereotypes disguised as realism (the wrong kind of realism, in Crisp's view)—so the novels may actually do more harm than good for young readers. For Crisp, the series teaches the wrong thing, and is teaching it to too many people: "I would suggest it is the series' unrivaled popularity among homosexual and heterosexual teen and adult readers, critics, and scholars that makes it most problematic," he writes ("Trouble" 246). Although Crisp has many political issues with Sanchez's series, including the representation of HIV/AIDS and racial stereotype, his primary concern is literary: the three main characters are stereotypical archetypes that stand in for realistic gay teens; fiction, for Crisp, is analogous to real life. In other words, Crisp takes a representational issue with Sanchez's attempts to address the crucial pedagogical question of "what queerness looks like": an ostensibly critical pillar of queer YA. Crisp details at length the three harmful and reductive tropes he sees represented in *Rainbow Boys*, naming them "The 'Masculine' T.C.J. [Tragic Closet Jock: Jason]", the "'Feminine S.U.D. [Sympathetic, Understanding Doormat: Kyle]", and "The Queer and Proud Homosexual as Sexually Insatiable Target [Nelson]" ("Trouble" 226, 233). These characters, Crisp argues, are heteronormative

tropes disguised as gay teens: “The ‘realistic’ feel that readers get from the series comes from the familiar play between ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ counterparts and reiterates (not subverts) these gender stereotypes and misconceptions about sexuality,” he explains; “it is because these depictions of gay men are played so ‘straight’ (pun intended) that the books feel so inauthentic” (“Trouble” 234). Yet, in spite of his critique, Crisp provides little information about what an “authentic” or “realistic” representation of a gay teen could look like.[27] Further, other than a brief gesture to how *Rainbow Boys* could be recuperated to teach students “how these pieces of contemporary realistic romance fiction depict homosexual and heterosexual people…in ways that reply upon and reinforce heteronormative and stereotypical constructions of gender and sexuality,” Crisp does not address the fact that texts do not always circulate in ways we expect them to, even if their didactic agendas seem transparent (“Trouble” 246).

In “The Trouble With *Rainbow Boys*” Crisp does, however, make a redemptive gesture that is common amongst critics of queer YA: he posits David Levithan’s Lambda award-winning *Boy Meets Boy* as an antidote to all the potentially harmful, angsty, stereotype- and homophobia-riddled titles. Published in 2003, Levithan’s novel is genre-blending story about, quite simply, a romance between two teenage boys, but the story is set in a world where the narrator comes out unproblematically in kindergarten, the high school quarterback is a drag queen, and “most of the straight guys try to sneak into the Queer Beer bar. Boys who love boys flirt with girls who love girls. And whether your heart is strictly ballroom or bluegrass punk, the dance floors are open to

[27] In *Troubling Education*, Kevin Kumashiro demonstrates how claims to authenticity have the inevitable and simultaneous effect of producing both exclusions and normativity: “Authenticity requires the existence of the nonauthentic: to say *who we are* and *what we are focusing on* is simultaneously to say *who we are not* and *what we are not focusing on*. The naming of difference, then, whether in activist communities or inclusive curricula, can serve less to describe who a group is, and more to prescribe who a group ought to be” (57).

whatever you have to offer" (1-2). *Boy Meets Boy* is mentioned in a variety of recent texts about queer YA, and almost always in a concluding movement that makes a prescription regarding the most desirable future of the genre. Wickens writes that "*Boy Meets Boy* deserves special attention. The novel is part love story, part farce, part contemporary realistic fiction. Through the blurring of genres, Levithan in fact crafts a novel to counter normative assumptions around gender and sexuality" (149). She continues to celebrate the novel throughout her article, arguing that "through its…inventive use of linguistic features, [*Boy Meets Boy*] undermines heteronormative assumptions by presenting the unthinkable: children as sexual beings, hegemonic masculinity as in fact non-hegemonic and detrimental to success, and homosexuality as normalized and even ordinary" (156). Tison Pugh claims that "Levithan's novel points to a refreshing new direction for children's literature, one in which gay angst is rendered meaningless in a world without sexual closets, and in which neither children nor adults are sacrificed to a fetishized belief in innocence as a virtue above all others" (*Innocence* 18). Cart and Jenkins hail *Boy Meets Boy* as "an authentic breakthrough book in the sense that it is the first feel-good gay novel for teens. …In its acceptance and celebration of human differences,…it represents a near-revolution in social attitudes and the publishing of GLBTQ books" (144-145). Even Crisp, at least initially, writes favourably about the novel: "It is an innovative book that not only avoids didacticism, but is generally regarded to be of a higher literary quality. Although in some ways it too is normative, it's a novel that through its very construction forces readers who identify as heterosexual to step outside of the 'world as we know it' in ways that reposition them as outsiders" ("Trouble" 247). For these critics at least, *Boy Meets Boy* seems to have struck the ideal balance between honesty and hope: its magical realist feel permits a fantasy of the widespread acceptance of queerness, while its contemporary, recognizable school setting and

deployment of a character with conservative religious parents still grants the novel claims on realism. Critics have ascertained that *Boy Meets Boy* largely teaches the right things about what queerness looks like and what it means to be queer, which is this case is a highly normalized albeit celebrated mode of sexual being.

However, in "From Romance to Magical Realism: Limits and Possibilities in Gay Adolescent Fiction," published a year after "The Trouble With *Rainbow Boys*" first appears, Crisp's thoughts about *Boy Meets Boy* spiral into anxious ambivalence. Reiterating much of his initial praise for *Boy Meets Boy*, he maintains that "Levithan's novel is notable in that it gives a feeling of hope uncharacteristic of LGBTQ adolescent literature" (341). While "this feeling of hope is worth noting due to its difference from what is often presented in gay adolescent literature," he continues, "it does not necessarily imply that this is a 'better' model: in fact, 'giving hope' may ultimately be unproductive in that it could forestall any radical restructuring" (341). Here, Crisp introduces a new pedagogical objective for queer YA, a fascinating move that shifts the terms of the debate that has structured critical discourse around queer YA for decades. No longer are hope and honesty/realism/authenticity the primary criteria for evaluating the pedagogical success of a queer YA novel. In addition to recognizing that too much "realism" can be harmful through its perpetuation of the martyr-target-victim trope, now, in a move reminiscent of the early days of queer YA, we must also appreciate how too much hope may be detrimental to young readers. This time around, however, excess hope is not harmful because it could delude young queers into believing that they can live happily as queers; too much hope has the potential to produce a type of anaesthetizing effect, a status quo queerness that does little to challenge the binaries that continue to structure popular understandings of gender and sexuality. In a complete paradox, Crisp wants to do away with the "realism" of stereotypes as

communicated in queer YA in favour of a more hopeful approach, but he also argues against excess hope, because too much hope might distract us from the stereotypes of queer YA that remain reflected in our reality; hope might numb us to the fact that we still need things to change. "While Levithan does indeed 'flip' the binary in *Boy Meets Boy*," Crisp explains,

> in many ways, he simply shows us the other side. He repositions the world to bring the inside-out and the outside-in, but 'out' and 'in' values persist and ultimately leave the binary intact. Because Levithan is ultimately operating in a binary, difference beyond gay/not gay or extending language beyond the limits of good/bad becomes an impossibility. This is not enough: to truly disrupt heteronormativity, literature would have to be imagined beyond identity categories and, in this sense, *the limitations of language make all projects of LGBTQ adolescent literature performative failures* ("From Romance" 343, my emphasis).

Here, Crisp articulates a really interesting and productive point, one that has undeniable echoes of Rose's argument about the impossibility of children's literature as a whole. As I have illustrated, given the pedagogical objectives contemporary critics attribute to the genre, all projects of queer YA—as the genre is currently being articulated—will inevitably produce anxiety about their successes and failures, since the pedagogical destiny critics have attributed to queer YA can never properly be fulfilled. However, I believe that Crisp's point about the failure of what he calls "LGBTQ adolescent literature" does not go far enough. What he misses here is the fact that children's literature *has* been "imagined beyond identity categories" for decades. As Kidd explains, "while such explicitly themed works [of queer YA] have appeared only in the last several decades, many classics of Anglo-American children's literature are fundamentally homosocial, or concerned with same-sex friendships and family bonds. In retrospect, some of

these classics seem decidedly queer" ("Introduction" 114). What Crisp misses is the fact that queer YA, as a genre, is currently defined by critics based on the visibility of non-heterosexual characters and themes. In order to render visible non-normative sexual and gender identities, authors must work within a system of signification that relies on particular binaries of gender and sexuality, as well as the associated concepts of realism and hope that critics have deemed to be of high pedagogical importance to the genre. So for Crisp, queer YA will perpetually fail because the language of sexual identity the genre relies upon preserves these binaries instead of disrupting them. In my view, this perceived failure emerges because critical definitions of the genre, including Crisp's, limit its content to texts where language is used to explicitly render sexual identity in contemporary terms. If we want to think about the "successes" of "LGBTQ adolescent literature" as opposed to its perpetual and inevitable failures, then, we must change the way we define and approach the genre. What must shift is our critical perception of queer YA, and it must shift in precisely the direction that Kidd outlines: to recognize that children's literature—including queer YA—has and continues to circulate and get read queerly in excess of those visible categories of sexual identity that Crisp understands as limiting queer YA's queer potential. If we imagine queer YA as an anxious genre—one that will never be fully stable or defined—we remove the limiting associations of visibility, hope, and authenticity, and open ourselves up as readers, educators, and critics to texts that offer more than perpetual failure at properly teaching young people "what queer looks like," instead shifting our focus to the queerness of reading practices themselves and relational forms in excess of "LGBT."

**The Case for Visibility**

Before I expand upon my notion of queer YA as anxious genre, I want to emphasize that I am not advocating the elimination of visibly queer characters and themes in YA texts. Quite the

opposite: for reasons I will outline, I believe visible queerness in fiction is fundamental to improving the lives of young queers. What I argue for is an expansion of our working critical concept of queer YA to include latent queernesses alongside the visible ones for the purpose of avoiding pedagogical expectations that constantly undermine themselves. Much of how I understand the productive potential of queer YA is tied to the power many critics—myself included—attribute to storytelling. As Sean P. O'Connell writes, for example, "stories have at once referential and performative power. They set up possible ways of being in the world, invite one to the realization of those possibilities, but they do so by drawing together what has already been, is now, and can be" (100). The visibility of LGBTQ characters in fiction is important because it has the potential to, as so many critics have described, provide identificatory possibilities to young people, queer or otherwise. As Michael Warner writes in *The Trouble With Normal*, if we consider sexual autonomy to be of importance—and I do—then we must think about how it "requires…access to pleasures and possibilities, since people commonly do not know their desires until they find them" (7). Queer YA with visibly non-heterosexually-identified characters is one venue through which young people can access possibilities for negotiating a sense of a sexual and gendered self. As Rothbauer explains, "the narrative accounts of gay and lesbian experience in fiction may represent possibilities for being in the world, whether read by queer or straight young people. …Published testimonials bear witness to the power of stories to ease the loneliness, despair, confusion, isolation, and curiosity that comes from realizing one's sexual identity is other than heterosexual" (11). Although I do not necessarily agree with Rothbauer's suggestion that identifying as non-heterosexual necessarily produces so much negative affect, I do believe that stories have the potential to be life-changing. Cart and Jenkins also think and write along these lines, asserting their "continued belief in the

power of books to help teen readers understand themselves and others, to contribute to the mental health and well-being of GLBTQ youth, and to save lives—and perhaps even to change the world—by informing minds and nourishing spirits" (xviii). And Jody Norton, who writes specifically about the representation of transgender children in children's literature, emphasizes the "liberatory role" played by the genre "in creating interpretive strategies, curricular revisions, and pedagogical interventions that will contribute substantially to the amelioration of the condition of cultural, institutional, and political neglect through which transchildren have been denied their reality, and their worth" (294). Norton distinguishes herself from these other critics through a focus on how literature can be deployed in the classroom to improve the lives of youth; Rothbauer, Cart and Jenkins are more invested in the pedagogical relationship between book and reader. What these critics have in common, however, is a belief that I share: that stories may provide important possibilities for understanding ourselves and our relationship to others, and stories with visibly queer characters only enhance the richness and diversity of these possibilities, thus dramatically augmenting queer YA's potential to have a positive effect on many young lives.

Many of these points crystallize in "The American Boy," a 2013 *New Yorker* article by Daniel Mendelsohn. Subtitled "A famous author, a young reader, and a life-changing correspondence," Mendelsohn's eloquent and moving piece details his eight year pen pal relationship with historical fiction author Mary Renault, from 1976—when Mendelsohn was fifteen years old—until Renault's death in 1983. Mendelsohn first discovers Renault when his father hands him a copy of *Fire from Heaven*, the first in Renault's Alexander the Great trilogy, which deals openly with the Greek hero's sexual relationships with men. "I read it when I was twelve," writes Mendelsohn, "and I was hooked. Alexander the Great was my first serious

crush." In a striking passage, Mendelsohn describes how Renault's books became so critical to the way he negotiated his sexuality in an era when homosexuality was dramatically less visible than it is now:

> Reading Renault's books, I felt a shock of recognition. The silent watching of other boys, the endless strategizing about how to get their attention, the fantasies of finding a boy to love, and be loved by, 'best': all this was agonizingly familiar. I knew something about pothos ['longing', in Greek] and thought of the humiliating lengths to which it could drive me—the memorizing of certain boys' class schedules or bus routes, the covert shuffling of locker assignments. I was astonished, halfway through *Fire from Heaven*, to find that this kind of thing had always been happening. Until that moment, I had never seen my secret feelings reflected anywhere. Pop music meant nothing to me, since all the songs were about boys wanting girls or girls wanting boys; neither did the Y.A. novels I'd read, for the same reason. Television was a desert. (*Will & Grace* was twenty-five years in the future). Now, in a novel about people from another place and time, it was as if I had found a picture of myself.

I quote this passage at length because it simultaneously illustrates the transformative function of visible queerness in stories and the possibilities for identification and relationality that extend beyond identification with fictional LGBT-identified characters. Mendelsohn speaks directly to the life-changing potential of fiction as described by Cart and Jenkins, Rothbauer, Norton, et al., emphasizing how, in a world otherwise devoid of queer representations, he found a reflection of himself that drastically improved his life and sparked his equally transformative correspondence with Renault. As I will further explore in my next chapter, I do not intend to idealize narrative or transform it into a cure-all for the ills of non-normative sexuality: fiction

presents as many pedagogical pitfalls as it does opportunities. However, I also do not want to underestimate the way fiction has improved many young queer lives. After receiving a letter from Renault complimenting him on his skill as a writer, the young Mendelsohn is changed: "Over the next months, as my stalking of the blond swimmer became more abject, as more and more meals ended with me bursting into tears and locking myself in my room as my parents clumped helplessly down the hallway after me, the sentence 'Something tells me you are going to have a future as a writer' served as a charm." Renault's stories, and the story she anticipates for Mendelsohn's life, guide him through a rocky, closeted adolescence.

Notably, this passage indicates that YA is not the only potential source of queer identificatory possibilities for young people. Although, in my second opening vignette, Brown and Smith emphasize the importance of having visibly gay characters specifically in YA novels, Mendelsohn's article illustrates how young people find points of identification in myriad places: books for adults, children's literature, young adult fiction, personal correspondence, and—also in Mendelsohn's case—*Playgirl* magazine. This, crucially, is why we must revitalize the way we work with queer YA to explore those queernesses not immediately visible, those latent queernesses that lurk beneath a narrative's surface, opportunities for queer reading that are beyond attempts to learn or represent what queer looks like. In the concluding movements of Crisp's "From Romance to Magical Realism," he writes: "currently, one can look at the body of LGBTQ children's and young adult fiction and suggest that there has not yet been any book that *really* inscribes queerness. The writing that has been done is 'marked writing'—LGBTQ people have now been given some texts and titles as representations, but they still entail heteronormative terms and are written through heterosexual language. Mere representation is not enough" (344). I agree with Crisp that representation and visibility are inadequate endpoints if

we want to create queer pedagogical moments in YA. However, the problem with his claim is precisely what I hope to illustrate with this chapter: that what Crisp imagines as "the body of LGBTQ children's and young adult fiction" includes only those texts that contain visible representations of non-heterosexual sexuality, and considers only those representations that could fall under the aegis of LGBT identity. We need to recognize the inadequacy of visibility—of trying to show readers "what queer looks like"—and begin to more deeply contemplate how texts can simultaneously present more complex, interesting, latent queernesses. And although I further disagree that *all* queer YA titles fail to "really" inscribe queerness, I would argue that, as it stands, queer YA is rendered a failure through the critical discourse that establishes its anxious pedagogies. If mere representation is not enough, we as critics should move beyond representation and a definition of queer YA that requires the representation of queerness, and begin to think of queer YA as an anxious genre: one that recognizes its own impossibility of being defined in such limiting terms. In other words, I want to think beyond visibility and see queerness not solely as an identity, but as a mode of being that presents a range of relational possibilities, and—especially in later chapters—I want to ask what it means to encounter that exemplarity through scenes of reading.[28]

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[28] Foucault famously used homosexuality as a model for the multiplication of relational modes; see, for example, "Friendship as a way of life." Here, I am also thinking of Berlant and Warner's 1998 essay "Sex in Public," in which they consider "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). Similarly, I want to explore the relational and identificatory possibilities that may occur when we read beyond the visibility of LGBT identities in queer YA, and consider how these possibilities often emerge from scenes of pedagogy and reading in queer YA. Chapters two and three will work through these ideas in greater depth.

**Looking Beyond Visibility**

The push for visibility in queer YA is a key component of this *It Gets Better* moment, which describes how North American culture currently imagines the relationship between adults, queer youth, and literature. As Savage notes in his introduction to the book version of *It Gets Better*, "the point of the project is to give despairing LGBT kids hope. The point is to let them know that things do get better, using the examples of our own lives" (6). For Savage, adults are responsible for creating forms of non-heterosexual visibility that will ostensibly deliver queer youth from the crisis in which they find themselves. Hughes-Hassell et al also posit visibility as a solution in their study, arguing that

> feelings of invisibility can occur in the absence of positive LGBTQ images. In addition to a lack of positive LGBTQ characters in literature, a lack of LGBTQ-themed books sends a message to youth that it is not okay to be gay, bisexual, transgender, or lesbian. These teens may have access only to literature that reinforces heterosexism and traditional gender stereotypes, sending additional messages that the teens' feelings are wrong (4).

In other words, there is a direct correlation between the invisibility of queerness in literature and the extent to which young queers feel invisible, and another direct link between the depiction of stereotypes and how young queers understand themselves to be "wrong." As I illustrated in my previous section, both of these claims about the possible effects of representation are to some extent accurate. They are, however, naïve: visibility and the expectation that fiction represent reality are not the sole loci of potential change for the social, pedagogical, and relational landscape of queerness. Crisp and Knezek make a point similar to this, arguing that "LGBTQ books are often taken to be positive or affirmative based on their mere inclusion of gay people as characters. We believe the catalog of LGBTQ texts must continue to increase in both quantity

and quality and that teachers must explicitly engage students in critical discussions of the ways in which texts work to construct for readers what it means and looks like to be gay" (77). While Crisp and Knezek are suggesting that queer YA must move away from stereotype and the heterosexualizing of queer characters, I argue that we must engage with texts that may or may not necessarily include LGBTQ-identified people as characters with attention to a variety of queernesses that are not limited to the visible.

The push for visibility in queer YA strikes me as a product of the approach taken by the North American gay rights movement over the past few decades. Warner's *The Trouble With Normal* offers a lucid overview and critique of gay activists' struggle for rights to marriage, adoption, and open service in the military. Warner argues that the politics of sexual shame have the potential to be a powerful rallying point for queers, but "the official gay movement—by which I mean its major national organizations, its national media, its most visible spokespersons—has lost sight of that politics, becoming more and more enthralled by respectability" (24-25). I am not calling for queer YA to deal in the politics of sexual shame, but I do believe that broader calls for respectability and visibility have shaped critical responses to queer YA. Warner further claims that "like most stigmatized groups, gays and lesbians were always tempted to believe that the way to overcome stigma was to win acceptance by the dominant culture, rather than to change the self-understanding of that culture" (50). Indeed, *It Gets Better*—as I will examine closely in chapter four—and critics of queer YA are more invested in the normalization of queerness than the denaturalization of sexual identity itself; many critics call for more characters that "just happen to be gay," or as Cart and Jenkins put it, "young people whose homosexuality is simply a given and who are dealing with other issues and challenges—emotional, intellectual, physical, social, developmental, etc., that are part of teens'

lives" (166). Other critics of YA use "queer" as part of this normalizing gesture, a move that goes against queer's impulse to destabilize the very concept of normalcy: Wickens, for example, writes that "queer theory and queer analyses of children's and young adult literature work to problematize and expand notions of what is acceptable and normal. Such queer approaches challenge the signifiers and structures that indicate otherness and difference and work to make them normal and usual" (162). The critical power of queer is not, as Wickens suggests, to expose the normalcy of ostensible strangeness. To the contrary, queer points to the sheer strangeness and alterity of everything believed "normal" about sexuality; as Abate and Kidd indicate, "the word 'queer'…has long meant 'strange,' 'unusual,' and 'out of alignment,' even as it has been linked to non-heteronormative sexuality since around the turn of the twentieth century" ("Introduction" 3). The rhetoric of gay rights movements and this call to normalize queerness in YA are reminiscent of Foucault's *The History of Sexuality Vol. I*, wherein he illustrates how, in response to the emergence of homosexual identity through discourses of medicine and sexology, "homosexuality began to speak on its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or 'naturality' be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified," instead of challenging these categories or establishing new ones (101). In terms of queer YA, calling for the normalization of queerness diminishes the critical and transformative potential of "queer" to reshape the way readers think about sexuality and relationality. Kerry Mallan nicely articulates this potential, arguing that

> from a queer perspective, the most successful fiction for children makes visible the processes that seek to enforce heteronormative categories and binaries, and that foreground subjectivity as multifaceted and shifting. The most successful queer stories

> 'queer' their readers by provoking them to query the assumptions that underpin notions of normal and abnormal identity, especially sexual identity (188).

And more broadly, Abate and Kidd write that "understanding children's literature as queer means embracing trajectories and tonalities other than the lesbian/gay-affirmative and celebratory" ("Introduction" 9). As I have demonstrated, Crisp is among a handful of critics who argue that queer YA should serve a critical function in addition to an affirmative one, although he does not consider looking outside of the visible. I intend to illustrate how, before taking seriously the queer potential of YA, we must first think queerly about queer YA and move away from a conception of the genre as being defined by the visibility of non-heterosexual identities.

Abate and Kidd's recent collection, *Over the Rainbow: Queer Children's and Young Adult Literature*, does an excellent job of establishing the framework for an anxious queer YA by poking holes in Cart, Jenkins et al's more rigid delineation of the genre. Organized more or less temporally into three sections entitled "Queering the Canon," "After Stonewall," and "Queer Readers and Writers," Abate and Kidd's volume is designed to explore the latent queer potential of canonical texts, the rise of queer visibility in children's literature circa the 1969 Stonewall riots (a key turning point in the gay rights movement), and the techniques young audiences use to make texts mean queerly through queer reading strategies and contemporary media including online slash fanfiction and video games. Abate and Kidd explode queer children's literature and YA, assembling a vision of the genre that recognizes its complexities and contradictions: "Queer children's literature both endorses and moves against a pedagogical or instrumentalist program," they explain, "just as it both endorses and moves against the politics of identity affirmation, as expressed in more didactic works of lesbian/gay literature" ("Introduction" 6). Indeed, by including essays that consider texts not traditionally considered to be overtly queer, Abate and

Kidd recognize and resist the role that visibility plays in structuring critical assumptions about the genre. Pugh's essay, for example, examines how "[L. Frank] Baum's *Oz* books fundamentally reimagine procreation, heterosexuality, and erotic drives" ("There Lived" 88). Arguing that Oz offers a "queer utopia" free from "the drudgeries of heteronormative inculcation," Pugh suggests that "the *Oz* texts are…particularly pertinent to contemporary queer theory, especially in regard to current debates addressing the tensions between utopianism and antisociality in the construction of queer culture and identity" ("There Lived" 88). Robin Bernstein and Eric L.Tribunella take a similar tack in their essays, "The Queerness of *Harriet the Spy*" and "Refusing the Queer Potential: John Knowles's *A Separate Peace*," respectively. Broadly speaking, these authors, like Pugh, are interested in mining the depths of texts that suggest queerness without visibility; in reading queerly instead of examining surface representations of what queerness purportedly looks like. While Bernstein locates the queer potential of *Harriet the Spy* in author Louise Fitzhugh's queering of age in lieu of the more common "genderqueerness" reading (112), Tribunella looks at YA-crossover classic *A Separate Peace* and suggests that the text's potential "to be read as homoerotic constitutes a kind of open secret—something a reader knows, intuits, feels vaguely, denies, rejects, or perhaps remains oblivious to—that cannot help but impinge on the experience of the reader reading it" (123). *A Separate Peace* both invites queer readings and teaches audiences how to read queerly: "It provides a lesson on what alternatively might be called ambiguity or subtext," Tribunella continues, "on the need to be attentive to subtlety, on the dynamics of the closet, on the possibilities of pleasure in 'knowing' a sexual secret or solving its mystery, on the potential for homosexuality to be anywhere, everywhere, or nowhere" (123). In other words, although *A*

*Separate Peace* does not contain overt representations of homosexuality, it lends itself to queer readings more readily than many texts that do.

A key distinction between the essays in Abate and Kidd's collection and some of the critics I examined earlier in this chapter is that the former do not consistently represent the pedagogical relationship between text and reader as unilateral. Abate and Kidd's essayists, in other words, do not presume that readers are simply learning whatever the text is seemingly trying to teach: these essays invite queer reading practices. Writing specifically about how lesbian-identified readers approach ostensibly non-queer texts, Sherrie A. Inness suggests that "[lesbians] look for meanings that lurk behind the text's apparently heterosexual surface, knowing that lesbian experiences, whether in fiction or reality, are rarely overt. …[L]esbian readers are on a search for the lesbian subtext that speaks to them and their experiences. Lesbians read and interpret aspects of a text that heterosexual readers simply might not notice in the same way" (272-273). Inness specifically explores the lesbian potential of the Nancy Drew books, arguing that in spite of being "aimed at a heterosexual audience," the series "can be interpreted in a queer fashion, a reading that is no less significant because it probably is not what the writers intended" (287). However, the essay in Abate and Kidd's collection that most vividly illustrates queer reading practices is "The Hobo, the Fairy, and the Quarterback," in which Biddy Martin reflects on how she and her childhood friends related to certain texts. She explores how her identification with Chip Hilton, a fictional heroic high school quarterback, formed the basis of her taking on a "wounded lesbian butch" identity, but also how her identification with and in opposition to the cheerleaders and the football fans allowed her to disavow aspects of Chip's masculinity and aggression (260). Her femme lesbian friend Carol identified with Wendy's femininity and domestic role in Peter and the Lost Boys' Neverland home, and Martin interprets

Carol's love of Peter Pan as the identification with the image of an inaccessible kiss (the one in the corner of Mrs. Darling's mouth). Martin's friend David identified with the "passion associated with healing and climbing and being on the way" in the story of a hobo who is dropped off a cliff, but then climbs back up to take revenge on his attacker (263). Overall, Martin's point is that literature has a power to "organize and express fantasies" in a nuanced way—fantasies that take into consideration the reader's identification with race and class-based positions—and cannot be quickly reduced to "political positions or identities" (267). "These stories offered realms not only of freedom, passion, and expansiveness," Martin reflects, "but also of forbiddenness and prohibition. They provided evidence of our isolation and queerness, however straight or queer we ended up being" (266). The complex, nuanced, and profoundly queer relationships Martin and her friends established with these ostensibly non-queer texts speak to the transformative interpretive and relational possibilities present in texts where an evaluation of queer visibility is not the primary pedagogical objective.

Due to the fact that Abate and Kidd's volume does not privilege queer visibility and the representation of "what queer looks like," valuing instead queer circulations and reading strategies, it largely evades the pedagogical traps and failures encountered by critics of Cart and Jenkins' ilk. As Abate and Kidd themselves point out, "understanding children's literature as queer rather than more narrowly as lesbian/gay broadens the interpretive possibilities. For example, many pre-1969 texts for children and young adults avoided the term 'queer' but were nonetheless engaged with issues of queer desire and identification" ("Introduction" 4). Missing in Abate and Kidd's volume, however, is a critical trope for approaching queer YA that articulates this refusal to be defined by visibility while simultaneously attending to the concerns, fantasies, desires, and affect that circulate around children's literature and its imagined

audiences. This, I suggest, is accomplished by understanding queer YA as an anxious genre: a genre defined by its nervous resistance to definition; a genre whose coalescence is future-oriented and always in the process of arriving. As an anxious genre, queer YA does not automatically cohere around texts with visibly queer characters and themes, but is instead constituted through Gubar's "constellation" of shifting evaluative criteria (as described in the introduction) and the interpretive practices of readers, be they children, teens, or adults. In other words, we cannot know if a text is queer YA until someone reads it queerly, and since the queer reading and writing practices of all readers and writers can never possibly be known, the genre remains always in the process of being constituted, never complete, but rather shaped and re-shaped with each new approach and intervention. Thus, an archival project like Cart and Jenkins' is rendered impossible, but by searching for queerness everywhere instead of only where it makes itself visible, we open ourselves to the rich interpretive and identificatory possibilities represented in Abate and Kidd's collection.

**The Case for an Anxious Genre**

As I argued in my defense of the importance of queer visibility in YA, I believe that queer stories present a great deal of positive, transformative potential for thinking relationality. Due to this potential, I maintain that we *should* be anxious about the content and circulation of queer YA, but anxious with a critical self-reflexivity about how the genre of queer YA itself invites and produces anxiety. In what follows, I argue that the embrace of queer YA as anxious genre has the capacity to reshape our critical approaches to queer YA. Genres, according to Fredric Jameson, "are essentially literary institutions, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact" (106). It is in the latter part of Jameson's formulation—wherein the public ascertains the value or "use"

of a particular artifact (in this case, queer YA texts)—that most critical anxiety takes place: if, that is, the public feels that writers are not obeying the "social contract" bound up with the genre itself. When it comes to queer YA, as I have illustrated, this anxiety emerges from a sense that YA does not contain enough queer visibility, or the "wrong kinds" of visibility, i.e. too much "realism" in the form of homophobia and stereotype—both of which speak to a reductive and didactic understanding of the relationship between fiction and reality.

Although research and writing on anxiety abounds in fields including medicine, psychology, and psychoanalysis, little has been written explicitly and specifically about the role anxiety plays in literary criticism, and even less about the generic anxieties—as anxieties proper—surrounding children's literature.[29] A rare, relatively recent example is Jennifer Shacker's 2007 article "Unruly Tales: Ideology, Anxiety, and the Regulation of Genre," which explores mid-Victorian criticism of folk and fairy tales, in particular those "attitudes and anxieties that shaped the discursive practices and popular reception of [folklore studies] in its earlier decades—specifically those regarding mass literacy and the marketplace, children and

[29] Certainly, anxiety (as term and symptom) surfaces in far too many discussions of literature (including children's literature) to mention here; literature as a site for the representation and rehearsal of anxieties has been written on by numerous critics, typically vis-à-vis Freud and/or Jung (see, for example, Henk de Berg's *Freud's Theory and Its Use in Literary and Cultural Studies*, 2003). In her discussion of gothic YA, Kathryn James even suggests there is a strong connection between anxiety as theme and the genre's young readers: "Perhaps [gothic YA] appeals because so many of its key themes—monstrousness, the body, metamorphosis, transgression, anxiety, sexuality, romance—strike a chord with the adolescent subject" (116). Furthermore, there are children's books to help young people deal with anxiety (see, for example: Huebner and Matthews, *What to do when you worry too much: a kid's guide to overcoming anxiety*, Magination Press: 2006, and Buron, *When my worries get too big!: a relaxation book for children who live with anxiety*, Autism Asperger Pub. Co.: 2006). What all of these conversations lack, however, is an attentive and focused trans-media, intersectional approach to anxiety that recognizes the complexity of its temporality, its circulation through multiple sites and subjects (criticism, reception, readers, the texts and characters themselves), and its potential as a critical trope for queer reading and thinking about genre.

commodity culture, and art in an age of industrial capitalism" (388). Shacker looks at two critics, Ruskin and Yonge, whose writings "hint at a need to regulate children's reading and the fairy tales to which they are exposed, to weed out the tainted, queer, unnatural, satirical, and excessive potentialities of the genre" (391). This should recall the writing of some contemporary queer YA critics, whose specific investments clearly differ from Ruskin and Yonge, but whose critical impulses remain the same: a "weed[ing] out" from queer YA those titles that contain themes and characters in excess of normalized and hopeful versions of LGBT identity. Although Shacker clearly identifies and explains the anxieties of these critics, most of which revolve around the infiltration of children's literature by burlesque, she does not consider the usefulness of anxiety as a critical trope for thinking about the relationship between children's literature and anxiety, or anxiety and literary criticism more broadly.

Thinking the latter, however, is part of Michael John's objective in *Anxious Intellects*, a book that establishes anxiety as foundational to and inextricable from the practice of literary criticism. John responds to two of Stanley Fish's books—*Doing What Comes Naturally* and *Professional Correctness*—to diagnose Fish with an anxiety that belies his commitments to the stable embeddedness provided by interpretive communities. "Given the fractured, fissured, volatile condition of all of our communities and the contending cultures that find themselves embedded in them," John writes, "the rhetorical nature of our self-reflection means that we find ourselves embedded and uncertain, anxious and engaged, at the same time" (75). This ambivalence is central to "communities generally," John writes, but his focus is on the "vexed and divided interpretive communities of English departments," where we can see quite clearly how "anxiety and interpretation are inextricably linked" (72). He meditates at length on the anxiety of English departments through a series of questions:

> What counts as the common interest of an English department at this moment? Literary appreciation, deconstruction, new historicism, Marxism, feminism, cultural studies? What counts as literature? The great books of Western civilization? What does that include? Women's literature? African diasporic literature? Philosophical texts? Postcolonial discourses? Film? Painting? Television? Folklore? Technology? Pamphlets on sexually transmitted diseases from the surgeon general's office? All of these may be methods for, or objects of study among the diverse population of those who occupy the space assigned to the English department. They necessarily do not form a peaceful community, since each of these methods and objects has come into being through active antagonism to at least one other method of reading or constitution of the discipline. To practice within such a community constrains the players to be ever calculating and ever certain of obligations, procedures, and legitimacy within the confines of their own professional context (68).

These anxious questions, John maintains, emerge as a result of our being grounded in an ostensibly stable interpretive community: "it is precisely our embeddedness as professional intellectuals in conflictual contexts," John writes, "that makes anxiety central to what we do" (77).

As I have illustrated in this chapter, critical expectations surrounding the function of fiction—as well as the critic's role in relation to fiction—are inherently anxious: what pedagogical or didactic function should queer YA fulfill? What future effects do we desire from queer YA? Is the role of the critic to find the "best book" for the child, or is it something else—something that includes, for example, an exploration of the complex and shifting dynamic between text and reader? Many critics—as I have pointed out—maintain a relatively naïve and

didactic understanding of queer YA's function. Like an English department as described by John, queer YA is something that critics attempt to construct as pedagogically cohesive but is ultimately unsettled and anxious, constituted by texts that "necessarily do not form a peaceful community" (68). And as John suggests, those of us working with queer YA must be "ever calculating" as we consider the stakes of our pedagogical and critical investments in the genre along with the criteria we bring to bear on our tools for defining its constitution and evaluating its texts.

Following this, my anxious approach to queer YA has much in common with Gubar's "On Not Defining Children's Literature" which, as I explained in the introduction, is key to my conception of queer YA. Instead of thinking queer YA as something defined by the visibility of LGBT characters and themes, I follow Gubar and insist that it is more productive to establish a "constellation of criteria" that can be applied to a variety of texts to consider how they do (or do not) lend themselves to analysis as queer YA (212).[30] I depart from Gubar, however, in that my starting point for this kind of analysis is anxiety: the acknowledgment, in John's words, that anxiety is "central to what we do"; that "literary criticism is a realm of contestations, a career of persuasion, a profession of anxiety," particularly when it comes to the pedagogies, potential and pitfalls of queer YA, a genre that seems to have so much at stake when real-life queer teens are still taking their own lives at an alarming rate (82). Queer YA resists definition, yes, but it also invites analysis that recognizes and addresses the anxieties that emerge in and through the genre.

The temporality of anxiety is also pivotal to its value as a lens for thinking about queer YA. Adam Phillips distinguishes between "worrying" and "anxiety" in *On Kissing, Tickling, and*

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[30] As quoted in the introduction, Gubar writes: "The best approach we can take is to proceed piecemeal, focusing our attention on different subareas and continually striving to characterize our subject in ways that acknowledge its messiness and diversity" (212).

*Being Bored*, in which he suggests that "worry always has an object, […] worrying is beyond displacement, whereas one can feel anxious without knowing what the anxiety is about" (52). Although he offers a seventeenth century *OED* definition of *anxious* as 'troubled or uneasy in mind about some uncertain event; being in painful or disturbing suspense; concerned; solicitous'," I am less interested in distinctions between worry and anxiety than I am in the complicated temporality suggested by both terms (52). For Phillips, "Worrying implies a future, a way of looking forward to things. It is a conscious conviction that a future exists, one in which something terrible might happen, which is of course ultimately true. So worrying is an ironic form of hope" (56). Yet, Phillips also describes worrying for one particular child patient as "a form of emotional constipation, an unproductive mental process … among other things an attempt to arrest the passage of time" (47-48).[31] Nat Hurley, who identifies worrying as one of the discontents of childhood, writes that Phillips is "encourag[ing] us to be open to the child's deployment of a sad passion as a future-management strategy" ("Childhood" 9). For adult YA critics, on the one hand, it is clear that their anxiety is in service of precisely this: managing the future by providing young queers with the fictional role models ostensibly necessary to their thriving. For queer YA's youth, however, the future is often managed by anxiously delaying its arrival—arresting the passage of time, as Phillips writes—and resisting growth into a coherent, stable LGBT identity. Anxiety and worry in this context invite us to explore, as Hurley writes, "the temporal contradictions and dialectics that unsettle and reorganize the very ways we narrate

[31] A "halting" temporality is also central to Lacan's lengthy theory of anxiety, as outlined in Book X of his *Seminar*; he identifies subjective "inhibition," which entails "the halting of movement" as an integral part of anxiety (10). He writes: "*Impedicare* means *to be ensnared* and it's an extremely precious notion all the same. Indeed, it implies the relationship between one dimension and something that comes to interfere with it and which, in what interests us, impedes not the function, a term of reference, not movement, which is rendered difficult, but truly and verily the subject. Here then is what brings us closer to what we're searching for, namely, what happens in what goes by the name of anxiety" (10).

the time of childhood and address childhood affects and attentions that move in multiple directions at once" (19). As I will explore in chapters two and three, while queer YA critics insist that the genre look forward to a future rife with visibly LGBT characters, queer YA's characters themselves seem more invested in delaying this future, in turning towards alternate relations and texts without the kind of visibility critics describe. In addition to serving as a useful concept for describing queer YA, anxiety describes a particular rhythm present in queer YA itself and critical responses to the genre: a turning to other texts and genres to unsettle the present while simultaneously looking forward to an uncertain, queer future.

Hurley opens "Childhood and Its Discontents: An Introduction" with a striking image that speaks to this rhythm, what I call the "queer double-take." "Figure this: a child looking simultaneously forward and back," she begins, describing an illustration by Amy DiGennaro entitled *Running with M.E.,*

> oversized ear cocked down and back, oriented to what is clearly in the distance, but too far away for us to see….Carrying the body of another, smaller child, this child's body moves forward, listens backwards but displays two faces: one peeks over her shoulder, as if following the ear backwards; the other peers fully forward, in profile, looking straight ahead into the rays that envelop the two small bodies in motion (1).

For Hurley, DiGennaro's illustration is "a vision of childhood and its discontents: a moving set of contradictions mobilized through a child looking forward and looking back, while being pulled and propelled into the space emanating from the vessel before her" ("Childhood" 2). Additionally, however, the image's still medium manifests a haunting stasis from which the child cannot (or does not wish to) escape in spite of the multiple directions in which she is simultaneously looking and being pulled. This image of the anxious child's anxious rhythm—

looking forward, looking back, yet static—and the temporal tensions it evinces, will be at the core of the remaining three chapters of this dissertation. The image and rhythm of the queer double-take also suggests Kathryn Bond Stockton's notion of "growing sideways," which she posits as a substitution for the forward-oriented metaphor of "growing up" that serves to flatten the complexity of a child's relations and movements (*Queer Child* 11). Sideways growth, for Stockton, accounts for the many ways children delay—through queer desires and relations—growing up into the reproductive heterosexual adulthood that is their ostensible normative telos.[32] DiGennaro's image is furthermore a picture of the queer child's anxious sense of what Stockton calls "growing toward a question mark," a "[desperate] feeling there was simply nowhere to grow," a strong desire that "time would stop, or just twist sideways, so that one wouldn't have to advance to new or further scenes of trouble" (*Queer Child* 3). Anxiety, as I have mentioned, is one of the primary affective forms that emerges through Stockton's notion of sideways growth, these queer turns and desires, the children and adults who experience them, and the critics who describe their role in queer YA.

I want to think about the circulation of anxiety through and around queer YA criticism, discourse about queer youth and adolescents, and queer YA texts themselves as an "affective

[32] Stockton's theories rely on "philosopher Jacques Derrida's notion of delay as the inescapable effect of our reading along a chain of words…where meaning is delayed, deferred, exactly because we read in sequence, go forward in a sentence, not yet knowing what words are ahead of us, while we must take the words we have passed *with* us as we go, making meaning wide and hung in suspense" (*Queer Child* 4). Stockton is interested in "not just words" but also "metaphors, which a child may use as a way to grow itself, in hiding, in delay" (*Queer Child* 4). Particularly in chapter three, this project draws on Stockton's elaboration of how the queer child "grow[s] itself" through metaphor, delay, and the deferral of identity and concrete "meaning." In spite of this debt to Derrida, a deeper engagement with his theories lies outside the scope of this project.

economy," a term coined by Sara Ahmed in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*.[33] In Ahmed's model, "feelings do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation. The circulation of objects allows us to think about the 'sociality' of emotion" (8). Further, speaking to the economic aspect of her formulation, Ahmed stresses that affect accumulates over time and through circulation: "signs increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more signs circulate, the more affective they become" (45). I find Ahmed's concept useful since I do not see anxiety as being specifically located within any particular queer YA critic, text, or theorist; instead, anxiety is produced and accrues through the circulation of YA texts and discourse about queer youth and adolescence (such as the three vignettes that opened this chapter).[34] In other words and by way of example, when I read the anxious rhythms

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[33] Affect studies is a rich and burgeoning field; a comprehensive genealogy of the term is outside the scope of this project. Affect, according to Patricia Ticineto Clough, "refers generally to bodily capacities to affect and be affected or the augmentation or diminution of a body's capacity to act, to engage, and to connect, such that autoaffection is linked to the self-feeling of being alive—that is, aliveness or vitality" (2). Many theorists of affect draw distinctions between "affect," "emotion," and "feeling"; Brian Massumi, for example, writes that "an emotion is a very partial expression of affect [that] only draws on a limited selection of memories and only activates certain reflexes or tendencies" (213), while Teresa Brennan "define[s] feelings as sensations that have found the right match in words," but she draws a less clear distinction between emotion and affect (5). Whereas Massumi might consider anxiety to be more emotion than affect—where emotion is "the way the depth of that ongoing experience [of affect] registers personally at a given moment" (213)—Brennan lists "anxiety" (in addition to grief and anger) as examples of affects that are "social and psychological in origin" and can be transmitted, thus "alter[ing] the biochemistry and neurology of the subject" (1). Since I draw primarily on Ahmed's theory of affective economies to consider the circulation of anxiety, "affect" is the term I will generally prefer, although I recognize that anxiety—in addition to describing an affective economy of queer YA—could also be theorized as an emotion and/or feeling (Ahmed uses the three terms almost interchangeably). Like Ahmed, I am more interested in asking "What do emotions [or affects] do?" than "What are emotions [or affects]?" as I "track how emotions circulate between bodies [and, in my case, texts], examining how they 'stick' as well as move" (*Cultural Politics* 4). For more on affect theory, see *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Gregg and Selgworth (Duke UP, 2010), in addition to the texts cited in this note.

[34] Crisp's "The Trouble With Rainbow Boys," as discussed earlier in this chapter, is a good example of this: Crisp himself flags the popularity and widespread circulation of the texts as the primary source of his anxiety about their representation of ostensibly stereotypical gay teen

of the queer double-take in a particular text, this anxiety is not embedded in the text or its characters themselves, but it emerges instead from the text's circulation in relation to this web of discourse about queer youth, adolescence, pedagogy, the role of fiction and literature, and queer theories of childhood.[35]

What affect as critical lens further permits is a "bringing together" of sorts—first, in the sense that I draw on myriad texts across genre (fiction, theory, criticism) and media (see my analysis of *It Gets Better* and fan fiction in chapter four) to consider how they circulate in an affective economy of anxiety, and second, a "bringing together" that speaks to the relational impulse of affect itself. Brian Massumi writes that

> in affect, we are never alone…because affects in Spinoza's definition are basically ways of *connecting*, to others and to other situations. They are our angle of participation in processes larger than ourselves. With intensified affect comes a stronger sense of embeddedness in a larger field of life—a heightened sense of belonging, with other people and to other places (214).

If we can locate potential for queer relationality in Stockton's description of growing sideways or "growing towards a question mark" (*Queer Child* 3), then perhaps there is a similar kind of queer

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archetypes. In other words, the anxiety is not inherently located in the text itself or in Crisp as he reads the text, but is rather "produced," in Ahmed's words, "as an effect of [the text's] circulation" in tandem with Crisp's particular reading, both of which contribute to the accrual of anxious signifiers (45).

[35] Another possible approach to my dissertation would have been vis-à-vis Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings*, in which the author understands "cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception" (7). In a sense, my project aims to compile an archive of texts that evince the anxious discourse surrounding queer YA. However, I follow Ahmed in her distinction from Cvetkovich's work: "Feelings are not 'in' my archive in the same way. Rather, I am tracking how words for feeling, and objects of feeling, circulate and generate effects: how they move, stick, and slide. We move, stick and slide with them" (*Cultural Politics* 14). Like Ahmed, I see my affective archive "not as the conversion of self into a textual gathering, but as a 'contact zone'" (*Cultural Politics* 14).

world-building taking place in queer YA's affective economy of anxiety, a dimension left unexplored by Stockton; or, in other words, we can now begin to think about the "ironic form of hope" (as Phillips writes) that emerges from the circulation of anxiety through various media forms (56). In the following chapters, I will situate theory and fiction within this affective economy of anxiety to connect theories of queer childhood with the young people of queer YA who demonstrate an anxious tension between turning back and sideways, growing up, and standing still, and further argue that queer YA as a genre and its body of criticism are similarly engaged in a process of turning back—to previous genres, to past queer YA texts—to negotiate their anxious relationship to an uncertain future.

It is difficult to talk about queerness and temporality—especially futurity—in relation to discourse of the child without considering, in addition to Stockton, Bruhm and Hurley, two other texts on the subject: Lee Edelman's polemic *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* and José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*.[36] In the former,

[36] There is a rich corpus of queer theory that deals with temporality more broadly and strives to problematize traditional, linear conceptions of time, most of which lies outside the scope of this project. Much of this work surfaced in relation to the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 80s and 90s, which demanded new temporal models for thinking about living, aging, and dying. See, for example, the work of artist/activist David Wojnarowicz, Tim Dean's "Safe-Sex Education and the Death Drive" (in *Beyond Sexuality*, Chicago UP, 2000), A.G. Duttmann's "Dying Before One's Time" (in *At Odds with AIDS*, Stanford UP, 1996), and Stockton's "Prophylactics and Brains, *Beloved* in the Cybernetic Age of AIDS," in which she theorizes antiretroviral treatment in relation to her concept of delay (in *Novel Gazing*, Duke UP, 1997). More recently, Judith Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005) seeks to illustrate how many queers (and queer youth subcultures) stand outside of heteronormative/reproductive time by rejecting futurity, thus enabling a proliferation of "alternative temporalities" and/or new ways of imagining "organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time" (6). Halberstam further foreshadows a kind of Stockton-esque model of sideways growth, espousing "girl and boy partial identities" that "can be carried forward into adulthood in terms of a politics of refusal—the refusal to grow up and enter the heteronormative adulthoods implied by…concepts of progress and maturity" (179). Although Halberstam's text is a noteworthy contribution to the field, I find the conversation about temporality that emerges through Stockton, Edelman, and Muñoz most relevant for the purposes of my dissertation.

Edelman coins the term “reproductive futurism” to name the logic that structures our entire sense of politics and cements heterosexual reproduction as the normative model for all social relations (2). At the heart of this ideology is the figure of the Child, in whose name all political acts are made. The power of queerness, for Edelman, is that it assumes the negative structural position that stands in opposition to futurity and the Child: Edelman makes the radical point that queers should embrace the language of negativity that circulates in Conservative discourse—queerness as anti-child, anti-family—thus exposing “the obliquity of our relation to what we experience in and as social reality, alerting us to the fantasies structurally necessary in order to sustain it and engaging those fantasies through the figural logics, the linguistic structures, that shape them” (6-7).[37]

Since *No Future*’s publication in 2004, many critics, including Muñoz, have challenged Edelman’s view of queerness as the anti-future. In *Cruising Utopia*, published in 2009, Muñoz outlines a future-oriented version of queerness that imagines “new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds” (1). For Muñoz, queerness remains dissatisfied with the present while imagining hopeful futures, and has Ernst Bloch’s concept of concrete utopia at its core.[38] Queerness—as “critical methodology” and relational mode—draws

[37] Leo Bersani is another theorist who has considered the relationship between queerness (specifically gay male sex) and negativity. In his 1989 essay “Is the Rectum a Grave?”, he considers how “gay men’s ‘obsession’ with sex…should be celebrated…because it never stops re-presenting the internalized phallic male as an infinitely loved object of sacrifice. Male homosexuality advertises the risk of the sexual itself as the risk of self-dismissal, of *losing sight* of the self, and in so doing it proposes and dangerously represents *jouissance* as a mode of ascesis” (222). In his 1995 book *Homos*, he theorizes (like Edelman) the “*anticommunitarian*” impulses gay and lesbian theorists “discover in homosexual desire” (7), but unlike Edelman, this negativity results in a new kind of community for Bersani: he ultimately calls for “an anticommunal mode of connectedness we might all share, or a new way of coming together” (10).

[38] Muñoz notes that Bloch “makes a critical distinction between abstract utopias and concrete utopias, valuing abstract utopias only insofar as they pose a critique function that fuels a critical

on past struggles to offer a critique of the present and anticipate a future (Muñoz 4). Since, for Muñoz, queerness is "an ideality" that "we may never touch," it recognizes its own perpetual failure: "we can feel [queerness] as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality," he explains (1), drawing on Bloch's suggestion that "utopian feelings can and regularly will be disappointed," but they remain "nonetheless indispensable to the act of imagining transformation" (9). "I contend that if queerness is to have any value whatsoever," Muñoz explains, "it must be viewed as being visible only in the horizon" (11). In other words, the perpetual, impossible utopian impulse of queerness is also the source of its critical potential: in its conception of future-oriented, transformative relational modes and identificatory possibilities, "queer" simultaneously enacts a performative critique of the present's impoverished imagination when it comes to precisely what "queer" is imagining.

Elements of both Edelman and Muñoz's work have profoundly influenced this dissertation. This chapter and the next, for example, illustrate how critics of queer YA position an ideal youth figure at the centre of queer YA that is not dissimilar from Edelman's figure of the Child: this youth is out and proud, LGBT-identified, and the embodiment of a positive and hopeful future for all queers. Subsequent chapters of this dissertation will challenge Edelman's argument, however, in my illustration of how queer YA—that is, its young characters, the genre itself, and in chapter four, the young people who write online fanfiction—actively *resist* the future; these are young people who are not beacons of a hopeful reproductive futurity (as Edelman would argue), but rather figures who anxiously resist growth and progression while

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and potentially transformative political imagination. Abstract utopias falter for Bloch because they are untethered from any historical consciousness. Concrete utopias are relational to historically situated struggles, a collectivity that is actualized or potential. In our everyday life abstract utopias are akin to banal optimism" (3).

manifesting powerful desires for stasis and sideways relations. Muñoz, on the other hand, is useful for thinking about the hopefulness of anxiety's forward turns, a hopefulness that, like Muñoz, I am unwilling to relinquish as an important component of queer thought. The rhythm of Muñoz's queer methodology—its backward turn to critique the present and imagine a future—is similar to what I describe as the anxious rhythm of the queer double-take, something I explore more deeply in chapter three in conversation with Heather Love's *Feeling Backwards*. Unlike Muñoz, however, I do not believe that queerness is necessarily dissatisfied with the present and hopeful about the future; as I will illustrate, on many occasions, queer relations and desires emerge from a resistance to the future and the will to remain in the present, to delay growth, and as Stockton writes, to long for the sideways twisting of time. These forms of opposition to the future, I maintain, are themselves powerful and rich sources of hope.

I follow Muñoz's claim about the impoverished imagination of the present, however, in my argument that many critics of queer YA suffer from a similar lack of creativity when it comes to their conception of the genre. Unable to conceive of queer YA as being defined by anything other than visible queerness and see past the negative affect of early queer YA titles, these thinkers block the critical passageways that Abate, Kidd et al so provocatively probe. Imagining queer YA as an anxious genre does not discount the relevance of visibly queer characters and themes, but rather shifts the genre's focus from the proper way to represent queerness on the page to consider whether queerness has to be transparently and coherently represented at all. In fact, it is sometimes by *not* visibly representing queerness that a text's queer potential appears most vividly. The potential of YA to do the work of queer critique—in ways that Abate and Kidd imagine, and Crisp begins to—is expanded exponentially when queer YA is imagined not as a distinct set of texts that strive to represent queerness in particular ways that

lend themselves to particular pedagogical effects, but rather a set of texts that coalesce only on the horizon, with queer effects that are nonetheless felt in the present. To Muñoz's positioning of hope as the central affect associated with futurity, I add anxiety: a constant yet critically productive uncertainty about the constitution of the future.[39] This anxiety does not ask us to be without hope, but instead invites us to consider the anxious turns and rhythms established by critics of queer YA: those turns, in the name of the uncertain on-the-horizon future of queer youth, away from hope (in the early days of queer YA), then towards hope and visibility, and simultaneously back to early queer YA to distinguish contemporary texts from their predecessors, now deemed potentially harmful and pedagogically unsound. As I will demonstrate in chapter three, queer YA characters themselves follow these rhythms of the queer double-take: anxious turns backwards that evince uncertainty about their own futures. And, in my next chapter, I will outline an alternative pedagogy of queer YA based on the genre's affective economy of anxiety.

**On the Horizon…**

As a means of conclusion, I'd like to return briefly to my third opening vignette and Tatar's claim that "adult anxieties" are "edg[ing] out childhood fantasy" in contemporary children's literature. I find this claim provocative for two reasons. First, without explicitly saying so, Tatar identifies anxiety as a primary locus of concern for the genre of children's literature, although in her view adult anxieties should not trump childhood fantasy in such books. Second, and paradoxically, Tatar's polemic against adult anxiety is itself a rehearsal of adult anxiety as it

[39] It is fitting that hope and anxiety circulate in the same affective economy, and not only because Phillips identifies worry as an ironic kind of hope; Massumi also theorizes the hopefulness of *all* affect: "In my own work I use the concept of 'affect' as a way of talking about that margin of manoeuvrability, the 'where we might be able to go and what we might be able to do' in every present situation. I guess 'affect' is the word I use for 'hope'" (212).

relates to children's literature. In a sense, I agree with Tatar's claim: while Tatar maintains that the anxieties of adult authors are edging out spaces for childhood fantasy in children's literature, I claim that the anxieties of adult critics are edging out and failing to recognize the queer pedagogies and reading practices that cause texts to signify and circulate other than Tatar believes they necessarily do, and these anxieties are further edging out those early queer YA texts that create space for fantasy and queer reading in excess of whatever stereotypes and negative affect they may contain. The interventions of Tatar and other contemporary queer YA/children's literature critics are not unlike those of the anxious mid-Victorian critics Shacker describes, who "often found themselves defining the genre by a series of exclusions, by addressing everything the true tale was not: not trivial, not burlesque, not materialistic, not modern, not worldly, not adult" (395). While positing a series of normative queer YA traits (hope, realism, etc.), critics similarly delineate such exclusions: (good) queer YA is not hopeless, not stereotypical, not dark, not (too) unrealistic.

Over my next two chapters, I will return to several early queer YA titles that have been dismissed by contemporary critics to demonstrate their utility in thinking queer relationality on productive—if anxious—terms. "What needs restor(y)ing here, then, is how we look at queer discourse in these novels," writes Trites regarding some early queer YA novels (149), and this is exactly what I hope, in part, to accomplish: a reclamation, of sorts, of some early queer YA texts that have been deemed to be teaching the wrong things. Alongside these older queer YA titles, I will explore some more recent titles that demonstrate queer YA's own anxiety with its constitution as a genre that coheres around visibility. First, however, I turn to a discussion that will expand upon my understanding of anxious pedagogy and queer reading practices.

## Chapter Two

Rethinking Queer YA: Toward a Pedagogy of Anxiety

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"[T]he era of 'gay teen books' is over—has been over for several years now. Ask any editor. We're now in the era of 'books where the characters happen to be gay.' A character's homosexuality is usually no longer the central 'problem' for the main character—the thing that's not resolved until the last few pages, or never resolved at all, as in *I'll Get There*..., because it couldn't be resolved in the world of 1969. Instead, a character's gayness is usually simply something that reinforces whatever the book's central theme happens to be, the other thing that has to be resolved. It sounds like a small shift, but it's not. It's huge."

– Brent Hartinger, "We Got There. It Was Worth the Trip" (2010, 212).

### The Didactics of Visibility

The typical queer YA protagonist, according to author Brent Hartinger, has been heretofore stuck in an interval between two types of visibility: the problem-producing and stereotype-ridden teen of yore whose sexual resolution, as Hartinger points out, was often perpetually forestalled; and today's role model, the character who just "happen[s] to be gay," whose sexuality is but one identity component among many. Hartinger conceives of this interval vis-à-vis the titular journey of John Donovan's groundbreaking 1969 novel *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*, which Kirk Fuoss describes as "the first problem-realism text to include a 'homosexual incident'" (162).[40] Hartinger's playfully and teleologically titled short

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[40] Although in this project I attempt to render hazy queer YA's generic boundaries, many critics position Donovan's novel as the first North American YA text to visibly represent and deal with a non-heterosexual encounter, and thus, in a sense, the foundation of a new genre. See, for

essay, "We Got There. It Was Worth the Trip," which appears as an appendix to the fortieth anniversary reprint of Donovan's novel, assures readers that the "getting there" has been gotten, trip concluded, resolution achieved, and the novel itself—which retains a kind of ironic cultural significance attested to by its reprinting (is the trip really over if *the Trip* continues to circulate?)—is significant only as nostalgia, a historical document, a stack of faded photographs from the childhood of the now mature genre it spawned.

Hartinger's version of queer YA's generic maturity, the "huge" shift that has taken place within the genre, rests on an assumption that a certain kind of contemporary visibility trumps, ontologically speaking, the lack of sexual resolution in previous novels and the way those narratives position sexuality as a thematic problem. For Hartinger, as for the critics I examined in my previous chapter, the value of contemporary YA is in its rendering of unambiguous, unproblematic, and unquestioned sexual identity. This is an anxious formulation on Hartinger's behalf: he attempts to pin down the current status of YA and the significance of sexuality within the genre, arguing that sexuality should signify only as one visible component of identity in relation to other ostensibly more important themes/ideas, and his comments are suggestive of further anxiety about the way adults should be addressing youth through queer YA, and the role and didactic function of sexuality in these novels—anxieties that should also recall my previous chapter. Hartinger's primary investment could be described, in a nutshell, as located in the didactics of visibility.[41]

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example, Cart and Jenkins' genre overview *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004*, which begins its survey with Donovan's book. Cart and Jenkins' second chapter, furthermore, is entitled "The 1970s: What Donovan Wrought."

[41] Here, I owe a great deal to Deborah Britzman's notion of "pedagogies of inclusion," which she critiques in her 1995 essay "Is There a Queer Pedagogy? Or, Stop Reading Straight." In Britzman's view, the mere incorporation of traditionally marginalized identities into curricula does little to problematize the structures of power that contribute to marginalization and

Hartinger and those critics of the "wrong kinds of visibility" outlined in chapter one echo Fuoss' 1994 essay, "A Portrait of the Adolescent as a Young Gay," in which he points out how an increase in YA novels with "homosexual incidents or self-identified homosexual characters" does not diminish "the political implications of presences and absences" (163). "On the contrary," Fuoss continues, "these new developments merely result in the shifting of the question from 'Is male homosexuality present in the text?' to 'How is male homosexuality presented in the text?'" (163). As examples of significant absences, Fuoss draws on Donovan's novel and Isabelle Holland's *The Man Without a Face*, first published in 1972 (and adapted into a film in 1993 and stripped of its overt queerness by director and star Mel Gibson). Fuoss points out that in both of these texts, much like most other queer YA novels published around the time that he was writing, "physical acts of male homosexuality (including hugging, kissing, and holding hands) are more often than not presented as occurring off-stage and out of sight" (163). "Holland's novel, like Donovan's," Fuoss maintains, "grants physical expressions of homosexual love all the presence of an ellipsis" (164).[42]

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oppression. For a more recent (2012) essay that calls for LGBTQ curricular inclusivity (in addition to those discussed in chapter one), see Renzi et al, "Out of the Closet and Into the Open," which argues that "LGBTQ young adult literature provides an opportunity for LGBTQ students to see themselves, to look into a mirror…[this literature] is conspicuously absent from our nation's secondary classrooms." (119). I prefer "didactics of visibility" in this case because it gestures to the simplified relationship between fiction and education posited by many queer YA critics while emphasizing the value they attribute to the visibility of LGBT-identified characters.

[42] Fuoss also laments the lack of sexual resolution in queer YA: "The thirteen problem-realism texts considered include a total of twenty-one characters who either question their sexuality, engage in a homosexual act, or are professedly homosexual or bisexual. Each of these characters follows a trajectory of sexual identity, beginning with their sexual identity at the opening of the novel and ending with their sexuality at the close of the novel. Of the twenty-one 'sexually suspect' characters, only eleven are self-identified as gay when their novels conclude. Of the remaining ten characters, one is bisexual, three are not gay, five are probably not gay through some question remains, and the sexuality of one of the characters remains truly ambiguous. It is interesting to note that this instance of true ambiguity appears to be the result of pressure exerted by the publisher on the author to change her ending" (167).

I agree with Fuoss' claim that a consistent absenting of overt queer physical affection from YA speaks to systemic fears about the political and pedagogical implications of representing sex—especially "homosexual" sex—on the pages of books for young people. However, contrary to Fuoss and those critics who see certain omissions and ambiguities as invariably negative, I want to ask: What do these omissions, invisibilities, and ambiguities allow and invite? Here, I refer not only to the glossing over of sexual encounters in YA, but also moments like the much-derided vague and "anticlimactic" (Cart and Jenkins 12) ending to Donovan's novel, moments that may invite readers to think about the act of reading instead of instructing us to learn from certain forms of visibility.[43] Just as Hartinger argues for the end of "the era of gay teen books," I would further suggest this represents a concomitant push for an end to ambiguous and occluded sexuality in YA; as Hartinger maintains, these characters simply "happen to be gay," and their sexual identity should be writ large, transparently, and unproblematically on the pages of the novels in which they exist, leaving space for problems unrelated to "homosexual incidents" and other such matters.[44]

The alternative pedagogy of queer YA that I propose in this chapter and carry forward into the next—a pedagogy of anxiety—seeks to find value in precisely that which gives shape to

[43] Rob Linné also critiques Donovan's ending for its ambiguity and assumes that only one, negative reading is possible: "The sexualities of the characters remain ambiguous," he explains, "presumably just 'phases' they have struggled through, or 'choices' they reconsider by the end of the novel…This trope presumably diffuses homophobic tensions in the readers by intimating that a return to 'normalcy' is always possible" (204).

[44] Hartinger's view, and the didactics of visibility more broadly, recall a point Britzman makes in a discussion about Anna Freud and education: "Whereas Anna Freud noted the infantilizing qualities of her analytic education," Britzman begins, "we can find this repetition of anxiety and defense in the university as well. It usually comes in the form of teaching, for example, when books that might make a difference to how one lives are treated as a still life" (The Very Thought" 7). In my view, this is similar to what many queer YA critics are doing: ignoring the mutability of text, the shifting dynamics of the text/reader relationship, and the myriad identificatory possibilities that can emerge from reading (whether or not we imagine these reading practices as "queer").

these anxieties evinced by Fuoss, Hartinger and the critics examined in my first chapter: those intervals, delays, non-teleological ways of conceiving growth, anxious rhythms and temporalities, and ambiguities that fill the pages of queer YA. In spite of what Hartinger declares, if the trip really is over, many contemporary queer YA characters would protest: plenty of narratives represent relations and scenes of reading that take place in intervals, in delay, in space where the characters dilly-dally and dodge and avoid "growing up" towards a sedimented iteration of "gayness," to use Hartinger's word. Further, because so many past and present queer YA characters resist what Stockton calls "the vertical, forward-motion metaphor of growing up," queer YA—even, or *especially*, those early titles that critics lambaste for their hopelessness, stereotypes, and omissions—is a lot queerer than it may initially appear, and much more interesting and relevant than Hartinger's comments suggest (*Queer Child* 11).[45]

In what follows, I elaborate upon my notion of a pedagogy of anxiety vis-à-vis the theoretical legacy of queer pedagogy, which is central to the work I'm undertaking in this chapter. I provide illustrations from three queer YA novels (one early, two more recent): Holland's *The Man Without a Face* (1972) and Francesca Lia Block's *Weetzie Bat* and *Baby Bebop (*first published in 1989 and 1995, respectively, and later released as part of *Dangerous Angels: The Weetzie Bat Books*, a seven novel collection, in 1998). Holland's novel depicts a literal scene of pedagogy between a teacher and student, which circulates in an affective economy of anxiety where questions of sexuality take centre stage; Block's novels speak predominantly to queer reading practices, which as I will demonstrate, are about creating space where an identity could be, but isn't; queer reading is about being in an anxious interval, a space

[45] As previously mentioned, Stockton's volume does not explore texts written for young audiences—this is another void this dissertation aims to fill.

of tension between delay and growth or forward movement. In chapter three, I will pick up on this discussion and approach some queer YA novels with a pedagogy of anxiety in mind to examine how their characters resist the narratives of progression and visibility that many critics describe as integral to the genre.

Crucial to these chapters is how queer YA characters engage in the kind of sideways relations that Stockton describes, those cultivated by children as they "approach their destinations, delay; swerve, delay; ride on a metaphor they tend to make material and so imagine relations of their own," and the relationship between this temporality of sideways growth and that of anxiety (*Queer Child* 15). The notion of delay is central to how Stockton "prick[s]" the "vertical, forward-motion metaphor of growing up" that dominates the popular imagination (*Queer Child* 11). En route to adulthood, Stockton argues, children (and Stockton maintains that all children are queer) desire and form relations in ways that are not necessarily aligned with the normative trajectory towards reproductive heterosexual adulthood: Stockton describes these experiences and desires as moments of delay and spatializes them as sideways growth. "To be sure," she emphasizes about delay, queer adults in particular

> remember desperately feeling (when they were children) there was simply nowhere to grow, feeling a frightening, heightened sense of growing toward a question mark. Or growing up in haze. Or hanging in suspense—even wishing time would stop, or just twist sideways, so that they wouldn't have to advance to new or further scenes of trouble ("*Lost*" 425).

This richly affective description should recall, in particular, Phillips' portrayal of worrying as, simultaneously, "a way of looking forward to things…a conscious conviction that a future exists, one in which something terrible might happen" (56) and "an attempt to arrest the passage of

time" (48). Although the queer child's desire for delay can emerge from this anxiety of growing into an unimaginable form of adulthood, Stockton further illustrates how in another sense the experience of delay can be quite enjoyable. "Lingering," she writes, citing Freud, "is pleasurable 'for quite a time' and seems for even 'normal people' to 'find a place' 'alongside' getting to the ultimate goal" (*Queer Child* 25). Playing around *while* growing up—what Stockton calls the "sideways movements or suspensions in relation to the road of copulation to be followed"—is permitted, in other words, but the anticipated normative endpoint, at least in Freud's account, is always adult reproductive heterosexuality (*Queer Child* 25).

But what happens if Freud's "ultimate goal" never arrives? What if the queer child in question prefers the perversion of diversion—the pleasures and "ironic hopes," in Phillips' words, of its attendant anxieties—to whatever the question mark at the end of growing up might signify? As I illustrated in chapter one, critics of queer YA expect an endpoint, but in their case, this telos is marked by the arrival of characters with a stable, confident, and hopeful sense of LGBT identity. Yet, as I will illustrate, queer YA—even those texts categorized as queer YA with visible queer/LGBT content—is rife with characters who take pleasure in various forms of delay that we can situate within an affective economy of anxiety. As Stockton asks: "Where do children go, to whom do they turn, when they cannot relate to their presumptive peers? What are their substitute relations?" (*Queer Child* 52). We could ask this question of both the characters in many queer YA novels and the genre itself. What this requires, however, is exploring how Stockton's non-linear model of growth circulates within an affective economy of anxiety; thinking about, in other words, the affective dimensions that attend sideways growth; the pleasure and hope of anxiety; the anxiety of pleasure and hope; and how anxiety is suggestive of

a pedagogy of queer YA alternative to the didactics of visibility. This endeavour, however, requires a detour through theories of queer pedagogy.

**Queer Pedagogy: An Overview**

Most crucially, a pedagogy of anxiety draws on theories of queer pedagogy with an aim to shift discourse on queer YA away from the didactics of visibility. Instead, the focus is on reading practices and what Susanne Luhmann describes as "the question of how we come to know and how knowledge is produced in the interaction between teacher/text and student" (126).[46] In the mid-1990s, Luhmann and Deborah Britzman began articulating a theory of queer

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[46] Luhmann's description recalls David Lusted's frequently cited definition from "Why Pedagogy?" (1986): pedagogy, Lusted writes, "draws attention to the *process* through which knowledge is produced. Pedagogy addresses the 'how' questions involved not only in the transmission or reproduction of knowledge but also in its production.…How one teaches…becomes inseparable from what is being taught and, crucially, how one learns" (2-3). For the purposes of this project, I am less interested in the classroom as educational scene and the teacher's role in Luhmann's teacher/text/student triangulation (although I do imagine that a pedagogy of anxiety could be used as a strategy for approaching queer YA in a classroom setting). Instead, as outlined in my introduction, I am more so invested in the pedagogical potential of reading—where the complex, dynamic relationship between text and reader suggests a kind of transformation— and the representation of such scenes of reading in queer YA. In Britzman's "The Very Thought," she allows for such a multiplicity of educational scenes, including "instituted education: schools, training institutes, and pedagogical exchange"; "the play of mothers and infants, where both will be subject to a future they cannot know but nonetheless, in their different ways, anticipate and act upon"; "the psychoanalytic session: as catharsis, as mystery, as transference and countertransference, and as a love of language"; and an unknowable education "associated with the unconscious," which "will be our most accidental education and will contain resistance to learning" (17). The terms "education" and "pedagogy" are intimately bound up with one another, although education generally "refers to the larger apparatus, institutional or not, of what Britzman…describes as the scenes of learning: at home, in the classroom, in analysis," while pedagogy "pays attention more closely to what one might describe as methodologies, epistemologies or processes of teaching and learning" (Luhmann, "Re: Britzman"). Although I use both "education" and "pedagogy" in this dissertation, I generally prefer the latter, with its attention to the messy processes of knowledge production, the role of ignorance in (resistance to) learning, and its recognition that attempts to "educate" might ultimately fail.

pedagogy in response to the visibility-oriented curricula of gay and lesbian studies.[47] "Citing the injurious effects of representational absence," Luhmann explains,

> lesbian and gay content is figured as a remedy against homophobia and a prerequisite for the self-esteem and safe existence of queers in the classroom. This approach is grounded in a set of assumptions common to lesbian and gay politics that follow from the notion that homophobia is little more than a problem of representation, an effect of lacking or distorted images of lesbians and gays…Against erasure or distortion, the mainstream lesbian and gay strategy demands accurate—meaning positive—representations of lesbian and gay life (121).

Queer pedagogy, drawing on queer theory's "insistence on undermining idyllic stabilities of normalcy" (Luhmann 124), instead "exceeds the incorporation of queer content into curricula" and "draws on pedagogy's curiosity toward the social relations made possible in the process of learning and on queer critiques of identity-based knowledge" (Luhmann 120). "Hence," Luhmann continues,

> what is at stake in a queer pedagogy is not the application of queer theory (as a new knowledge) onto pedagogy, nor the application of pedagogy (as a new method) for the dissemination of queer theory and knowledge. Instead, at stake are the implications of queer theory and pedagogy for the messy processes of learning and teaching, reading and

[47] In her discussion of what she calls "im-personation, the personal as performance" in pedagogy (9), Jane Gallop, writing in 1995 (the same year that Britzman's "Is There a Queer Pedagogy?" appears), suggests a different kind of queer pedagogy: "The more-than-perversity, the defiant gayness, of the show biz analogy [of im-personation] might bring out the ways in which *all* teaching, even by heterosexual men, is not just theatrical, but what it somehow seems appropriate to call 'queer'" (11). Although this triangulation between performance, queerness, and pedagogy is fascinating and relatively unexplored territory, Gallop's angle remains outside the scope of this project.

> writing. Instead of posing (the right) knowledge as answer or solution, queer theory and…[queer] pedagogy…pose knowledge as an interminable question (128).

There is a clear parallel to be drawn here between queer pedagogy's critique of gay and lesbian studies' impetus to fill curricula with visibly LGBT figures, and my attempt to shift critical discourse on queer YA away from visibility and teleology and the privileging of certain kinds of resolved, "out and proud" sexual identities in queer YA—what queer pedagogy might articulate as "terminal" knowledge about sexuality. Overall, and in addition to problematizing the didactics of visibility, queer pedagogy and my project are jointly invested in several broad, overlapping themes and goals: questioning notions of "normalcy" (especially as they relate to visibility and critical impulses to normalize representations of queer YA characters); examining the limits and excesses of knowledge (including how knowledge is related to normalcy);[48] exploring reading practices and the dynamic interplay between reader and text; and considering the relationship between reading practices and risk.[49]

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[48] G.D. Shlasko nicely summarizes queer pedagogy's intervention into discussions of knowledge and ignorance, explaining that "ignorance itself is seen as a potentially subversive location. In a sense queer pedagogy wants us to be confused. By engaging with complexity, queer pedagogy hopes to overwhelm our capacity to 'get it,' to bring us to a point where we are absolutely ignorant, having neither knowledge nor resistance to knowledge….Lacking answers, we are able to embrace questions, engage with multiple understandings, and imagine new possibilities" (129).

[49] The best engagements with queer pedagogy remain its foundational texts: Britzman's "Is There a Queer Pedagogy? Or, Stop Reading Straight" (1995) and "Queer Pedagogy and Its Strange Techniques" (1998). See also William Pinar's 1998 collection of essays *Queer Theory in Education*, the first volume of its kind; it contains Luhmann's seminal essay "Queering/Querying Pedagogy? Or, Pedagogy Is a Pretty Queer Thing" (120-131). More recently, Pinar and Nelson M. Rodriguez co-edited a collection entitled *Queering Straight Teachers: Discourse and Identity in Education* (2007), which I argue rests on a misuse and misunderstanding of queer theory; Rodriguez claims that queer theory maintains "insider/outsider politics" and chooses instead to situate his text in "the burgeoning field of study known as Critical Heterosexual Studies [which] aims to seriously question traditional assumptions regarding heterosexuality as natural, normal, and universal" (what is this if not the work of many queer theorists and theories?) (x). Teachers, however, might appreciate Elizabeth J. Meyer's essay in this collection, "'But I'm Not Gay':

The difference, however, between queer pedagogy and my notion of a pedagogy of anxiety is that I am proposing an alternative strategy for thinking about queer YA, specifically; an approach that, in addition to rejecting the didactics of visibility, concurrently describes the affective economy within which queer pedagogy circulates in relation to queer YA while putting pedagogy into conversation with questions of temporality. My analysis takes place in the anxious contact zone that opens up when we (as educators, critics, and readers) begin asking questions about how adults propose to address youth through fiction and the potential pedagogical effects of such a mode of address; when we, in other words, mirror the temporality of worry as described by Phillips: looking anxiously toward the future while simultaneously trying to freeze, hold onto, and/or pin something down. Here, those future concerns involve seeking a mode of address that might remedy the crisis of bullying and suicide confronting queer youth, and the thing to be pinned down is the "right" set of signifiers to include in that address. As outlined in chapter one, I use affect to bring together several discourses that are shaped by their contact with queer YA: anxious critical dialogue about the genre; theories of queer childhood and temporality, such as Stockton's notion of sideways growth; scenes of reading within queer YA that evince an anxious temporality; and the genre's instability and incoherence. This approach is pedagogical, following Luhmann and Britzman, in its concern with the mechanisms through which knowledge is produced; pedagogy, in Britzman's words, becomes "a problem of reading practices, of social relations, and of the means to refuse to think straight" ("Queer Pedagogy" 92), and reading practices are "an imaginary site for multiplying alternative forms of identifications and pleasures

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What Straight Teachers Need to Know about Queer Theory," which "call[s] on educators to question and reformulate through a queer pedagogical lens…how they teach and reinforce gendered practices in schools…[and] how they support traditional notions of heterosexuality" (28). This collection deserves more thorough analysis, but such a discussion is outside the context of this project.

not so closely affixed to—but nonetheless transforming—what one imagines their identity imperatives to be" ("Queer Pedagogy" 85). In this dissertation, pedagogy is about transforming a popular critical lens for thinking about queer YA, and proliferating the interpretive and identificatory possibilities that emerge through readings of queer YA, but doing so with attention to the complexity of the act of reading itself—to thinking pedagogy, as Britzman suggests, as "radical uncertainty" ("Between Psychoanalysis" 111).[50]

"Reading"—queerly and otherwise—is a complex (and radically uncertain) concept that has inspired a body of work far larger than the scope of this dissertation.[51] I hope to funnel my

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[50] This emphasis on uncertainty and transformation is echoed in Kevin Kumashiro's 2002 monograph, *Troubling Education: Queer Activism and Antioppressive Pedagogy*, in which he argues that "changing oppression requires *disruptive* knowledge, not simply more knowledge. Students can learn that what is already known or is becoming known can never tell the whole story…students can learn that the desire for final knowledge is itself problematic" (42). Kumashiro's book is an excellent (and rare) example of the practical applications of queer pedagogy—via Britzman and others—to antioppressive education in a classroom setting; as Kathleen Quinlivan points out, "queer pedagogical interventions within schooling sites appear to be relatively thin on the ground" (513). For more on classroom applications of queer pedagogy, see Quinlivan; Cynthia D. Nelson's *Sexual Identities in English Language Education* (2009), in which the author "makes a case for queer inquiry as a valuable tool in language study" (4); Eric Rofes' *A Radical Rethinking of Sexuality and Schooling*, which includes chapters on bullying and safe-sex education; Heather Sykes' 2011 study on queer bodies in physical education; Jen Gilbert's "Literature as Sex Education"; Reta Ugena Whitlock's "Getting Queer"; and Zacko-Smith and Pritchy Smith's "Recognizing and Utilizing Queer Pedagogy."

[51] Queer theory has produced an abundance of material on reading. Sedgwick's canonical *Between Men* (1985) famously coins the term "homosocial desire" through readings of nineteenth century English literature to describe how male-male desire is often routed through women; Sedgwick later established a theory of "reparative reading" to critique what she calls "paranoid reading," i.e., briefly, reading for oppression without proposing alternatives (*Touching, Feeling*; Duke UP, 2002). Works by Butler and Foucault are, in a sense, also about reading in their interrogation of storytelling and discourse. Foucault employs the latter term to describe "the heterogeneous collection of utterances that relate to a particular concept, and thereby constitute and contest its meaning" (Jagose 81). As a medium for the circulation of power and resistance, discourse is a theoretical lens for approaching the stories that structure our relationship to subjectivity and identity. Butler imports Foucault's argument into the realm of gender, famously arguing that heterosexuality is naturalized through the performative repetition of normative gender identities ("Imitation and Gender Insubordination"). Alexander Doty suggests that queerness itself is not only a range of non-heterosexual identificatory possibilities

thoughts through queer pedagogy's approach to reading and distill several key concepts: I want to raise and explore the idea of risk, which Britzman argues is central to reading, and the question of anxiety, which Britzman poses in relation to pedagogy; I hope to expand her conversation into the realm of queer YA and consider it alongside questions of temporality. In this chapter and the next, I think about "reading" in terms of two overlapping scenes. First, I am interested in moments in queer YA where characters read texts in the traditional sense—usually books—and, inspired by Margaret Mackey's work on reading, I examine how these characters "make sense and explore the potential pleasures of the…stories they are given, how they select

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but also "a mass culture reception practice" ("There's Something Queer" 72). More recently, in his 2012 book *How to Be Gay*, David Halperin provides a similar perspective on queer reception, although his object of study is the more narrowly focused "gay" in lieu of "queer": "As a cultural practice," he writes, "male homosexuality involves a characteristic way of receiving, reinterpreting, and reusing mainstream culture, of decoding and recoding the heterosexual or heteronormative meanings already encoded in that culture, so that they come to function as vehicles of gay or queer meaning" (*How to be Gay 12*). Mark Lipton's "Queer Readings of Popular Culture," published in 2008, takes a specifically queer youth-focused approach to reading, insisting that "queer youth are imaginative and dynamic readers of popular culture" (163). Halperin, Doty and Lipton attest to a general sense that readers often engage in practices that somehow defy a text's surface reading, a way of reading that Creekmur and Doty describe as "an alternative or negotiated, if not always fully subversive, reception of the products and messages of popular culture" (1). Yet, such theorists are mixed on the pedagogical and potential of reading queerly, and the cultural work that they want queer reading practices to do. Halperin, for example, believes that "gay" as cultural practice shores up a notion of gay male subjectivity that defies queer's anti-identitarian position; Daniel Marshall's argument that "young people's reading practices are…anchored in a critical reflectiveness regarding the constructed and non-unitary nature of identity" opposes Halperin's perspective (76); along the same lines as Marshall, Lipton argues that queer youth produce "negotiated meanings" from popular texts that "reveal a great deal about the queer imagination and its relationships to sexual desire and political resistance" (163). In addition to the above and the essayists in Abate and Kidd's collection, authors who discuss the queer subtexts in ostensibly non-queer narratives for young people include Laura Robinson and Catharine R. Stimpson, who have written on *Anne of Green Gables* and *Little Women*, respectively (see works cited). Outside of queer theory, two classic monographs on reading include Paul De Man's *Allegories of Reading* (1979), which enacts close readings of Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust to stage the provocative claim that "any narrative is primarily the allegory of its own reading" (76); while D.A. Miller's *The Novel and the Police* (UC Press, 1988) argues that the Victorian novel evidences an internalization and suppression of police authority. There are, of course, far too many other texts to list here.

the elements to orchestrate and how they weave these components together and bring them to life in their minds" (13). Crucial is that, in spite of critical emphasis on the importance of visibility in queer YA, the genre's characters often read texts without visible queerness in attempts to make sense of their selves and their relations to others. Next, I explore reading practices that can emerge from—but are not limited to—these scenes of book-reading; moments in queer YA where characters employ reading practices as sense-making mechanisms to navigate the world around them. These are scenes where, in Britzman's words, characters establish "theories of the world," which are composed of "a strange combination of what we receive from others, what we wish to have happen, what we notice in the world" ("Precocious" 51). Reading, for Britzman, is "about proliferating one's identificatory possibilities…about risking oneself" and "confronting one's own theory of reading, of signification, and of difference, and of refusing to be 'the same'" ("Queer Pedagogy" 95). This proliferation, however, involves the composition of anxious, rickety stories that offer only temporary possibilities for identification at best. Largely unexamined by Britzman, and as I will illustrate through *Weetzie Bat* and *The Man Without a Face*, is that anxiety—accompanied by a desire to arrest the passage of time—describes the affect and temporality that attend this scene of reading. Reading is about creating a possibility, looking forward, but also trying to pin something down—forging space where identity could be, but isn't—or is only fleetingly. As Britzman asks in "Queer Pedagogy and Its Strange Techniques," "What if one thought about reading practices as problems of opening identifications, of working the capacity to imagine oneself differently precisely in one's encounters with another and in one's encounters with the self? What if how one reads the world turned upon the interest in thinking against one's thoughts, in creating a queer space where old certainties made no sense?" (85). Britzman's model for reading resists teleology and coherence,

those certainties favoured by critics of queer YA, the very genre that presents us with opportunities to think more deeply about this model.

Finally, I consider a pedagogy of anxiety to be an alternative roadmap for approaching texts, for reading with attention to the presence of anxious temporalities, and putting these ideas into conversation with broader discourse about the critical anxieties that attend queer YA, the state of the genre and its role in relation to the audience of queer youth it imagines itself as addressing. In other words, a pedagogy of anxiety asks us to pay attention to how queer YA texts, critical discourse about the genre, and theories of childhood and adolescence shape and are shaped by the affective economy in which they circulate. Central to this approach to reading are notions of risk and anxiety, which I discuss below.

**Pedagogy and Risk**

In "Queer Pedagogy and Its Strange Techniques," Britzman imagines

> a theorization of reading as being always about risking the self, about confronting one's own theory of reading, and about engaging one's own alterity and desire. Thinking itself, in classroom spaces, might take the risk of refusing to secure thought and of exposing the danger in the curious insistence on positing foundational claims at all costs (94).

What this version of "risk" requires in relation to queer YA, however—and what Britzman does not explore—is a move away from the flattening conceptions of the term that are typically associated with queer youth, and onto a more nuanced and complex theorization.

Recall the first of my three vignettes that open chapter one. One need not look far for evidence of queer youth being at-risk, and indeed, this demographic continues to confront a number of widespread, systemic issues. Two recent studies among many seek to tackle these issues: in "Understanding suicide among sexual minority youth in America," for example, Hong

et al explain that "suicide among sexual minority youth is a major public health concern. A number of studies have reported high rates of suicide attempts among sexual minority youth; and these youth were significantly more likely to be at risk of suicidal behaviour than youth in the general population" (Hong et al 885). Another, related article, "Risk and Protective Factors for Homophobic Bullying in Schools," explains and illustrates how and why "students who frequently experience homophobic bullying are at an elevated risk of several negative outcomes, including depression, anxiety, hostility, mental health symptoms, health problems, poor school functioning, school absenteeism, substance use, risky sexual behaviours, post-traumatic stress disorder, self-harm, and suicidal behaviour" (Hong and Garbarino 272). This is to say nothing of the alienation and violence, both symbolic and physical, experienced by queers of colour, homeless queers, and the trans community.

My point is not to disagree with these claims, but rather indicate that the same story about queer youth and risk is repeated ad nauseum, a narrative Eric Rofes calls "martyr-target-victim," which insists that when young people live openly as queer, they are incontrovertibly risking a barrage of homo/transphobic violence and laundry list of subsequent risks that, as we have seen, includes a host of negative pathological conditions (42). Troubled by the notion that present-day queer youth seem defined by their potential victimization, Rofes suggests that we must expand our analyses to examine "the role of pleasure and sex in young people's lives" (57). According to Susan Talburt, resistance to the trope of martyr-target-victim has put another narrative into circulation, resulting in a dichotomous pair of adult-created stories working to define queer youth, both of which circulate readily in queer YA: "(1) narratives of risk and danger and (2) narratives of the well-adjusted, out, and proud gay youth" (18). According to Talburt, these stories function to "make youth intelligible—to others and themselves in narrowly defined

ways," and severely limit the creativity and imagination with which we understand sexuality (18). In the context of queer pedagogy, Britzman invites us to rethink the taken-for-granted constitution of risk by asking: at-risk of what? What does it mean for youth to actively "risk" (as a verb) versus being labelled as "at-risk"? In much of the literature on queer youth, we are provided with little beyond tautology. Linda Goldman, for example, lists "risk-taking behavior" as one of the "signs of at-risk youth": in other words, to be at-risk is to be at-risk of taking risks (97). Much literature about at-risk youth largely takes for granted the meaning of risk, and instead of offering a more nuanced articulation of the concept, presents solutions for managing risk while preventing and overcoming presumed victimization.[52]

Some scholars argue that we need to move away from this negative conception of risk and instead consider a resilience-based model for thinking about youth. In *Children and Families 'at Promise': Deconstructing the Discourse of Risk*, for example, Christine E. Sleeter rightly points out that the discourse of "at-risk" "deflects attention away from injustices perpetrated and institutionalized by the dominant society and again frames oppressed communities and homes as lacking the cultural and moral resources for advancement" (x). Instead, the book's authors strive to "reframe oppressed groups in terms of '[at]-promise,' presenting portraits of children, parents, and teachers who refused to accept definitions based on deficiency and mobilized local cultural and personal resources to achieve with excellence" (x). "Promise," however, represents a kind of teleology that lives me dissatisfied; it asks queer youth to follow a particular narrative and reach a specific destination, similar to that espoused by *It Gets Better* project (see chapter four).

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[52] The sexual activity of youth, queer or otherwise, is also frequently presumed to be risky. As Judith Levine points out, "Commonly in the professional literature, sex among young people is referred to as a 'risk factor,' along with binge drinking and and gun play, and the loss of virginity as the 'onset' of intercourse, as if it were a disease. One of the journals that frequently reports on teen sexual behaviour is called *Morbidity and Morality*" (xxvi-xxviii).

Further, it fails to account for those youth who may *not* fulfill that which they ostensibly "promise." Instead of pursuing this avenue, I want to consider what alternatives the concept of risk—which offers a less teleological temporality—can yield in discussions of youth, reading, and anxiety.

What many sociological considerations of risk leave unexplored is the fact that something usually stands to be gained from risk. Writing from a psychoanalytic perspective, Phillips considers the relationship between risk and pleasure, arguing that

> We create risk when we endanger something we value, whenever we test the relationship between thrills and virtues. So to understand, or make conscious, what constitutes a risk for us—our own personal repertoire of risks—is an important clue about what it is that we do value; and it also enjoins us to consider the pleasures of carelessness (33).

Phillips writes about what he calls "the ordinary risks of adolescence that extend into adult life," risks that are necessary to determining our relationship to objects beyond our control, outside ourselves (30). He explains vis-à-vis one of his patients, a ten-year-old who, although terrified of water, was learning to swim:

> For the boy the risk of learning to swim was the risk of discovering that he, or rather his body, would float. The heart of swimming is that you can float. Standing within his depth, apparently in control, was the omnipotence born of anxiety; the opposite of omnipotence here was not impotence, as he had feared, but his being able to entrust himself to the water. The defense of vigilant self-holding precluded his ability to swim. He needed a "generous kind of negligence" with himself. It is possible to be too concerned about oneself (30).

Phillips' swimming metaphor illustrates not only the pleasurable and productive stakes of risk, but also the role of anxiety in risk. Here, anxiety is at the root of a sense of control and power that Phillips suggests is only "apparent"; relinquishing this power is a kind of risk—a necessary, "generous kind of negligence"—that leads to discovery. This link is a key point that I will return to later in this chapter: anxiety produces the illusion of a coherent, stable self, but is simultaneously indicative of the unstable and precarious ground upon which subjectivity rests. Anxiety, then, speaks to the twin gestures of pinning down and undoing.

Phillips' metaphor extends to scenes of reading in queer YA, as I will illustrate in this chapter through queer YA texts. Reading is a kind of risk, yes, but one with stakes that vary from the standard pathologies. Also at stake and rarely discussed are possibilities for new forms of kinship, community, and pleasure: all of which could be said to have buoyant properties, to continue with Phillips' metaphor. What the swimming boy—and the reader—risk is a false sense of omnipotence and control in favour of entrusting their bodies to an outside object; as much as the reader risks one, potentially safe space, another stands to be gained: a world that justifies and motivates the initial risk, one that presents potentially transformative and pleasurable relational possibilities. Like anxiety, risk is future-oriented in that it anticipates a certain future as a consequence of the risky action. In her quote about risk that opens this section, Britzman highlights how queer pedagogy is partly about engaging in reading practices that are inevitably and productively "at-risk," but at-risk of forgoing the security and stability of sedimented categories of sexuality and gender in favour of queerness' open waters. Britzman effectively points to how risk, pedagogically speaking, should not be taken for granted as something to be managed or minimized. Instead of leading into danger, Britzman's queer pedagogical risk underscores the precariousness of an initial subject position of supposed stability while allowing

for a proliferation of new ways of thinking about identification (including a resistance to the idea of identity) and relationality.

Following Britzman, I want to imagine two shifts in our current pedagogical paradigm in terms of queer YA. First, instead of placing such a heavy onus on YA to represent certain kinds of "resolved" (to use Hartinger's word) LGBT identities to protect what we imagine to be at-risk queer youth from what we imagine to be their inevitable victimization and subsequent risky behaviour, I want to explore how representations of risk in queer YA invite a more sustained consideration of risk as something that can be both pleasurable and productive. Next, I call for a queer pedagogy where the presently favoured notion of a coherent, transparent, "resolved" self is risked in favour of the uncertainty of queerness' open waters and the anxiety that attends this scene of risky reading.

**Pedagogy and Anxiety**

In a number of her essays and books, Britzman explores the relationship between education, pedagogy, and anxiety.[53] A primary goal of *After-education* (2003), for example, is to

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[53] Although Britzman is perhaps the most prominent theorist to consider in-depth the role of psychoanalysis—including anxiety—in education, other critics have tread upon similar terrain, even if "anxiety" isn't explicitly named as such in their work. In "Queer Pedagogy: Praxis Makes Im/Perfect" (1993) for example, Mary Bryson and Suzanne de Castell describe their attempt to undermine "lesbian" as coherent category in their upper-year university women's studies class on lesbian culture and identity. They conclude that the class only succeeded in further concretizing the categories "lesbian" and "heterosexual," notwithstanding their queer approach, and despite the classroom's theoretically queer space and the queer presence in the classroom, one uncomfortable white heterosexual student controlled the course's tone, thus maintaining the same position of power and authority that she holds outside. "What this taught us," write Bryson and de Castell, "is that lesbianism, although it could of course be any other subordinated identity, is always marginal, even in a lesbian studies course, and that lesbian identity is always fixed and stable, even in a course that explicitly critiques, challenges, deconstructs 'lesbian identity'" (294). For Bryson and de Castell, this attempt at queer pedagogy was not a failure, but "im/perfect": for these authors, pedagogy is always and necessarily a messy (and, one could argue, anxious) mix of success, failure, missteps, and small victories. Shoshana Felman's "Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching" (1995) explores the relationship between

continue putting psychoanalysis and pedagogy into conversation to insist that anxiety perpetually attends the scene of education.[54] Further, in "The Very Thought" (2009), Britzman argues that the affective register of education stems from primal psychoanalytic scenes that are inherently anxious, producing resistance to thinking about the limits of knowledge as they relate to education: "Education begins with the anxiety of dependency, helplessness, and fears of separation," Britzman explains; "This can mean that our defenses against thinking the thought of education…somehow anticipate our educational dangers: dependency and the anxieties of having to relive the profound helplessness of one's infancy" (7). Later, in "Between Psychoanalysis and Pedagogy" (2013), Britzman draws on Arthur Jersild's 1955 volume *When Teachers Face Themselves* to explore the close ties between the history of educational theory and anxiety, asserting that "Jersild saw the history of educational theory as a history of anxiety, defense and alienation" (107); she uses these links to consider how "the field of education" can benefit from "a psychoanalytic style," which invites "the desire to learn more from otherness," confrontations with "the difficult knowledge that is already there," and "a passion for the work,…an interest in

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teaching, testimonial, and crisis, asserting that "There is a parallel between…teaching [as testifying] and psychoanalysis…insofar as both this teaching and psychoanalysis have, precisely, to *live through a crisis*. Both are called upon to be *performative*, and not just *cognitive*, insofar as they both strive to produce, and to enable, *change*" (56, original emphasis). More recently, Heather Sykes (2011) has considered how "adult phantasies and projected anxieties" about "childhood and adolescence" play themselves out in the physical education classroom (91), and Sheila L. Cavanagh (2007) has explored public anxieties surrounding teacher sex scandals, inviting us to "imagine a queer pedagogy based not on sex between teachers and students but on illicit wishes and non-normative identifications with these wishes" (27). For more, see the first chapter of Kumashiro's book, in which he considers the anxieties he experienced when attempting to implement an anti-oppressive pedagogy in his own classroom; and a 2011 University of Oxford blog post by David White entitled "Education should make us anxious" (which seems inspired by Britzman's work). Thus, as Britzman asserts in "Between Psychoanalysis and Pedagogy," "it is hardly news to observe that in the field of education words arouse anxiety. But it is news to think education through its neurotic, perverse, and psychotic symptoms" (105). The latter is precisely the work I hope to continue in this project.

[54] Quinlivan summarizes Britzman's primary assertion in *After-education* as "what is educative makes us anxious," emphasizing the inextricability of anxiety from the scene of education (519).

working within the uncertainty in our own learning, of narrating the conditions of education with a difference, itself an emotional situation difficult to know" (115).

For Britzman, generally speaking, psychoanalysis opens the door to thinking education's unconscious: what she calls the "unthought" of education, through which we can "call into question"—as she explains in "Queer Pedagogy and its Strange Techniques—"the subject-presumed-to-know, the capacity of the subject's response to be unencumbered by that which is cannot tolerate, and the subject's own 'passion for ignorance'" (80). Further, psychoanalysis returns Britzman to those primal drives and affective forms—including anxiety, loss, love, desire, and phantasy—that fuel our impulses to teach and learn: "The educator was once a child with frustrated thoughts and fears over loss of love and is now in the position to frustrate others with an offer of love that cannot really be given without incurring loss, anxiety, defenses, and phantasies," Britzman writes; "Could it be that education, like psychoanalysis, is an attempt to cure by love?" ("The Very Thought" 17).[55] For Britzman, then, anxiety both partially describes the scene of education and enables new approaches to thinking about teaching and learning. Fundamental to these new approaches, as I have already mentioned, is a rethinking of reading practices in light of anxious affect and the possibilities for identification this affect produces: "That is," Britzman explains, "pedagogy might provoke the strange study of where feelings

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[55] Britzman's "Precocious Education" (2000) treads in a comparatively positive affective register (vs. anxiety and fear, for example), exploring the role of pleasure, desire, and love as they relate to education. She asks: "How does the experience of learning become pleasurable? How does one take joy in having ideas, in changing one's mind, in encountering the work of learning? What sorts of relation exists between learning to love and loving learning?" (44). In this essay, Britzman draws on Freud's conception of children as "little sex researchers" to associate childhood curiosity and precociousness with the desire and pleasure that surrounds learning (51). She concludes: "In my view, teachers must find a way to return to the student the conditions that allow the joy of having ideas, taking ideas apart, and then making new knowledge" ("Precocious" 44).

break down, take a detour, reverse their content, betray understanding, and hence study where affective meanings become anxious, ambivalent, and aggressive" ("Queer Pedagogy" 84). As I do, however, Britzman sees anxiety and ambivalence as useful, since these affects lead to "reading practices…capable of both expressing a desire that exceeds subjectivity and of provoking 'deconstructive revolts': reading practices as a technique for exceeding auto-affectivity and the accompanying investment in pinning down meanings, in getting identities 'straight.'" ("Queer Pedagogy" 85). She asks:

> What if one thought about reading practices as problems of opening identifications, of working the capacity to imagine oneself differently precisely in one's encounters with another and in one's encounters with the self? What if how one reads the world turned upon the interest in thinking against one's thoughts, in creating a queer space where old certainties made no sense? ("Queer Pedagogy" 85).

In other words, following Britzman and in the context of this project, I want to think anxiety as an affect that attends scenes of reading, shapes and is shaped by reading practices—an affect that has the potential to produce a kind of resistance to the teleology and fixedness of many critical approaches to queer YA, while "possibly unhinging the normal from the self" and "multiplying alternative forms of identifications and pleasures" ("Queer Pedagogy" 85). The pervasiveness of anxiety in education—the way anxiety circulates in discourse and gives form to pedagogical and reading practices—is precisely why theorizing an affective economy of anxiety provides such an appropriate and useful alternative approach to queer YA.

I imagine my project as picking up upon and growing Britzman's discussion of anxiety and pedagogy. I place anxiety at the centre of my alternative pedagogical approach to queer YA by recognizing that an affective economy of anxiety, as I have already argued, shapes discourse

about the genre. I depart from Britzman, however, in that I am principally intrigued by how the temporality of anxiety can influence pedagogy, something Britzman touches upon but does not fully consider; return, for a moment, to the quotation—cited above—in which she invites us to study those places "where feelings break down, take a detour, reverse their content" ("Queer Pedagogy" 84). In what follows, I will situate this anxious, stall-and-start temporality in the context some other theories of pedagogy, considering how the temporality of anxiety fits with a pedagogy of anxiety more broadly.

**Pedagogy and Temporality**

Several well-known educational theorists draw temporal connections between pedagogy and the future. For Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, pedagogy is about reproducing, in future generations, a culture's habitus: "PA [pedagogic action] entails pedagogic work (PW), a process of inculcation which must last long enough to produce a durable training, i.e. a habitus, the product of internalization of the principles of a cultural arbitrary capable of perpetuating itself after PA has ceased and thereby of perpetuating in practices the principles of the internalized arbitrary" (31). Paulo Freire, who makes a crucial distinction between pedagogy and "training" (the latter being closer to what Bourdieu and Passeron outline), describes pedagogy as "revolutionary futurity," a "permanent process of hope-filled search" (*Teachers* xviii, *Pedagogy* 100). Writing in the context of literacy education for Brazilian labourers, Freire places utopian thought at the centre of his pedagogy,[56] but roots his pedagogy in the here and now—in the

[56] I am wary about drawing on Freire in such a different cultural and theoretical context, but also conscious of the fact that Freire encouraged the creative adaptation and reworking of his ideas. In the foreword to *Teachers as Cultural Workers*, he is quoted as saying: "Donaldo [Macedo, author of the foreword], I don't want to be imported or exported. It is possible to export pedagogical practices without reinventing them. Please tell your fellow American educators not to import me. Ask them to re-create and rewrite my ideas" (xi). Here, I hope to be, in a sense,

material practices that have the potential to intervene in the present and create change that aims towards the realization of utopia, even if this utopia is never achieved. Thus why, for Freire, pedagogy is best described as a "permanent process."[57]

Freire's view of pedagogy shares similarities with—as seen in chapter one—queerness according to Muñoz: "a temporal arrangement in which the past is a field of possibility in which subjects can act in the present in the service of a new futurity" (16). Muñoz justifies his location of queerness in the always-arriving future in that it prevents the ossification of queerness under the auspices of neoliberalism and refuses queerness' domination by individual rights-driven struggles. Queerness for Muñoz becomes an "openness to the world" through its "horizonal temporality," which is invested in a collective futurity not premised on normative reproduction (25). By maintaining the instability of queerness and understanding it as a refusal of what exists in the present (much like how Freire sees the objective of pedagogy), queer remains an open horizon that can be imagined and reimagined through artistic and cultural production, political praxis, and use of the performative "as a force of and for futurity" (32). "Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough," Muñoz writes, "that indeed something is missing" (1). In a strikingly similar passage, Freire makes a similar connection between incompleteness, education, and hope: "The matrix of hope," he writes, "is the same as that of education for human beings—becoming conscious of themselves as unfinished beings. It would be a flagrant contradiction if human beings, while unfinished beings and ones conscious of their unfinished

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rewriting Freire's Marx-influenced view of pedagogy as futurity in light of my approach to queer pedagogy.

[57] bell hooks is another pedagogical theorist who, inspired by Freire, writes about the connections between education, hope, and the future. See, for example, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (2003) in which hooks argues that "Educating is always a vocation rooted in hopefulness" (xiv); "Our visions for tomorrow are most vital when they emerge from the concrete circumstances of change we are experiencing right now" (12).

nature, did not insert themselves into a permanent process of hope-filled search. Education is that process" (*Pedagogy* 100).

Both Muñoz and Freire evince a dissatisfaction with completeness and teleology that I share in this project, and in conversation with one another, their thinking establishes another provocative link between queerness and pedagogy in their dual discursive commitments to recognizing a perpetual subjective "unfinished"-ness.[58] However, I want to complicate the role of futurity as a temporal orientation in their work, which sits uncomfortably alongside other strands of queer theory and a pedagogy of anxiety as it relates to queer YA. I want to ask: can we imagine a pedagogy of anxiety as queering the future-oriented temporality of pedagogy to consider, following Stockton and Phillips, its stalls, starts, and delays—those temporal dissonances in pedagogy that Britzman mentions but never fully explores? Can we, thinking back to my discussion of Edelman in chapter one, also consider how queer and anxious forms stand in opposition and/or ambivalence to the future? In addition to being nascent in Britzman, an anxious temporality also has seeds in Kumashiro's work. Drawing on Felman's essay on pedagogy and crisis, he writes:

> Learning that the very ways in which we think and do things is not only partial but oppressive involves troubling or 'unlearning' what we have already learned, and this can be quite an emotionally discomforting process, a form of 'crisis.' In particular, it can lead students into what I call a paradoxical condition of learning and unlearning in which students are both unstuck (i.e., distanced from the ways they have always thought, no longer so complicit with oppression) and stuck (i.e., intellectually paralyzed and needing

[58] As we have already seen, Britzman has similar investments. See also "The Very Thought," in which she asserts: "Education itself will be interminable because it is always incomplete and because it animates our own incompleteness" (3).

> to work through their emotions and thoughts before moving on with the more academic part of the lesson) (63).

Let us pause to recall Phillips' description of worrying as simultaneously "[implying] a future, a way of looking forward to things" (56) and "an unproductive mental process that got [his patient] nowhere; and this was part of its value to him…it was among other things an attempt to arrest the passage of time" (47-48). We see a similar relationship to temporality in Kumashiro's "paradoxical condition of learning and unlearning," his formula that involves students being both "unstuck" and "stuck"—even "paralyzed." My point here is to not dissociate pedagogy with futurity and hope—recall that Phillips identifies worry as "a conscious conviction that a future exists" and "an ironic form of hope" (56). Instead, I want to pick up on the "stuck-ness" of both anxiety and pedagogy, considering its role in relation to queer YA.

Thus far, I have been relatively unconcerned with fine distinctions between "worry" and "anxiety," focusing instead on how the two terms seems to share a temporality that is simultaneously stalled and future-oriented. Here, however, I am compelled to make a sharper differentiation between the two terms. Recall that Phillips suggests that the "distinction we tend to make is that worry always has an object, that worrying is beyond displacement, whereas one can feel anxious without knowing what the anxiety is about" (52).[59] As a result of worry's object-orientation, Phillips argues,

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[59] Cavanagh makes a similar conscious/unconscious, articulable/displaced distinction between worry and anxiety: "A worry that is real can be dealt with and named for what it is. An unconscious anxiety…goes underground and resurfaces as an attachment to something seemingly more legitimate" (21-22). While there remains overlap between the two concepts, especially in terms of what I understand to be their shared temporality, I believe there are (hazy) lines to be drawn between the object-centred "worry" and the more generalized, perhaps directionless and/or improperly focused affect "anxiety."

> Worries…show a coherent subject in an intelligible, if unsettling, narrative; they assume a pragmatic self bent on problem-solving, not an incurably desiring subject in the disarray of not knowing what he wants. We use worries to focus and are prone to use them to simulate purpose (just as when we are intimidated by possibility) (57).

"Worrying," he continues, "tacitly constitutes a self—or, at least, a narrator—by assuming the existence of one; for how could there be a worry without a worrier?" (57). Remember that for Brtizman, however, anxiety in education makes available "reading practices" that "exceed[] subjectivity…and the accompanying investment in pinning down meanings, in getting identities 'straight'" ("Queer Pedagogy" 85).[60] If worrying, then, produces—at the very least—a temporarily coherent subject, anxiety differentiates itself through its undoing, halting, and impeding selves, even if this undoing results from a subject's attempts to pin itself down and/or render itself coherent.[61] This, as I discussed in the previous section, is the apparent omnipotence of the boy learning to swim: a sense of power and stability *produced* by the very anxiety that simultaneously gestures to the boy's instability and precariousness. By keeping alive a kind of vital and transformative anxiety, pedagogy—which has been theorized largely in terms of futurity and hope—becomes simultaneously attuned to delay, risk, stalls and starts, and subjective ambiguity; "learning," as Kumashiro writes, "is about disruption and opening up to further learning, not closure and satisfaction" (43).

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[60] We can further recall Lacan's assertion that anxiety "impedes…truly and verily the subject" (10).

[61] Recall, for instance, Butler's famous assertion in "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" that "heterosexuality [is] an incessant and *panicked* imitation of its own naturalized ideation" (314). Given that heterosexuality, as Butler explains, "is always in the act of elaborating itself," it is simultaneously demonstrating "that it 'knows' its own possibility of becoming undone: hence, its compulsion to repeat which is a foreclosure of that which threatens its coherence" (314). In other words, heterosexuality rehearses itself in order to pin itself down, but it is this very anxious, repetitive performance that establishes its instability.

In what follows, I turn to Block's *Weetzie Bat* and *Baby Be-Bop*, two YA novels that I argue illustrate many of the above concepts and offer a model for reading practices, via queer pedagogy, as anxious processes. This perspective, which emerges through the character Dirk's negotiations with his sexuality in relation to the narrative of martyr-target-victim, posits the stories of others as constitutive forces in his anxious sense of self.

**"De-story. Destroy. Destory.": Anxious Reading in *Weetzie Bat* and *Baby Be-Bop***

In my exploration of how Block provides us with a theory of anxious reading in *Weetzie Bat* and *Baby Be-Bop*, I would like to pick up on my discussion of risk from earlier in this chapter, in particular the dual/duelling narratives that have come to constitute queer youth in the popular imagination: the narrative of being "at-risk" or what Rofes calls "martyr-target-victim," and the narrative Talburt identifies as its opposing counterpart, that of the out-and-proud gay youth. Both of these stories about queer youth are central to Block's novels and how the character Dirk negotiates his sense of self. I argue that Block's novels interrogate the process of reading in a broad sense that is not limited to reading traditional texts; Dirk reads the world around him—his friends, family, people he encounters—instead of focusing on particular novels, television shows, or films to understand himself.[62] Further, Block's novels do not merely reject narratives of martyr-target-victim and posit hopeful replacement stories with sexually resolved, unambiguous characters (as some queer YA critics might have us do). The "hero" of Block's novels is not Dirk as reader, but rather the sense-making mechanisms that Dirk employs to read the world around him, a world that he anxiously assembles through rickety, provisional stories.

[62] In chapter three, I will examine in-depth queer YA novels that features characters who *do* draw on particular texts to negotiate their sense of self and relations with others. In this section, I am interested in the implications of reading as a technique for, broadly speaking, making sense of the world around us.

Recall that reading is partly about creating, as Britzman writes, a series of temporary "theories of the world" based on "a strange combination of what we receive from others, what we wish to have happen, what we notice in the world" ("Precocious" 51); Block invites her readers to recognize that fictions like the martyr-target-victim trope come into play in the ongoing constitution of Dirk's sense of self, which is constantly being "de-" and "re-stor[ied]" (476). Moving away from both narratives of victimization and those of resolved and transparent sexual identity, Block's novels propose a theory of storying that foregrounds how Dirk's terms of self-reference are primarily and inevitably established through the stories told by others, stories that are nonetheless subject to Dirk's own reading and interpretation.

Block's *Weetzie Bat* is a queer novel partly due to its failure to conform to expectations regarding audience and genre: as Cart points out, it was written for adults, marketed to young adults, and ultimately enjoys a tremendous amount of success as a cross-over title (59). Block takes the bildungsroman and queers it thoroughly, fusing YA themes (friendship, first love, loss) with fairy tales and magical realism and setting it in a Los Angeles that feels both real and completely surreal: "…there was a fountain that turned tropical soda-pop colors, and a canyon where Jim Morrison and Houdini used to live, and all-night potato knishes at Canter's, and not too far away was Venice, with columns, and canals, even, like the real Venice but maybe cooler because of the surfers" (3). *Weetzie Bat* is the story of Weetzie, her best friend Dirk, and their very queer family, which includes: My Secret Agent Lover Man and Duck, Weetzie and Dirk's boyfriends, respectively; Cherokee Bat, Weetzie's daughter, conceived through a series of sexual encounters with Duck and Dirk (the actual father is unidentified); Witch Baby, whose mother is a mysterious woman impregnated by My Secret Agent Lover Man when he temporarily leaves Weetzie; and a series of equally queerly-named pets. The family lives in a "Hollywood cottage

with one of those fairy-tale roofs that look like someone has spilled silly sand" bestowed upon Weetzie when she is granted three wishes by a genie (Block 20). Throughout the novel, these characters mourn the death of loved ones (including Weetzie's father and Dirk's Grandma Fifi), contend with the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, and repeatedly question the fairy tale narrative in which they find themselves. "And so Weetzie and My Secret Agent Lover Man and Dirk and Duck…lived happily ever after in their silly-sand-topped house in the land of skating hamburgers and flying toupees," concludes one chapter, while the next begins with Weetzie asking: "What does 'happily ever after' mean anyway, Dirk?" (Block 30-31). The novel's queerness, however, remains largely unproblematic, and there are no looming traces of the martyr-target-victim narrative. Dirk and Duck experience no harassment or discrimination as a result of their queerness, and as Deborah Kaplan and Rebecca Rabinowitz point out, "there is nothing that the narrative voice finds wrong with the thoroughly queer sexual act of a heterosexual woman having intercourse with a pair of partnered gay men" (205). "I don't know about happily ever after…but I know about happily," *Weetzie Bat* concludes, and next to *Baby Be-Bop*, *Weetzie Bat* is indeed the "happily" narrative, where its young queer characters exist not only without major difficulty, but also as a model for creative relationality that defies both heteronormative permutations of the nuclear family and their incarnations in gay and lesbian communities (Block 70).

*Baby Be-Bop*, first published six years after *Weetzie Bat* but set several years before, complicates the ease with which we initially see Dirk inhabiting his sexuality. *Baby Be-Bop*'s Dirk is a confused and self-loathing teenager who fears violence and hatred as a result of the homoerotic desires he keeps deeply suppressed. Dirk falls in love with Pup, his best male friend, and fantasizes about trains filled with naked showering men, but he remains "a scared boy…who

hated himself" (Block 406). Dirk meets his Grandma Fifi's friends, Martin and Merlin, who "talked in voices as pale and soft as the shirts they wore and they moved as gracefully as Fifi did. Their eyes were startled and sad. They had been hurt because of who they were. Dirk didn't want to be hurt that way" (Block 381). The vulnerability Dirk perceives in Martin and Merlin is what causes Dirk to hide his sexual desire; Dirk fears being legibly queer like Fifi's friends, and so attempts to resist all forms of legibility: "[Dirk] had no story. And if he did no one would want to hear it. He would be laughed at, maybe attacked. So it was better to have no story at all" (Block 410). Ironically, Dirk's belief that he has no story *is* part of his story in that moment—Dirk's perception of and resistance to his queer feelings are informed by the stories he hears and those he tells himself about the association between queer desire and potential violence. Like shallow water for Phillips' swimming boy, Dirk's "storylessness" provides a feeling of apparent control, but this control is produced by the anxiety Dirk has about his sexual impulses—the anxiety that undercuts any sense of power storylessness might seem to provide.

Dirk retreats into L.A.'s punk scene, and it is paradoxically this retreat from queerness—and not the open adoption of a gay identity—that leads him to experience a series of increasingly violent encounters that culminate in a vicious beating at the hands of a group of skinheads. Seeing himself hated through the eyes of a swastika-tattooed concert-goer, Dirk taunts the boy: "fuck fascist skinhead shit" (Block 419). When the skinhead replies with, "where you going, faggot," Dirk feels visibly queer and terrified, as though "they had looked inside of him to his most terrible secret" (Block 419). Block continues, graphically describing the brutal attack: "The skinheads were all on him at once. Dirk saw their eyes glittering like mica chips with the reflection of his own self-loathing. He wondered if he deserved this because he wanted to touch and kiss a boy" (419). Here, Dirk comes into being as queer through the skinheads' eyes, hailing

himself as a martyr-target-victim and understanding this story as the one that defines him. There is a tension in this moment between the third person narrator and Dirk's own perspective: Dirk interferes with the omniscient voice to enunciate himself as entrenched in the narrative that sees queers as the inevitable victims of violence. The fiction of victimization that Dirk constructs for himself through the skinhead is what mediates his interpretation of the beating: understanding himself as the inevitable victim of violence because of his queer desires, he becomes one. Crucial here is the fact that Dirk sees and interprets himself through the eyes of another: in spite of Dirk's desire to resist legibility by refusing to see himself as storied, Dirk still reads himself as queer by creating an account of how the skinhead would see him. Although he aims to possess a story-less sense of self that would resist legibility, Dirk reads and produces his story through a messy combination of absorptions and resistances to a number of colliding fictions.

Severely bloodied and beaten, Dirk manages to drive home, where he is visited by a series of ghosts: his great-grandmother Gazelle, a seamstress raised by her tyrannical aunt; his parents, Dirby and Just Silver, who died in a car accident; and Gazelle's lover. "Help me; tell me a story," Dirk begs Gazelle when she first appears: "tell me a story that will make me want to live, because right now I don't want to live" (Block 423). In a scene of ghostly pedagogy, Gazelle and Dirby recount the story of their family, explaining how each relative discovered a medium for self-expression: dressmaking for Gazelle, Fifi's dancing, and Dirby's beat poetry—recitations that would bring inanimate objects to life, causing wine glasses to dance and hats to fly from the heads of Dirby's audience members (Block 452-53). Following the relatives' stories, Dirk tells his father that he's gay. Dirby replies: "I know you are, buddy…do you know about the Greek gods, probably Walt Whitman—first beat father, Oscar Wilde, Ginsberg, even, maybe, your number one hero?  You can't be afraid" (Block 458-59). Dirk's mother then invites Dirk to

tell his own story, which he does, realizing in the process that "all his ancestors' stories were also his own. Each of us has a family tree full of stories inside of us…each of us has a story blossoming out of us" (Block 461).

On one hand, we could read the final movements of *Baby Be-Bop* and conclude that Dirk ultimately surmounts the trope of martyr-target-victim and becomes a resilient young gay man with the agency to narrate himself and negotiate his sexuality on his own, more authentic terms. However, Dirk requires the stories told by others in order to imagine himself as capable of narrating his own story. Instead of reading himself as legibly queer and a possible victim of violence through the eyes of the skinhead and the invisible others who hurt Martin and Merlin, Dirk begins understanding himself as liberated through his own capacity as a storyteller (Block 478). Dirk's newfound freedom and ostensible agency, however, is contingent on his self-perception as storyteller mediated by stories about storytelling told by his deceased relatives, and his ability to interpret himself through the queer role models offered by his father as alternatives to the self-loathing of a martyr-target-victim: "What is at stake in…pedagogy," in Luhmann's words, "is the deeply social or dialogic situation of subject formation, the processes of how we make ourselves through and against others" (130). The ghosts, in Dirk's case, are central to this process of self-fashioning and narration.

"Think about the word destroy," the ghost of Gazelle's lover encourages Dirk, "do you know what it is? De-story. Destroy. Destory. You see. And restore. That's re-story. … Telling your story is touching. It sets you free" (Block 476). Here, the ghost gestures to the precariousness and mutability of Dirk's sense of self by acknowledging that the narratives through which he understands himself are susceptible to constant "destroying/destorying" and "restoring/restorying." While Dirk is, in a way, partially freed from his self-containment in a

narrative of victimization, this liberation process is not a linear progression from anxious storylessness to stable storied-self enabled by a newfound capacity to self-narrate. Rather, Dirk de-stories his story about storylessness—his attempted refusal of legibility—and re-stories his self-understanding by constructing a narrative that resists the trope of martyr-target-victim and absorbs the stories of his relatives. The effect is not an authentic, sexually resolved, gay Dirk, but rather a de- and re-storied, still-rickety Dirk whose self-understanding remains contingent on the stories of others, on a reading of the world around him. Moreover, from a temporal perspective, Dirk's reading practices are anxious: through his self-narration as storyless, he attempts, in a sense, to "arrest the passage of time" (Phillips 48), to avoid confrontation with the homoerotic fantasies that fill his dreams, to derive a sense of control from pinning himself down as being without an essential story. Yet, Dirk exhibits a conflicting desire for forward motion, central to the temporality of anxiety, that exists in tension with his impulse to stabilize his sense of self. Recall that Dirk's fantasies about the naked, showering men take place, significantly, on a train:

> "…It's just a phase," Fifi said. Just a phase. Dirk thought about those words over and over again. Just a phase. Until the train inside of him would crash. Until the thing inside of him that was wrong and bad would change. He waited and waited for the phase to end. When would it end? He tried to do everything fast so it would end faster. He got A's in school. He ran fast. He made his body strong so that he would be picked first for teams (Block 380).

Here, as Dirk's "frightening, heightened sense of growing toward a question mark" (Stockton, "*Lost*" 425) becomes lodged in the metaphor of the train, he demonstrates what Phillips describes as "a conscious conviction that a future exists, one in which something terrible might happen," the "ironic form of hope" central to worry (56). For Dirk, the terminus of his train ride

assumes two possible shapes: disaster (the train "crash"), or some form of relief (his desire "would change"). His solution is to become a bodily mirror of the train's forward motion: to progress as quickly as possible—literally running as fast as he can—in order to reach the end of the train ride that stands in metaphorically for his desire. As in the temporality of anxiety, this desire for forward movement is in tension with Dirk's other wish, to "have no story at all," "to be untouchable and beautiful and completely dead inside," which reminds Dirk "of the stuffed dog he and Pup had seen on the Venice boardwalk, so long ago it seemed now—a rigor mortis display" (Block 411). Dirk's conflicting and conflicted desires—which are alternately focused on the pleasures, shelters, and dangers of movement and stasis—suggest a complicated relationship to notions of growth and identity, a relationship that takes place through anxious practices for reading and navigating relationality.

What *Weetzie Bat* and *Baby Be-Bop* offer us—in content and form—is an oscillation between fictions that demonstrates the instability of narrative: just as Dirk moves between desires for speed and stasis as modes of self-description, Block's story shifts from a fairy tale world devoid of queer martyr-target-victims to one where stories of victimization have significant purchase in how Dirk understands himself. These two novels, in other words, de- and re-story the narrative of martyr-target-victim in a way that upends our typical experience of this story as linear and progressive. The victim trope, in these novels, offers a useful critical perspective on the relationship between reading and storytelling more generally: Block illustrates, through her magical realist style, how fictions can be (literally) life-giving (Dirby's poems breathe life into inanimate objects, and Dirk realizes that telling "our stories can set us free") and life-taking (or limiting) (478). This view of fiction and storytelling enables a more capacious understanding of queer youth as de- and re-storied not thanks to a liberating resilience

and agency alone, but through the anxious incorporation of and resistance to—the reading of—stories told by others. Instead of suggesting that we can simply move beyond the narrative of martyr-target-victim and reject it as a fiction, we can recognize it as one fiction among many that work to create stories about queer youth—fictions that continue to be de- and re-storied by adults and youth alike. Queer youth, then, are not the sole locus of vulnerability in stories about sexuality, identity, and subjectivity: the stories themselves are vulnerable to creative disruption and resignification.

In what follows, in conversation with Holland's *The Man Without a Face*, I will continue to illustrate the potential that emerges from the anxious occlusions, sideways relations, and ambiguities of queer YA. Holland's novel depicts the sideways, erotic relation between teacher and student as a kind of interval that is nonetheless, like *Baby Be-Bop*, in tension with the future, with forward-oriented movement. My objective is to demonstrate that critics who push for "resolution" ignore the productive and creative relations that occur inside delay and through risk.

## ***The Man Without a Face* and the Boy in the Golden Cocoon**

Holland's novel is told from the perspective of fatherless fourteen-year-old Charles "Chuck" Norstadt, who is desperate to attend boarding school in order to flee his verbally abusive, serial divorcée mother and tyrannical older sister Gloria. Like *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*'s Davy, Chuck's only apparent friend is an animal: in this case, a mangy stray cat named Moxie. In order to pass the entrance exam for the school that will guarantee his escape, Chuck approaches the mysterious, disfigured loner and former teacher Justin McLeod—the titular faceless man—who lives in isolation in the hills near Chuck's family's summer cottage. McLeod takes pity on Chuck and agrees to tutor him; while Chuck is at first resistant to McLeod's gruff demeanour and strict pedagogical methods, the two eventually warm to one

another. McLeod, initially aloof, eventually reveals the story behind his disfigurement to Chuck: he was drunk driving with a teenage boy in the car, they crashed, and the boy was killed. As the summer passes with student and teacher spending every day together, Chuck's affection for and attraction to McLeod deepens. One night toward summer's end, Chuck returns home to discover that his beloved Moxie has been kicked to death by Gloria's boyfriend, and Gloria has vindictively left him a stack of newspaper clippings about his missing father, who "died of chronic alcoholism in Sydney, Australia, where he had been living on skid row for some years" (Holland 145). Overwhelmed and traumatized, Chuck runs to McLeod, collapses into bed with him, and narrates: "I didn't know what was happening to me until it had happened" (Holland 147). The next morning, ashamed and confused, Chuck rebuffs McLeod's attempt to talk things through, returns to the city, passes his exam, and begins school. Later, overcome with guilt and "sick with shame for—again—having run away," Chuck decides he must apologize to McLeod and confess "how much [he] loved him" (Holland 152). He arrives to find McLeod's house empty, however, and receives the news that McLeod died of a sudden heart attack a month prior and left his entire estate to Chuck. The novel concludes with Chuck deciding to return to school and reflecting on McLeod's "talent for salvaging flawed and fallen creatures" (Holland 157).

What Fuoss describes as *The Man Without a Face*'s sexual ellipsis is not the only aspect of Holland's novel that has garnered criticism. As with other early queer YA titles, including Donovan's novel, critics tend to focus on the novel's stereotypes and ambiguities. Hanckel and Cunningham, for example, write that "Holland's novel contains one of the most destructive and fallacious stereotypes—the homosexual as child molestor….In light of such limited coverage of the gay experience in YA fiction, the possible identification of such a major character as a corrupter of children is grossly unfair" (534). Cart and Jenkins, who acknowledge that Holland

was writing at a time gay relationships were more taboo than at present, maintain that "the author nevertheless equates homosexuality with disfigurement, despair, and death, and her novel, along with Donovan's, reinforced some of the stereotypical thinking about homosexuality that became a fixture of LGBTQ literature" (22). And like Fuoss, Corinne Hirsch takes issue with the novel's occlusions, arguing at length for the importance of clarity and resolution in YA:

> Having introduced themes rich with ambiguity, the exigencies of the novel demand that they be worked out more fully. How might Charles deal with the complicated emotional and sexual feelings he has developed? What would be a realistic outcome of his relationship with McLeod? Adolescents, no less than adults, deserve a fully developed fictional experience. If Holland wishes to consider the difficult problems she does, she has a responsibility to explore their implications….In *The Man Without a Face*…Holland perceptively raises and partially explores complex questions; but in the end she evades them (33-34).

Aside from Hanckel and Cunningham's labelling of McLeod a "child molestor," which I find extreme, I do not disagree with much of the above criticism. Holland's novel is filled with stereotypes: the stale pathology of the fatherless gay is in full force (at one point, Chuck has a dream where one faceless man—his missing father—literally morphs into another, i.e. McLeod), and McLeod's tragic and isolated existence is not exactly an appealing representation of queer life (99). What interests me, however, is what these critiques assume and overlook. Hanckel and Cunningham and Cart and Jenkins' assumption is that *The Man Without a Face* (and, by extension, other early queer YA titles like Donovan's novel) can only be read only one way: in terms of potential harm via their many outmoded stereotypes. As a result, these texts are viewed as having little to no pedagogical value (and are of interest only, as I mentioned earlier, as

historical documents) since they teach the wrong thing and are rife with so many wrong kinds of visibility or, as Hirsch argues, incomplete visibilities. What these critics overlook is how *The Man Without a Face*'s occlusions, ambiguities, and seemingly harmful representations produce a number of possibilities that speak to the desire for delay of identification, sideways teacher/student relations, and pedagogy's queerness and riskiness. Hirsch's critique in particular privileges a notion of "resolved" sexuality, and in what follows, I want to consider the productive aspects of incompleteness. I will illustrate how Holland's novel queers pedagogy, not only eroticizing it as space of desire between teacher and student, but also representing pedagogy as a site of anxious temporality, where delay and forward movement are constantly in tension. Finally, in spite of the stereotypes the novel perpetuates, I will consider the Chuck's risks to be in line with what Britzman calls "risking the self," launching himself into the indefinite postponement of identity instead of assuming a complete, resolved self ("Queer Pedagogy" 94).

In *The Queer Child*, Stockton explores ideas surrounding delay, pleasure, and pain vis-à-vis Henry James' 1891 novella *The Pupil*, which bears a number of thematic similarities to *The Man Without a Face*.[63] To introduce her analysis, Stockton poses the following questions:

> To what extent has man/boy love, at least for a century, in some contexts, functioned as a substitute lateral relation for men and boys?—especially if each of them has been publicly trapped in delays, with the dictates of arrested development and ghostly gayness thrust upon them. Or to meld these questions: has what is called man/boy love found surprising outlets in mutual pain, giving men and boys ways to meet inside delay? (62).

[63] The many parallels between *The Man Without a Face* and *The Pupil* (as examined by Stockton) warrants in-depth investigation elsewhere. Among these similarities is a reversal in narrative voice and conclusion: James gives us the story from the tutor's perspective and it is the pupil who dies at the end from a "weak heart," whereas in Holland's novel, the story is narrated from the student's point of view and the tutor is the weak-hearted one.

Like James' tutor and pupil, Chuck and McLeod form a sideways relation premised on pain and what Stockton calls "the dictates of arrested development"—i.e., McLeod and Chuck's implied homosexuality, and the fact that Chuck is taunted by his mother and sister as being not intelligent enough to pass his entrance exams (a 1972 Kirkus Review even goes so far as to call Holland's two protagonists "emotional cripples"—see "The Man Without a Face"). Stockton's approach, however, is to consider the teacher/student relationship in *The Pupil* through the lens of masochism, which she describes (drawing on Deleuze) as "a special way of pursuing a pleasure that comes on delay" (78). For Stockton, this masochism emerges from the verbal play between teacher and student: "Talking, of course, can be a delay, even itself a sexy delay," she writes; "It's a delay since it often isn't sex (it's talking, after all), but it can be greatly suffused with pleasure, even a highly sexualized pleasure, even if the topic of the talking is pain….Talking can even be a kind of whipping: a verbal (and imaginative) painful enjoyment" (*Queer Child* 63). Again, there are a number of links here between Stockton's analysis of *The Pupil* and Holland's novel: in a sense, Chuck and McLeod's relationship could be seen as masochistic, since delay is integral to their interaction and Chuck derives a kind of flirtatious pleasure from the way McLeod treats him strictly and harshly.[64] What Stockton doesn't examine in-depth is the anxious affect of the relationship between tutor and pupil, which circulates with these notions of delay, pleasure, and risk—all of which Holland's novel serves to emphasize. While it would be

[64] McLeod participates in these exchanges with a flirtatiousness of his own. See, for example, the exchange on page 69 of Holland's novel: "I [Chuck] decided to live dangerously. 'I thought you were never supposed to end a sentence with a preposition.' 'I, too, can quote,' [McLeod] said deadpan. 'There is a certain type of insubordination going on around here up with which I will not put.' I couldn't help but grinning. 'You're not serious about be having to do that Latin word bit, are you, Mr. McLeod?' 'Oh, yes.' … I sighed loudly. It really is against my principles to give in to an adult. But somehow, of the two of us, I had a strong feeling he wasn't going to do the yielding." Of course, this also foreshadows the fact that McLeod resists Chuck's physical advances until he finally presumably "yields" to Chuck in the novel's ambiguous sexual climax.

fascinating to follow Stockton and make the case that Chuck is a masochistic child, I will instead examine the sideways relations and occlusions that take place in the pedagogical space of Holland's novel, or what Chuck calls his "golden cocoon" (Holland 121).

Holland's narrative is built around a series of risks that Chuck takes as he enters into and fulfills his pedagogical contract with McLeod. Chuck's story has much in common with Phillips' metaphor of the swimming boy: *The Man Without a Face* is essentially the story of a boy who learns to entrust his body and self to open waters—in this case, the risky, free-floating space of queerness. Chuck "risks his self" (to borrow from Britzman) through a pedagogy that culminates not in the resolution of a transparent and stable sexual identity, but rather in the incompleteness of his sense of self. This incompleteness manifests itself in Chuck's desire for delay, which is in constant tension with the futurity of pedagogy; this incompleteness also demonstrates how queerness, quite productively and transformatively, can take shapes and form relations that lie outside of the call for sexual resolution.

As Chuck makes his initial trek to McLeod's house, the main risk he perceives is an attack from McLeod's "man-hating dog" and a fear of being rejected as a pupil by the former schoolteacher: "the butterflies in my stomach were threatening to become bats," narrates Chuck as he approaches the house (Holland 26). Although he is initially shunned by McLeod, Chuck shares details about his uncomfortable situation at home, and McLeod reluctantly agrees to tutor him: "I'll coach you. But you'll have to do it my way, and that means the hard way," McLeod tells Chuck; "It will be tough. But if I ever find you haven't done the work I've assigned you, you won't come back. Are you sure it's worth it?" (Holland 35). Together, Chuck and McLeod enter the interval of pedagogy: "three hours every morning five days a week" aimed at shaping Chuck's future (Holland 35). Chuck emphasizes his desire to prolong their time together when,

later in the novel, he begins referring to his time with McLeod as feeling "like I was in a sort of golden cocoon and I didn't want to break out of it" (Holland 121). This desire, however, is in tension with the forward momentum and future-orientation of their pedagogical arrangement, a tension that is caught in the trope Chuck selects to capture his feelings: a cocoon, which must inevitably break open, regardless of its inhabitant's desire to stay within. The metaphor of the cocoon, then, provides the same kind of anxious sense of power and stability for Chuck as Dirk's self-narration as storyless; it is a temporary means of pinning himself down while simultaneously recognizing the vulnerability of the trope that lends him momentary safety.

As the novel progresses, many of Chuck's risks continue to involve "approaching" McLeod with increasing degrees of physical closeness, while the stakes remain rejection at the hands of his stern tutor. Chuck's intimacy with McLeod deepens significantly after McLeod reveals the story behind his disfigurement to Chuck, and Chuck describes an involuntary desire to make physical contact with McLeod: "Without my volition, my hand reached towards his arm and I grasped it. He didn't move or say anything. The good half of his face was as white as paper. Then he jerked my hand off and walked out" (Holland 93). McLeod later apologizes and renews their friendship, Chuck confesses that he revealed McLeod's secret to some local boys, McLeod forgives him, and the next time they make contact it occurs—very appropriately, given Phillips' metaphor—while the two are swimming:

> I forgot he was an adult and a teacher and forty-seven years old. I even forgot what I had done to him. I forgot everything but the water and being in it and chasing and being chased, far from the shore with nothing around or moving except us. It was like flying. I thought suddenly, I'm free. And the thought was so great I poked him again on the way

> up. We swam some more, this time parallel with the shore, then played some more, then back to where we'd been (Holland 117).

Like Phillips' swimming boy, Chuck is making the risk to entrust his body to a previously unknown object; in Chuck's case, however, this object is not the water, but rather McLeod. Further, this form of this passage makes clear the pleasure Chuck derives from delay. His desire to linger in the golden cocoon with McLeod is reflected most strikingly in the repetition of the word "forgot" and the circular construction of "chasing and being chased" in addition to the final sentence, where "some more" repeats and also rhymes with "the shore," producing a repetition-like effect. The final sentence also ends with "back to where we'd been," suggesting that Chuck and McLeod's playful romp is repeated ad infinitum (or, rather, Chuck wishes it could be repeated ad infinitum).

For Chuck, touching McLeod is a pleasurable kind of risk, the consequences of which he seems to be partially unaware; McLeod, in his resistance to Chuck's touch, anticipates Chuck's own shameful and tormented response to their elliptical sex at the novel's end. McLeod, in other words, is aware that Chuck is making a series of risks through this touch: the safety of Chuck's golden cocoon, his sense of self, and the pleasure he receives from attempting to linger in a space of delay with McLeod. In another instance following the arm-grabbing incident, McLeod pulls away from Chuck: "'I like you a lot,' I [Chuck] said…I wanted to touch him…I reached over and touched his side. The hot skin was tight over his ribs. I knew then that I'd never been close to anyone in my life, not like that. And I wanted to get closer. But at that moment McLeod sat up and then stood up" (Holland 120). McLeod's response prompts Chuck to ask him "Do you think I'm a queer?" to which McLeod answers "No, I do not think you're a queer…Everybody wants and needs affection and you don't get much. Also you're a boy who badly needs a father"

(Holland 120-121). Chuck, however, seems to dismiss McLeod's suggestion, insisting that "I didn't want to think about home at all. I felt like I was in a sort of golden cocoon and I didn't want to break out of it" (Holland 121). In other words, on one level, Chuck anxiously senses the risk he is taking: disrupting the safety of his cocoon (an inevitable disruption) and actively recognizing the "world" he is risking through his desire for contact with McLeod; on another, he takes great pleasure in cocoon-dwelling with his teacher. In order to maintain this cocoon, on another occasion, Chuck himself postpones the level of physical contact that would ultimately prove too risky for him: "The sun was hot. I was still on my side, one arm under my head. Just as I was dropping off I put the other across his chest, feeling the skin and hair under my hand. A sort of an electric feeling went through me. I half sat up" (Holland 139). Here, sensing the potential for his cocoon to break, Chuck withdraws his touch and retreats to the comfort and pleasure of stasis. Chuck's physical back-and-forth with McLeod is a series of calculated, anxious, and pleasurable risks that put into play Chuck's desire for delay with his desire for a level of physical intimacy with McLeod that would, in a sense, impel him forward and away from what he perceives as a kind of safety.

Interestingly, Chuck's feeling that his desire to touch McLeod is "queer" and the electricity sparked by their contact recall an earlier moment in Holland's novel. Here, we see another kind of risk more suggestive of queer pedagogy and Britzman's notion of reading as being about "risking the self…about engaging one's own alterity and desire" ("Queer Pedagogy" 94). In this particular moment, following a lesson, Chuck expresses his distaste for poetry. McLeod responds by appealing to Chuck's fascination with airplanes, reading aloud John Gillespie Magee, Jr.'s "High Flight." Chuck responds to the poem: "It was queer, what it did to me. There were little explosions in my head and stomach and a tingling down my back. My

throat was dry. McLeod was looking at me. 'Here,' he said, holding out the book. 'Take it'" (Holland 70). Notable in this passage is Chuck's use of the word "queer" to describe his reaction to the poem, the same word he later uses in fearful response to his desire to touch McLeod. Although we could interpret his choice of "queer" to describe his bodily response to the poem to mean "strange/unusual" and the "queer" in conversation with McLeod to mean, essentially, "non-heterosexual/gay," the two "queers" nonetheless signify in excess of these easier definitions. In other words, if Chuck's desire to touch McLeod is a queer erotic longing, his response to the poem might also be erotic, where the scene of pedagogy evokes the same kind of desire—"little explosions in my head and stomach and a tingling down my back"—that is brought about by physical contact with McLeod, i.e. "a sort of an electric feeling" (Holland 70, 139).

I read this moment as a kind of risk, where Chuck, as Britzman writes, engages his "alterity and desire" and discovers, through reading, a new site of erotic contact, a new queer aspect of his self that locates desire in a moment that fuses pedagogy with poetry and a student's longing for his teacher ("Queer Pedagogy" 94).[65] Crucial, too, is how the temporality of anxiety

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[65] As Britzman writes, queer pedagogy aims "to unsettle old centerings of the self in education: to unsettle the myth of normalcy as an originally state and to unsettle the unitary subject of pedagogy" ("Queer Pedagogy" 81). Chuck's trajectory in Holland's novel—which culminates in the very kind of "unsettling" Britzman describes—could also be (re)read in light of Bersani's "Is the Rectum a Grave?" in which the author posits "a more radical disintegration and humiliation of the self," a "self-shattering into the sexual as a kind of non anecdotal self-debasement" as a lens for "transgressing…that very polarity which…may be the profound sense of both certain mystical experiences and of human sexuality" (217). Britzman channels Bersani more directly in "Between Psychoanalysis and Pedagogy" when she writes that "symbolizing uncertainty involves the work of getting to know one's emotional experience from the pain and vulnerability of learning from ambiguous experience…Paradoxically, getting to know one's emotional experience involves one with new ideas that may shatter what sentiments try to settle" (98). There is much to be said here, especially given that Holland's novel relies on Chuck's "pain and vulnerability of learning" from experience that is narrated as "ambiguous." A Bersani-inspired approach to Holland's novel, however, has more in common with the masochistic reading

is written into Chuck's response to the poem, which establishes the scene of pedagogy as one that lingers in the present in spite of its orientation towards the future. Chuck does not respond to the poem with an efficient phrase like "What it [the poem] did to me was queer," but instead he narrates "It was queer, what it did to me," which invites the reader to dwell in the multiple clauses and contemplate the ambiguous referent "it." Does the first "it" refer to the poem (i.e. the poem was queer) or Chuck's response to the poem? Does the second "it" refer to the poem, McLeod's performance of the poem, or a combination of the two? Like Chuck, the reader is momentarily placed in a space of interpretation and asked to linger inside an ambiguous, erotic response to poetry while considering the significance and implications of such a response. Here, Chuck's queerness emerges through pedagogy and reading, but crucially, the reading does not come with an "identity" per se. Instead, the erotics of reading become part and parcel with Chuck's queerness more broadly: his desire for physical contact with McLeod, the pleasure he finds in delay, and the series of risks he takes that put his sense of self into question.

The ambiguous "it" returns in the novel's much-scrutinized moment of elliptical sexual contact between Chuck and McLeod. After Chuck collapses into McLeod's arms, here's how Chuck narrates the encounter:

> I could feel his heart pounding, and then I realized it was mine. I couldn't stop shaking; in fact, I started to tremble violently. It was like everything—the water, the sun, the hours, the play, the work, the whole summer—came together. The golden cocoon had broken open and was spilling in a shower of gold.
>
> Even so, I didn't know what was happening to me until it had happened (Holland 147).

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suggested by Stockton's chapter on James than what I am attempting to do through a focus on a pedagogy of anxiety.

Here, Chuck's retrospective narration brings the tension between stasis and futurity "together" in a single moment, breaking open and spilling the golden contents of Chuck's secure cocoon, and the ambiguous "it" returns to stand in for whatever happens between Chuck and McLeod. Cart and Jenkins interpret the "it" as "a spontaneous ejaculation," but I prefer to consider instead the multiple possibilities suggested by the ambiguity of "it" (21). The next morning, Chuck seems to realize for the first time that his desire for delay was in tension with the series of risks he was taking: "…somewhere, for a long time," he narrates, "I had known—not that this would happen, but that something would happen, and then everything would be over" (Holland 148). In spite of this realization, ambiguity continues to loom large: Chuck had the knowledge "somewhere" (where?) that "something" (what?) would take place, ending "everything" (which includes what?). This ambiguity—again in the form of "it"—endures in the morning-after conversation between Chuck and McLeod:

> There is nothing in that morning's conversation that I am not bitterly ashamed of. But of all the things I said I am most ashamed of…what I said next.
>
> "What does it make you?"
>
> "I've known what I was for a long time."
>
> And so had I. Without knowing I knew it, I had known. What did that make me? I stared at him (Holland 149).

Here, the "it" again refers to something and nothing in particular: "it" is something that "makes" McLeod, and also something that Chuck "knew" and "had known," but "without knowing."[66]

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[66] This moment returns us to Britzman's suggestion that queer pedagogy pushes "thought…to think the limits of its own dominant conceptual orders," which is necessary "if new desires are to be made" ("Queer Pedagogy" 80). Here, Britzman is drawing on queer theory's legacy of probing the relationship between knowledge, ignorance, and "the will not to know," or what Sedgwick calls "the relations of the closet" (*Epistemology* 3). "Silence is rendered as pointed and

The multiple, contradictory conjugations of "to know" (continuous, preterite, past perfect) contribute to the occlusions of Holland's novel (what, exactly, does Chuck know?) while reinforcing Chuck's sense of temporal collapse: the end of delay—and, perhaps, McLeod's final "lesson" to Chuck—marks an anxious orientation to past, present, and future.

This is the moment in Holland's novel that some critics take issue with: we're never told what lies on the other side of Chuck's cocoon; or to grow this banal metaphor, we're never shown the butterfly. It remains unclear—or, at least, unspoken—what McLeod "is," how Chuck understands himself or what he has become by the novel's end, and how Chuck's sexuality will presumably play out after the story's conclusion.

While Fuoss reads this as a negative and potentially harmful lack of resolution (164), I see this as an appropriate culmination of the anxious pedagogy that has been taking place between teacher and pupil: Chuck risks his self and his world, trusts his body to the unknown, and emerges with an ambiguous and unstable relationship to sexuality. In Britzman's words, Chuck is "refusing to secure thought," denying the reader an easy resolution or way of understanding his sexuality and desire (94). Instead, we are left with a sense of queer desire as something in excess of sexual identity per se: desire in Holland's novel emerges through a complex combination of pedagogy and the erotics of reading, sideways relations between teacher and student, and an anxious longing to dwell in a golden cocoon that constantly, through touch, risks eruption. Although it fails to provide resolution, *The Man Without a Face* succeeds, by virtue of this failure, in providing a model of queerness that speaks to the risky but productive "open waters" of sexuality. And, crucially, it is pedagogy that lends shape and temporality to

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performative as speech, in relations around the closet," she famously points out, "[which] highlights more broadly the fact that ignorance is as potent and as multiple a thing there as is knowledge" (*Epistemology* 4).

Chuck and his relationship with McLeod. Maybe the pedagogy of queer YA isn't necessarily what Hartinger claims it to be: the straightforward, resolute representation of non-heterosexuality. Instead, perhaps it's more along the lines of what Chuck experiences when McLeod reads the poem: a feeling of ambiguous queerness, but also the desire to dwell in this queerness, in the anxious space between delay and movement, to take pleasure in anxiety and ambiguity without fashioning them into something that means in any straightforward manner. It is possible, too, that this queer pedagogy extends to the reader, who may have the potential to learn something from the pedagogical relationship represented in the novel.

Chuck has much in common with *Baby Be-Bop*'s Dirk. Dirk's determination to be storyless is a desire for stability and delay, similar to Chuck's golden cocoon, which dodges and prolongs Dirk's trajectory towards the queer question mark represented by his sexual fantasies. Like Chuck, Dirk risks this space of ostensible safety—his self-perception as storyless—in favour of the open waters of queerness. Dirk also undergoes a significant transformation through reading that takes place in pedagogical space. Although *Baby Be-Bop* does not have a pedagogical relationship at its core as Holland's novel does, Dirk's primary engagement with reading—his de- and re-storying—nonetheless unfolds during a pedagogical encounter with the series of ghosts who teach him that stories constitute his primary mode for self-understanding, and he has the ability to re-work these stories to a certain degree. True to the characteristics of anxious temporality as outlined in this chapter, this moment is caught up in a tension between delay and futurity: it takes place in an magical realist out-of-time, ghostly space, yet results in Dirk's forward-oriented movement towards the identity "gay."

This moment of ostensible sexual resolution is where Dirk and Chuck seem to part ways: Chuck's sexuality, as we know, remains occluded at novel's end, whereas Dirk resolutely

declares himself to be "gay." On one hand, this telos appears to deliver a kind of resolved and transparent sexual identity. On the other, however, if we read the novels sequentially according to their order in the *Dangerous Angels* collection, we already know that Dirk's sexuality bleeds outside of "gay" given that he has sex with Weetzie Bat and may, in fact, be Cherokee Bat's father. Although Dirk has a long-term and monogamous partner in Duck for the balance of Block's series, we are nonetheless presented with a moment where Dirk's story of "being gay" is inadequate to describe the material practices of his sexuality, regardless of how quickly Dirk's gayness is reconstituted as his primary sexual narrative following his series of encounters with Weetzie and Duck. Although he declares himself to be gay, Dirk's sexuality remains ambiguous: his gayness is a story that he assembles about himself that is nonetheless subject to being perpetually reconstituted, reread, and renarrated.

In both novels, moments of anxious pedagogy emerge from sexuality. In "Precocious Education," Britzman writes:

> [O]ur sexuality gives us the instability of curiosity, the desire to learn, and the passion to ignore all that stands in the way of learning. Without sexuality there is no curiosity. The question of sexuality is central to…crafting a self who can invent, over and over again, the courage to stand up for the self, to feel passionately for the conditions of others, to create a life from the experiments of learning to love and making from this learning to love a love of learning…[W]e must also note that…[s]exuality is also the place where injustices, anxieties, and modes of aggression attach and become enacted (39).

Taken together, Holland and Block's novels demonstrate how critics' anxious call for certain kinds of resolved, transparent LGBT visibilities in queer YA not only flattens the queer potential of early novels like *The Man Without a Face*, but also ignores the critical and transformative

capacity of pedagogy and reading—in other words, reading for and learning about those anxious yet pleasurable intervals, risky moments, and spaces of delay where identification is postponed, perhaps indefinitely, even in cases where a character like Dirk appears to have achieved sexual resolution. Queer YA, then, does not necessarily do the pedagogical work that critics claim it does and/or want it to do: instead of sitting comfortably in its sexually resolved adulthood, queer YA circulates within an affective economy of anxiety, remaining invested in the dwellings and delays of its youth, in occlusions and ambivalences, its passionate attachments, desires, and fears. "When education is reduced to its most literal time," Britzman asserts, "it collapses into phantasy and idealization to foreclose our capacity to think the thought of education. Lost as well is the question of why any education is an encounter with what is not yet, an experience with what is most incomplete in us" ("The Very Thought" 6). Here, Britzman points out precisely why an alternative approach to pedagogy is so essential: a pedagogy of anxiety brings to light those productive incompletenesses and tense temporalities that critics of queer YA tend to overlook.

In the following chapter, I will carry these ideas forth to explore more thoroughly the question of genre, and how some queer YA novels work to disrupt the boundaries and borders around the very genre within which they operate.

## Chapter Three

Turning Back and (Not) Coming Out: The Anxious Relations of Queer YA

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"Turning back to adolescence is a seemingly mandatory gesture in any narrative of gay or lesbian identity. In its classic form, the 'coming-out' narrative, this return typically involves a retrospective exegesis, from the perspective of the 'out' adult gay or lesbian subject, in which virtually every aspect of his or her adolescent life can be understood in terms of its relation to the eventual realization of homosexual identity—a realization that is both epistemological and narratological."

- Angus Gordon, "Turning Back: Adolescence, Narrative, and Queer Theory" (1999).

"And because there is no one right way to be (or write) gay, a good coming-out novel isn't prescriptive; it recognizes that there are infinite paths toward coming out, even if they all share some basic similarities."

- Claire Gross, "What Makes a Good YA Coming Out Novel?" (2013).

### The Queer Double-Take of YA

As Angus Gordon points out in the above quotation, "coming-out" narratives are bound up with a retrospective temporality, given the position of the adult who reflects on her/his adolescence. In queer YA, this position might be held by the author, who may enact a kind of quasi-autobiographical turning back through the act of writing the book;[67] the reader, who is

[67] See, for example, Sanchez and Sipe, in which Sanchez describes the inspiration for his YA novel *The God Box* as being "my own life journey of reconciling my sexuality and my spirituality" (268).

invited to reflect on her/his coming-out vis-à-vis the text;[68] and/or the novel's characters, who themselves might come out in the book's very pages. Claire Gross describes a not-prescriptiveness for the "good coming-out novel," which simultaneously inscribes "YA Coming Out Novels" as a genre steeped in the very retrospective gesture that Gordon describes and "out" as its ultimate end result. For Gross, there is an identifiable cluster of texts invested in turning back, and there is also a "good" way of writing about this process.

Critics of queer YA are also engaged in a kind of turning back, as I illustrated in my previous chapters: a turning back towards the "adolescence" or "childhood" of the now-come-of-age genre of queer YA to reflect upon its ostensible thematic growth. Heather Love might describe this retrospection in affective terms as a "feeling backwards," wherein critics such as Cart, Jenkins, and Hartinger explore the "backwards feelings—shame, depression, regret" of early queer texts, but unlike Love, these critics do so for the purpose of affirming the pedagogically superior state of contemporary queer YA (8). Love—in her 2007 book *Feeling Backwards: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*—turns back to early queer texts that seem saturated with negative affect, self-loathing, loneliness and isolation.[69] Unlike Cart and Jenkins, however, Love embraces these "dark, ambivalent" texts, arguing that "such representations constitute a crucial 'archive of feeling,' an account of the corporeal and psychic costs of homophobia" (4). For Love, these "earlier forms of feeling, imagination, and community" enable us to critique "structures of inequality in the present" without subscribing unequivocally to a narrative of progression when it comes to queer rights and the normalization of gay and lesbian

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[68] This is perhaps most evident not in a traditional book, but in the *It Gets Better* project, as discussed in chapter four: the project asks (adult) readers to reflect upon and re-narrate their coming out and "getting better" stories for young queer audiences.

[69] Love focuses in particular on authors Walter Pater, Willa Cather, Radclyffe Hall, and Sylvia Townsend Warner. Like Stockton, she does not engage with texts written for young audiences.

identity; to this end, Love "insist[s] on the importance of clinging to ruined identities and to histories of injury" (30).

This chapter partly draws its inspiration from Love's analysis of the ambivalence that constitutes the relationship between queerness and the acts of looking and feeling backwards. As Love points out, "although many queer critics take exception to the idea of a linear, triumphalist view of history, we are in practice deeply committed to the notion of progress; despite our reservations, we just cannot stop dreaming of a better life for queer people" (3). As a result of these investments, Love maintains, "we find ourselves deeply unsettled by our identifications with…texts or figures that refuse to be redeemed," such as—in the context of my dissertation—those early, ambiguous works of queer YA that refuse resolution (8). Early novels like *The Man Without a Face* and *I'll Get There* circulate in the anxious affective economy of contemporary queer YA in a dual sense: they are deployed by critics in attempts shore up the "good coming-out novel" as something that moves beyond hopelessness and lack of resolution (i.e., there is no "coming out"), but these novels simultaneously destabilize the notion of an affectively coherent queer YA genre through their resistance to contemporary critical standards. Like Love, I am interested in how "queers have embraced backwardness in many forms: in celebrations of perversion, in defiant refusals to grow up, in explorations of haunting and memory, and in stubborn attachments to lost objects"; these forms of backwardness, in the context of my project, seem to be the source of much critical anxiety surrounding queer YA (7). As I have already begun investigating, queer YA is rife with many of these backwards and sideways queer attachments: especially characters who desire risk and delay and don't "come out," as I illustrated through Holland's *The Man Without a Face*.

Unlike Love, my focus is not solely on those dark feelings "tied to the experience of social exclusion and to the historical 'impossibility' of same-sex desire" (4). These feelings are, of course, crucial to many works of queer YA—especially earlier texts like Donovan and Holland's novels—where shame, despair, and loneliness pervade. I am, however, interested in a different kind of looking: what I call the queer double-take of YA, a look that follows the anxious rhythm that I established in my previous chapters, a rhythm that alternately stalls and starts, that emerges from the tension between a desire for delay and a sense of forward movement.[70] In Gordon's description, turning back serves as an attempt to buttress and stabilize a present identity through retrospection about adolescence; this turn is mirrored by queer YA critics who turn back in order to affirm the present state of queer YA, which hinges on visible and resolved sexual identities. Queer double-takes—the anxious turns of queer YA—put into question the integrity of queer YA as a genre that coheres around resolution and visibility, and are additional components of the alternative approach to queer YA that I have described as a pedagogy of anxiety. Many queer YA characters struggle to find a genre through which they can understand themselves: they turn to different and multiple genres, inside to the genre in which they are ostensibly located, and sideways to creative forms of relationality that exceed "coming-out" in Gross' terms, demonstrating that genre is more slippery than her "YA Coming-Out Novel" umbrella might suggest. This chapter investigates those characters who turn backwards and sideways to relationships with delay, animals, cousins, and alternative ways of thinking and queerly reading themselves through genres including comedy, tragedy, and the YA problem

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[70] Recall, from my first chapter, Hurley's analysis of Amy DiGennaro's illustration *Running with M.E.:* "a vision of childhood and its discontents: a moving set of contradictions mobilized through a child looking forward and looking back, while being pulled and propelled into the space emanating from the vessel before her" ("Childhood" 2).

novel itself. The texts in this chapter have a peculiar relationship to the genre of queer YA: in many ways, they are all quintessential problem novels; in others, they subvert problem novel tropes and the linear temporality of the "coming-out novel" through their anxious relationship to the genre and their characters' reliance on queer relations and texts outside of the genre in order to make sense of themselves. As in my previous chapter, these texts challenge the linear narrative of progression in which many queer YA critics are invested; they are filled with fascinatingly messy "possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning"—to cite Sedgwick on queerness—that demonstrate how queer YA enacts its own anxiety surrounding the way critics articulate its utility and establish its boundaries (*Tendencies* 8).

In his examination of the "network of power relations" that "shape[s] fictional characters," Fuoss identifies genre as an integral player (169). "Characters in a tragedy," he explains, "are in some measure predetermined by their appearance within a tragic text. Similarly, homosexual characters appearing in the problem-realism genre are in some measure predetermined by the very nature of the genre in which they operate" (170). He continues to argue that "the temptation to stereotype homosexual characters in problem-realism novels" emerges "from the very nature of 'realism' itself" (170). What Fuoss fails to address, however, is that although texts might find themselves classified in a genre that carries certain expectations, these texts do not always do the work of that particular genre. As I will illustrate, what some queer YA texts paradoxically evince is a subversive relationship to their own genre and a continuing investment in other genres. In this chapter, I look at three primary kinds of anxious turns—of "double-takes"—that contribute to this work of generic subversion, not all of which are retrospective or historical as in Love's analysis. First, I explore the anxious double-takes of

queer YA characters who turn to alternative, "sideways" relations en route to—or in avoidance of—something like "coming out," or the assumption of an LGBT identity. These double-takes evince the same kind of anxious temporality seen in my previous chapter, where characters like Chuck express a desire for delay while simultaneously contending with a sense of forward motion. In this chapter, however, I am primarily interested in exploring which queer objects of desire function as stand ins for and/or metaphors of delay and anxiety: dogs, theatre, cousins, among others. Second, building on my analysis of *Weetzie Bat*'s Dirk, I look at characters who turn to particular texts in order to make sense of themselves and the world around them; in this chapter, however, these scenes of reading offer a more decisive critique of the genre in which these texts are located, and present readers with strategies for subversive reading. Finally, more broadly, and building upon my previous point, I am interested in those moments when queer YA seems to critique itself from within: I look in particular at James St. James' *Freak Show*, which turns back to previous iterations of the "problem-realism" novel and takes up tropes found in novels like Donovan's in order to camp and critique the same genre within which it is ostensibly located.

In addition to Donovan and St. James' novels—published in 1969 and 2007, respectively—this chapter includes analyses of Shyam Selvadurai's *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* (2005) and Elizabeth Hand's *Illyria* (2010). I proceed through the chapter more-or-less chronologically, first turning back to Donovan's novel to establish its "problem-realism" tropes as foundational to those texts that followed it, while also arguing that the novel is more complicated than critics have given it credit for. Initially, what intrigued me about Donovan, Selvadurai, and Hand's texts is that they all draw on Shakespeare to reinforce their central themes and provide their characters with narratives to read themselves through and in opposition

to. In earlier drafts of this dissertation, I argued that Shakespeare is a metaphor for the delay of "getting there," the trip to bodily queerness/gay identity and the many shapes this might take, but never the arrival.[71] Shakespeare, I maintained, is a space that characters turn to in order to negotiate their relationships to growing up and feeling queer. Since the Bard is undeniably central to the double-takes in these novels, I still spend some time later in this chapter briefly exploring what function Shakespeare as "space" performs (and fails to perform) in these texts. However, I principally focus on how Selvadurai and Hand's texts contain tropes and double-takes that both reiterate the queer "problem-realism" genre as established by Donovan while also illustrating their anxious fit within this same genre.[72] Selvadurai's novel, on the one hand, provides an interesting counterpoint to Donovan's in that it is a rare example of a North American-published queer YA text that features a host of non-white characters and is set in a different cultural context: Sri Lanka. Along these lines, I observe, it is noteworthy that the novel's protagonist initially turns toward and anxiously identifies with/in opposition to Shakespeare's *Othello*—a text with close ties to Britain, Sri Lanka's former colonizer—which ultimately proves inadequate for the transformative function it seems to promise, a function that

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[71] In his introduction to *Shakesqueer*, Madhavi Menon argues for the "disorienting experience" of detaching queerness from "its primary affiliation with the body and expand[ing] the reach of queerness beyond and through the body to a host of other possible and disturbing configurations" (4). Through the eyes of this kind of disembodied queer reader, Shakespeare "is not a post-nineteenth-century homosexual, and he never comes out as gay—or, rather, we cannot tell, and that is what makes him so queer" (Menon 4). It is the fact that "queerness as homosexuality deems him to be such an unlikely candidate," Menon maintains, that "Shakespeare is a prime candidate for the expansion of queer theory" (4). Shakespeare, then, is trapped in a queer kind of suspended animation, or delay: like the characters in early YA novels on the cusp of gay visibility, his "coming out" (and that of his texts) is perpetually postponed.

[72] I am grateful to Nat Hurley for pointing out, in her review of this chapter, that Shakespeare's presence in these texts might be indicative of nothing more than curricular canon. Nevertheless, I make a case later in the chapter that Shakespeare is called upon by Donovan, Selvadurai, and Hand to fulfill a particular transformative function in their novels.

seems at first glance to deliver more thoroughly in Donovan and Hand's novels. *Illyria*, on the other hand, is interesting for three primary reasons: it does not have same-sex desire at its centre, yet it returns us to the problem of genre in its reiteration of many queer YA conventions established by Donovan; next, it illustrates the erotics and desire associated with a temporality of anxiety; further, it brings us into the adulthood of its characters, illustrating what the "there" of their "trip" looks like, something unseen in these other texts and uncommon in queer YA more broadly. Finally, in its campy subversion of queer YA tropes, St. James' *Freak Show* is a fitting conclusion to this chapter: it demonstrates most thoroughly the instability of those tropes and conventions that have been central to queer YA since its inception.

So, I begin by turning back to where queer YA itself is said to begin: Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*. The novel's title is an unfulfilled promise: we never learn where or what "there" is, only what the trip entails, and this particular trip is filled with delay, metaphor, and sideways relations with and through a reading of *Julius Caesar*, a phallic dog, and what Nat Hurley calls lingering in the "murky middle," i.e. disregarding and/or ignoring parts of a narrative that do not serve a particular interpretation or affective response—typically endings—while choosing to prioritize and dwell in other moments in the story ("Perversions" 124). I will illustrate how Donovan's novel establishes queer YA conventions for decades to come; the novel also suggests a pedagogy of anxiety in its potential to teach readers how to read for the novel's subversion of the very conventions it seems to set up.

**Caesarian Sections and Phallic Dogs: Reading for the Murky Middle in *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip.***

The first-ever North American YA novel with visibly gay themes, Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* features two protagonists—introverted Davy and Altschuler,

the charismatic "kid philosopher," as Davy describes him—whose relationship is catalyzed by their class production of *Julius Caesar* (197). Davy and Altschuler first meet after Davy's grandmother, who raised him, passes away, and Davy is sent to live in New York with his alcoholic mother. Between his troubled mother and distant father, Davy's closest friend prior to Altschuler is his precious dachshund, Fred. The two adolescents form their initial bond over *Caesar*, and its theme of betrayal also frames their relationship, which bleeds into the physical one night when Altschuler sleeps over at Davy's house (the details of what happens are vague, as in *The Man Without a Face*). Davy struggles with the event, narrating: "There's nothing wrong with Altschuler and me, is there? I know it's not like making out with a girl. It's just something that happened. It's not dirty, or anything like that. It's all right, isn't it?" (Donovan 161). Shortly thereafter, Davy and Altschuler sample some of Davy's mother's whiskey and end up napping on the floor in close proximity. When Davy's mother returns home and finds the boys asleep together, she assumes she's catching them post-coitus, and she flies into a panicked rage. In the confusion that follows, Davy's mother takes Fred for a walk, and Fred slips off his leash and into the street where he is struck by a car and killed. Davy becomes furious with Altschuler, interpreting Fred's death as a direct outcome of their tryst. Eventually, Donovan's novel "ends a bit anticlimactically," as Cart and Jenkins describe it, "with the two boys agreeing that they can 'respect' each other" (12).

Kathleen T. Horning points out that at the time of its publication *I'll Get There* "was both highly regarded and recommended for young readers," and earned mentions on the *New York Times* and *School Library Journal* Best of 1969 Book Lists (225). Only recently, she continues, have "critics have been less kind to the book, pointing out that it falls into the same trap many early gay teen novels did, which was to punish the main character with a car accident leading to

death or serious injury" (225). Horning further mentions that critics fault the book for "depicting gayness as a choice or suggesting that being gay is just a passing phase," and emphasizing Davy's guilt after his romp with Altschuler, "especially when he feels responsible for his dog's death as a result" (226). Indeed, Hanckel and Cunningham identify the ostensibly harmful "salient characteristics" of the first four novels with gay themes, including *I'll Get There*: "Being gay has no lasting significance and/or costs someone a terrible price. Not one plot has a happy ending in which the protagonists meet hostile pressures successfully and go on to find fulfillment and a supporting relationship based on love and respect. For gay adolescents the negative impact of these novels cannot be minimized" (532-533). Cart and Jenkins' more recent critique is along these same lines. They point out how "a cause and effect relationship is implied between homosexuality and being the child of divorced parents," and argue that the book's "most distressing" aspect is "the close—even casual—connection [the novel] makes between homosexuality and death" (15). And in perhaps the most spirited critique of *I'll Get There*, British critic and novelist James Rees writes: "Donovan suggests that teenage homosexuality is so totally unacceptable, socially and psychologically, that any young homosexual is likely to have his fears and worries increased rather than reduced, and the prejudice of the heterosexual reader against homosexuals is reinforced" (qtd in Cart and Jenkins 14). While Cart and Jenkins assess Rees' critique as "a bit harsh," they concur that "it's hard to imagine any gay or lesbian teen finding much comfort or support in this novel" (14). The overall verdict from many contemporary critics, then, is that *I'll Get There*'s approach to sexuality—although groundbreaking for its time—is outdated and intensely problematic in the troubling, contradictory, and ultimately unresolved way it deals with Davy's experiences.

*I'll Get There* does indeed contain a number of stereotypes (alcoholic mother, distant father) and suggest an unfortunate causal connection between homosexuality and death, sadness, and loneliness. But while the novel may not satisfy the visibility and hope-oriented demands of contemporary critics of queer YA, these same critics ignore the fact that *I'll Get There* is also a book about Davy's desire for relations in excess of "coming out" as gay—with delay and his dog, Fred—and his anxious relationship to the queer question mark that he grows towards, represented by Altschuler. Critics are quick to label Davy as "lonely" (as he is described on the book's back cover) or even, in Hartinger's words, "emotionally repressed" (204) and demonstrating "emotional disengagement with other human beings" (206). While we can certainly infer that Davy is lonely due to an overall absence of friends in his life, he seems quite content with the sideways companionship of his dog, Fred, who serves as phallic surrogate for the queer question mark of (proto)homosexuality. Theirs is a sideways relationship based on the temporality of anxiety, a central rhythm for Davy and the novel's other double-takes that become pedagogical exercises in reading for *I'll Get There*'s characters and readers.

Recall Stockton's eloquent description of what it feels like to grow towards a question mark, desiring the sideways twisting of time or its complete stoppage ("*Lost*" 425). Davy evinces such powerful desires for delay, stasis, and dwelling throughout the novel; this is a boy, after all, who befriends a stuffed coyote while visiting the Museum of Civilization with his father:

> I put my hand up to the glass in front of the coyote.
>
> "Hello," I say."
>
> "He's stuffed, Davy."
>
> "Sure, I know."
>
> I put my face against the glass.

> "Hello."
>
> Father walks away.
>
> "Hello, coyote," I say again. "What was your name?"
>
> The coyote just looks at me.
>
> "You must have had a name. You could have been a pet. Some Indian kid's pet. Were you?"
>
> He doesn't move, but I won't take my eyes off him. There's no one else in the corridor with the stuffed animals now.
>
> "Coyote," I say, "do you want to be petted?" Of course he just looks at me.
>
> "Do you?"
>
> I think he sees me. Honestly. There is something in his eyes which makes me believe that he understands that I am there and talking to him as a friend. I swear that he understands that I am his friend (Donovan 67-68).[73]

Here is Davy's ideal friend: one that is stuffed and static, that "sees" and "understands" Davy's longing for the same kind of stasis that it makes manifest. Moreover, Davy imagines the coyote as "some Indian kid's pet," projecting onto the animal a kind of double-stasis: the coyote is both literally frozen, and preserved as an exoticized object of American pre-history. Here, Davy demonstrates a desire for delay and a desire to turn back to a time far from his current position and trajectory.

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[73] *I'll Get There*'s stuffed coyote recalls my discussion of *Baby Be-Bop* in the previous chapter, wherein I point out that Dirk associates his desire "to have no story at all" with "the stuffed dog he and Pup had seen on the Venice boardwalk" (Block 411). Equally significant is "Pup," the undeniably canine name of Dirk's childhood crush (what to make of Dirk's longing for a stuffed Pup?). Although Stockton's *The Queer Child* explores the sideways relation between queer children and dogs, there is clearly more to be said on the provocative topic of dead/frozen/stuffed animals as the companions and/or objects of desire of queer YA's children and youth. Unfortunately, this discussion lies outside the scope of this project.

Fred, though, is the central vessel of Davy's longing for delay. For if Davy feels himself growing towards a question-marked "there" because of his desire for Altschuler, his present (the "trip") is defined in part by an eroticized sideways relation with a phallic dog that both foresees and forestalls his queer future. Stockton's *The Queer Child* contains a provocative chapter entitled "Why the (Lesbian) Child Requires an Interval of Animal," in which she explores how "animal/child affectionate bondings can offer opportunities…for children's motions inside their delay, making delay a sideways growth the child in part controls for herself, in ways confounding her parents and her future" (90). For Stockton, "the dog is a living, growing metaphor for the child itself…and for the child's own propensities to stray by making the most of its sideways growth. The dog is a vehicle for the child's strangeness. It is the child's companion in queerness" (*Queer Child* 90). Davy indeed enters "into an interval of animal," as Stockton describes, but Fred is a different breed of interval-agent that both permits Davy's delay and propels him into other queer relations.

On numerous occasions, Davy's first-person descriptions of Fred are overtly sexual, reinforcing the dachshund's status as a kind of substitute penis, a placeholder until the real thing is attained. In transparently erotic terms, Davy recounts how he received Fred as a gift from his grandmother:

> … when I came home from school, I heard a funny noise in the kitchen. I ran back to see what it was. There was Grandmother bending over a box filled with newspapers, stroking about ten inches of black dachshund. It was Fred. She picked him up and handed him to me.
>
> "Happy birthday, David."

> My eyes must have gotten as wide as two tennis balls. I reached over to get Fred. He was wiggling in Grandmother's hands. As I held him to me he squirted all over my jacket.
>
> Grandmother and I laughed. Fred, the nut, he just licked away at my face (Donovan 15).

The whole scene is indisputably coital, from Davy's grandmother's fluffing or "stroking" of the "ten inches" of penis-puppy, to Davy's ecstatic response, to Fred's squirming and ejaculation when he first makes contact with Davy, all of which establishes not only Davy's intimate sideways relation with his dog/lover, but also how the penis-puppy (a dachshund, to top it off: the breed frequently referred to as a "wiener dog") anticipates Davy's orientation toward a question mark that may itself be phallus-shaped. Davy's narration, in other words, transforms Fred into his lover and allows Davy to delay the arrival of a human male lover (i.e. Altschuler) while experiencing and describing a level of intimacy with his canine companion that does not necessitate a confrontation with the looming question mark of the titular "there." In other moments between the two, Davy describes sweet-talk with Fred as "lovemaking" (Donovan 52, 53) and the dog's excitement at seeing him as "a state of ecstasy" (Donovan 147), while his cuddle sessions with Fred are recounted such that, taken out of context, they could be (mis)interpreted as describing a human lover: "[Fred] looks up at me, his dumb face begging for a kiss, so I bend over and pull him into my lap. He cradles his head under my chin, and in two seconds his eyes are closed and he's breathing heavily with the kind of instant and total sleep Fred seems able to fall into every time he's contented" (Donovan 10). Here, Davy narrates with an attention to intimate detail absent elsewhere in the book; his voice during moments of contact with Altschuler remains aloof, while his intimacy with Fred is deeply-felt and richly described.

Ironically, the same Fred that enables Davy's delay also propels Davy forward into Altschuler's arms, yet fittingly, in this moment, the link between penis-dog and male lover is

firmly established. For it is Fred who seduces Davy and Altschuler into kissing for the first time, luring the boys into a human/canine ménage-à-trois that irreversibly re-orients Davy's sideways movements and forces him to confront the question mark while still craving delay. The groundbreaking (in the novel's context, and the queer YA genre as a whole) kiss occurs after Davy and Altschuler are romping with Fred around Davy's mother's apartment, playing a game of tug-of-war that culminates in the boys lying side-by-side on the floor. Davy narrates the experience in staccato sentences that seem to echo a nervous heartbeat, standing in sharp contrast to the fluid comfort with which he details his moments with Fred:

> I close my eyes. I feel unusual. Lying there. Close to Altschuler. I don't want to get up. I want to stay lying there. I feel a slight shiver and shake from it. Not cold though. Unusual. So I open my eyes. Altschuler is still lying there too. He looks at me peculiarly, and I'm sure I look at him the same way. Suddenly Fred jumps in between us. First he licks my face, then Altschuler's, and back and forth between us. I think that this unusual feeling I have will end, but in a minute the three of us are lying there, our heads together. I guess I kiss Altschuler and he kisses me….It just happens. And when it stops we sit up and turn away from each other. Fred has trotted off, maybe tired of both of us by now (Donovan 149-150).

Child's companion in queerness, indeed. Here, Fred sets in motion the events that will bring about his own death: a sleepover with Altschuler that results in more intimacy (details omitted), the catastrophic incident with the whiskey, and the untimely walk with Davy's mom that sees Fred crushed under the wheels of a car, "not making the slightest move now," as Davy describes it: "He's not moving at all. I can feel him not moving" (176). Dead, Fred embodies the stasis he has hitherto represented as metaphor: although Davy can still "feel him," the sensation is no

longer a sideways motion, but rather the stillness of death. While critics argue that Fred is killed to fulfill the destiny of most animals in early queer YA, i.e. to demonstrate that bad things happen to pets in the company of queer desire (recall poor Moxie, Chuck's cat in *The Man Without a Face*), Fred must die as sideways relation to expedite Davy's trajectory towards the titular "there," which nonetheless remains a question mark by the novel's end.

By the end of the novel, in spite of the elimination-castration of his most loving lateral relation and his quasi-reconciliation with Altschuler, Davy's forward motion remains a question mark: the story's end does not bring a "there," but simply more "trip." Readers bear witness to the return of the stuffed coyote, this time with Davy in a frustrated and disturbed Altschuler's company:

> Altschuler looks very close at the coyote. He tells me that it is a nice coyote but that I shouldn't talk to stuffed animals.
>
> "What the hell do you mean I shouldn't talk to stuffed animals? Look at that animal. Look into his eyes. He sees me. He understands me."
>
> "Those eyes are glass. Everyone knows that."
>
> "They aren't," I yell. "This coyote is a strange creature. He understands. I know he does."
>
> "He's dead and stuffed! Are you nuts?"
>
> "He's a pet. He was somebody's pet, and he will be a pet forever. Why don't you get lost in some dinosaur bones if you don't want to look at the coyote?"
>
> "You're nuts to think stuffed animals understand you" (Donovan 195-196).

While Altschuler protests Davy's connection with the stuffed coyote, Davy remains unconvinced: he insists upon a mutual understanding between the permanently static animal and himself. It is significant that (1) this episode occurs in the novel's last four pages, and (2) is

unresolved: Altschuler does not succeed in convincing Davy that relationships with humans are superior to relationships with dead animals. Immediately after the coyote incident, Davy and Altschuler discuss "this queer business" and the "peculiar night" they shared together (Donovan 197). While Davy insists on a connection between their encounter and Fred's death, Altschuler insists: "Go ahead and feel guilty if you want to. I don't.…If you think it's dirty or something like that, I wouldn't do it again. If I were you" (Donovan 197). After a pause, Davy double-takes, moving the conversation from the stasis of the coyote to the forward motions of growing up: "I guess some day we'll be old, like our parents," he says suddenly (Donovan 198). The novel ends shortly thereafter with its much-criticized ambiguous ending:

> "Who do you want to be like?" Altschuler asks.
>
> "Me," I guess. "And guys like my grandmother. There was a great old girl. She was real stiff by nature, but she had respect for me, and I respected her. It was the same way with Fred too. We respected each other."
>
> "I respected Wilkins," Altschuler says [referring to his best friend who died of cancer].
>
> "I guess we could respect each other," I say. "Do you think so?"
>
> "Sure," Altschuler says (Donovan 198-199).

Of course, the perceptive reader will recognize that the boys have just used the word "respect" to describe their most intimate and loving relationships, which deserve far more effusive terms: respect, here, means far more than it seems. But regardless, thus anxiously ends "the trip": with a boy refusing to relinquish his sideways relation with a dead coyote while still recognizing that he will grow forward into old age, and two boy-lovers agreeing to "respect" each other when, in fact, they probably mean something more entirely. We end, thus, with the

promise of more "trip" and nothing close to a "there": an unresolved and unresolvable juxtaposition of stasis and growth that leaves dangling a big, queer question mark.

The final coyote debate echoes exchanges between Davy and Altschuler throughout the entire novel, many of which are debates over reading and interpretation that rely on several historical texts, including *Julius Caesar*.[74] In the *Caesar* scene, Altschuler expresses his desire to read the play against the grain, resistantly: he wants the class production to represent Brutus as a hero and have Davy portray Caesar as a loathsome villain. Further, Altschuler wants to truncate the narrative in such a way that Caesar's murder becomes the play's conclusion, so the audience would never witness Brutus' downfall and eventual death. "Altschuler spent so much time convincing everyone that Caesar was an old bastard," as Davy narrates, "that the good-looking kid playing Mark Antony, who was dumb, couldn't think up any reasons for honoring Caesar's memory. The play would end with my death, everyone agreed. Everyone but Miss Stuart" (109). In addition to agreeing to an unconventional representation of its main characters, the class further consents to shorten the story in such a way that it ends with the middle, causing the narrative to signify quite differently. The production of Caesar is followed by a dream sequence that takes place, significantly, in the middle of the novel: immediately after the play and shortly before Davy and Altschuler kiss for the first time. In this scene, the novel's queer double-take is premised on the same anxious temporality and rhythm as Fred: a tension between delay and

[74] Davy and Altschuler's debate over the representation Caesar and Brutus' characters is one of many examples of unresolved conversations about interpretation in the book. The two boys also quarrel over who should be considered the protagonist in *Androcles and the Lion* (Donovan 145) and spar over the significance of Fred's death, with Davy insisting "It was because of what we did, you dumb bastard!" while Altschuler maintains that "It had nothing to do with us" (Donovan 185). At one point early in the novel, Altschuler revealingly self-defines as an "agnostic"; like the novel itself, he will never arrive at a definitive conclusion (Donovan 84).

forward motion, sideways relations and forward growth towards a looming question mark; between a focus on the "trip" versus an investment in a destination, a "there."

Davy's dream puts the novel's tension between delay and growth into clear juxtaposition as he narrates:

> I was walking along the beach at home, my real home, and I never seemed to stop walking. The beach isn't that long in real life, so it wasn't my very own and familiar beach. It was an imaginary beach. But I thought it was the very one I used to take Fred to. At least I thought it was that beach in the beginning of the dream because naturally the little bastard was trotting along beside me. Otherwise I wouldn't have been at the beach. It was late in the year, and the only time I went there was to walk Fred. So the dream started out to be a recollection of the good, free walks I used to have with Fred. We started out OK (Donovan 119-120).

Here, Davy takes a long time to go precisely nowhere as he establishes the setting for his dream: just as he "never seemed to stop walking," he never seems to stop trying to determine what beach was represented in his dream and why. His repetition of the word "beach," the circular structure of the paragraph (he begins with a description of the dream, and then returns to "we started out" at the end), and the way his narration starts and stalls repeatedly all evince the temporality of anxiety. Davy continues:

> But after a while, as the beach got longer and longer and less the beach I knew but some other beach, *the* beach, the one that rims the beautiful ocean that people think about, the one without seaweed and jellyfish, poor Fred wasn't in the picture anymore. I was. Just me. And the great expanse of sand and sea. And me running along that beach sometimes throwing myself in the sand and flinging it up in the air and sometimes splashing in the

> water that tickled my feet. I took off my clothes in the dream and then ran along the beach. I ran along the very rim of the tide, and it became windy and the sand blew all over me. I threw myself on the beach because the sand began to sting me as it blew against my body….I think the wind stopped. Or maybe I stopped it with some miracle which dreams make me think I have a supply of. Whatever the reason, I did get up, and I did walk back, and Fred did trot into the picture I was dreaming about, and the beach did get smaller, and I must have found my clothes, and it all came out OK in the end (Donovan 120-121).

In this latter portion of the dream description, we get much of the same starting-and-stopping, repetitive narration as we do in the first part: "the beach" is repeated, as is the verb "run" in various forms, yet the circular nature of the dream (always returning to Fred and being "OK" at the beginning and the end) gives a sense of motion without progress, of delayed movement, of a trip that never arrives *there*, wherever there may be.

Also key is the way Davy introduces the dream, with instructions for readers about how they should read the dream, if at all: "The next part isn't part of the story," Davy claims, "so it is all right to skip over it. It's about what happened to me inside, after just a few weeks of being away from my real home and being in New York. I dreamed some of these things, and some of them are real. It doesn't matter which are which" (Donovan 119). In his essay, Hartinger addresses this moment in the story: "Unreliable narrator that [Davy] is," he writes, "we ignore him, because we know instinctively that we're about to hear something that's key" (206). But what if we don't ignore Davy? What if we actually listen to him and choose to disregard certain parts of the text like the dream sequence, Davy's mother's explosive meltdown, or the novel's

ambiguous ending? What if the narrative is actually encouraging readers to do precisely what Altschuler does with *Julius Caesar*: hack, slash, truncate, dwell and delay as they see fit?

In her elaboration of the "murky middle," Hurley asks of Louisa May Alcott's classic novel: "What might it mean to read *Little Women* for what I like to think of as the murky middle of the book—those delicious places where Jo has fully organized an alternative world for herself where she alone gets to play the parts of boys and speaks in slang?" ("Perversions" 124). This, I argue, is the kind of reading that *I'll Get There* invites: a dwelling in the narrative's centre, broadly speaking (recall that the beach dream takes place in the middle of the narrative); a delayed or repetitive reading of moments that are most pleasurable (Davy's relationship with Fred, his exploratory intimacy with Altschuler); and an Altschulerian truncation of those points that the reader feels are like the second half of *Julius Caesar*, i.e. completely irrelevant. Further, this dwelling is contingent on a turn towards *Julius Caesar*, towards another genre that provides the tools for an alternative reading of *I'll Get There*. Given that so many critics take issue with the ambiguity and seeming negativity of *I'll Get There*'s ending, what would it mean to disregard the ending entirely? Not only does Donovan's novel invite readers to do so, it literally shows them how through a deployment of Shakespeare's play.

*Julius Caesar,* Fred the dachshund, and Davy's dream all have the temporality of anxiety in common. *Caesar* is truncated such that it exists in a perpetual state of delay: its ending never arrives; it lingers in its own murky middle. The same could be said for *I'll Get There* itself, as its own ambiguous ending feels severed and incomplete, a "trip" with no "there." Moreover, Davy exists in a static space that eternally postpones his own coming out, a space that sees him navigate sideways relations with a dog that simultaneously launches him into a forward-oriented relation with another boy, while Davy nonetheless craves delay and enacts this desire through his

narration. Part of queer pedagogy is to consider and find pleasure in the multiplicity of possibilities available in one text: *I'll Get There* presents these possibilities, and then instructs the reader to access them through creative play with the story itself.

In the next section, in which I discuss Shyam Selvadurai's *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, we see even more clearly a boy who dwells inside metaphor, and in his case it's *Othello* that provides the sideways-moving vehicle that stops and starts en route to the queer question mark that haunts him throughout the novel.

**An Interval of Iago: Shyam Selvadurai's *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea***

"There is an interval—sometimes it is long, sometimes it is short—between every vehicle and its tenor," explains Stockton in *The Queer Child*: "the time it takes, of course, to arrive upon a meaning. This makes a metaphor a moving suspension. Meaning is moving and growing in a metaphor even while time seems to hang in a delay" (92). Selvadurai's *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* is a story about just this: a metaphor, Shakespeare's *Othello*, that grows and moves with a boy living, growing sideways and moving inside of it, a boy who delays his own metaphorical meaning-making until he cannot avoid it any longer, at which point the boy falls out of Shakespeare, and Shakespeare—whose presence in the novel's Sri Lankan school is a colonial remnant—falls out of the text and is replaced by a Sinhalese word, *ponnaya*. Amrith's looming coming-out is perpetually delayed, while *Othello* provides Amrith with a narrative that he and his classmates read to identify with and in opposition to.

Set in the Sri Lanka of 1980, *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* is the story of Amrith, a fourteen-year-old boy who, at a young age, loses his parents in a motorcycle accident and is subsequently raised by his Uncle Lucky and Aunty Bundle. Although he has a close friend in Mala, one of Lucky and Bundle's two daughters, Amrith feels like an outsider in his adopted

family, and he has never been able to openly discuss the traumatic effects of his parents' deaths with anyone. Amrith is passionate about acting: he wins a major award for his portrayal of Juliet in a national theatre competition, and he is thrilled to have a second shot at glory when he is cast as Desdemona the following year. His rigorous rehearsal schedule is derailed, however, when his handsome and charming cousin Niresh comes to visit from exotic Canada. Amrith and his cousins are instantly smitten with Niresh, and when Niresh falls for Mala, a tale of white-hot jealousy (and, in Amrith's mind, betrayal) ensues that mirrors the themes of *Othello* and culminates in an attack that sees Amrith nearly drown Mala. As Niresh prepares to return to Canada, Amrith reconciles with Mala, finally opens up to Niresh about his parents' death, and comes to grips with his attraction to his cousin, realizing that he is "…different.…He would have to learn to live with this knowledge of himself. He would have to teach himself to be his own best friend, his own confidant and guide. The hope he held out to himself was that, one day, there would be somebody else he could share this secret with. But for now he must remain silent" (Selvadurai 267).

Although Amrith's queerness might be apparent to the reader, the story's third-person narrator makes it clear that the boy hasn't begun to negotiate or process the status and implications of his "difference." More observant, however, is his drama teacher, around whom "Amrith felt curiously uneasy…She had a way of looking at him, as if she saw right into his soul and understood something about him that he did not understand about himself. And what she saw made her more kind to him, more gentle. She never joked or teased him, or used her wit against him. And yet her gentleness made him all the more uncomfortable" (Selvadurai 56). Amrith's classmates are equally if less sensitively attuned to queerness: they mine *Othello* for its queer potential to homophobically taunt Peries, Amrith's rival for the role of Desdemona, who is

endowed with a sobriquet that calls further attention to how these bullies employ homoeroticism as a means of anxiously shoring themselves up as heterosexual:

> "But you know, Penis, I'm not making it up," Jayasingha, the assistant head prefect said, with a conspiratorial look at Suraj, who winked back. "The lines about Cassio lying with Iago in bed are right there in act 3, scene 3. Turn to it and see for yourself. It's in bold print."…The other boys laughed and began to whistle, making kissing sounds at Peries. Ahmed tried to embrace Peries. "Cassio, you can lie with me anytime." Peries pushed him away and stormed out of the auditorium, followed by catcalls and hoots. Amrith had no idea what they were teasing Peries about, but he could not help feeling glad to see his rival discomfited (Selvadurai 66-67).

Here, we see Amrith being set up as relatively clueless in relation to Jayasingha and Ahmed, who are in a sense reading *Othello* queerly, but doing so to oppress: here, we have an example of a homophobic outcome of a text's queer potential as opposed to a more productive and positive multiplication of relational and identificatory possibilities.[75] *Othello*'s queerness, in other words, is unimaginable by Amrith and entirely undesirable for his classmates.

The narrator continues to draw on *Othello*'s queer potential and contrast the text's evident homoeroticism with Amrith's naïveté in relation to queer matters, which also exposes

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[75] In "Queer Readings of Popular Culture," Mark Lipton offers some autobiographical thoughts on the potentially homophobic outcomes of reading for queer possibilities in texts. He describes his ambivalent childhood relationship with Jughead, the paper crown-wearing, female-loathing character from *Archie* comics. Lipton explains that he saw himself reflected in Jughead's avoidance of female interest, which provided him with "a sense of identity and pleasure," but the way that Jughead gets taken up as strange and unusual by his peers also left Lipton feeling alienated: "Despite finding myself in popular culture," he explains, "it was still within a homophobic context. I had all the more reason to hide my sexual desires—from others, and myself—for the subtle messages of queerness in Jughead warned me of a mental instability" (166). See also "My Beautiful Wickedness," in which Alexander Doty describes a similarly ambivalent childhood relationship to the Cowardly Lion from *The Wizard of Oz*.

Amrith's own lack of awareness in regards to his own sexual desires. Amrith is lost in the interval of Iago: at the beginning of the text, he has only begun slowly making meaning of the metaphor of *Othello* into which he has been thrust by his teacher and peers. Amrith reads but does not grasp the potentially queer implications of *Othello* that had been so eagerly seized upon by his classmates:

> Since there was still a possibility Amrith could end up playing Cassio, he had a look at act 3, scene 3, the moment he got home. It was the point in the plot when Iago told Othello that he had shared a bed with Cassio, and how, during the night, Cassio had murmured in his sleep of his love for Desdemona and cursed Othello for having her. Iago also told Othello that Cassio mistook Iago for Desdemona and held Iago's hand in his, kissed him hard on the lips over and over again, embraced him, and pressed his leg over Iago's thigh. Amrith was sure this was what the boys had teased Peries about. He did not understand why Peries was so outraged by what Cassio had done mistakenly in his sleep.
>
> Still, Amrith felt even more uneasy now about ending up with that part (Selvadurai 68).

The narrator matter-of-factly lays bare the text's queerness through its turn to Shakespeare and places it side-by-side with Amrith's own bewildered discomfort, which emerges from a vague sense of difference buttressed by the homophobic teasing of his peers and his teacher's sensitivity. Although the text draws on Shakespeare to make clear to the reader the relation between *Othello* and Amrith, Amrith himself remains clueless.

Amrith's embeddedness in the metaphor of *Othello* is made most apparent when, one night, he shares a bed with Niresh. Amrith becomes Cassio in act three, scene three of *Othello*, his eyes panning with desire down his sleeping cousin's body, Amrith's body moving to unconsciously imitate that of his metaphorical counterpart:

> Amrith turned around, propped himself up on his elbow, and gazed at his cousin. His hair was disarranged over his forehead, his mouth slightly open, his lips glistening. Niresh's T-shirt was bunched up, exposing the rise and fall of his stomach, the hairs that fanned out from his navel. When he was sure that Niresh was sound asleep, Amrith lay down on his back, as close to him as he dared. He moved his leg until his thigh was resting against his cousin's. He turned his head to the side so he could gaze at Niresh. After a while, so much heat had spread through Amrith's body that he seemed to be burning up with fever (Selvadurai 167).

Although Amrith's bodily movements are aligned with Cassio's, to paraphrase Stockton, Amrith's vehicle has not reached its tenor: he is dwelling inside a metaphor out of which he does not make meaning. Amrith does not yet see himself in *Othello*, but when he loses the part of Desdemona after neglecting his rehearsals to spend time with Niresh and is reassigned to Cassio, Amrith becomes the new target of his peers' taunts: "'Ah, Michael Cassio, waiting for your darling Iago to pick you up?' Amrith looked at him, too miserable to say anything. Suraj snickered. 'Act three, scene three, [Amrith] De Alwis. You'll see yourself in there, no doubt'" (Selvadurai 223).

Shortly thereafter, in an epiphany, Amrith finally does see himself in *Othello*, the metaphor in which he has been growing. Here, Amrith turns to *Othello* to negotiate his own desire, but this reading inspires fearful anxiety, not comfort:

> … now he felt a coldness spreading through him as he thought of what Suraj had insinuated. He was referring to Iago's story of how Cassio, in his sleep, took Iago's hand in his, held him tight, kissed him hard on the lips over and over again, and pressed his leg over Iago's thigh. With a will of its own, Amrith's mind slipped back to that night he had

> lain awake looking at Niresh, how he had rested his thigh against his, the way his body had flamed with desire; and before that, the time he had got an erection after seeing his cousin naked.
>
> Amrith felt a deep horror seep into him. He loved Niresh the way a boy loves a girl, or a girl loves a boy (Selvadurai 234).

Here, Amrith renders explicit the metaphorical ties that bind him with Cassio and finally, fearfully sees his own queer desire reflected back at him through the haunting act three, scene three—the queer double-take: anxiously back to *Othello*, anxiously forward to his own queer question mark. Although Amrith's identification with Cassio serves to cultivate fear and self-loathing, his reading of *Othello* also operates on a different level: Amrith identifies with Desdemona, but refigures the character in such a way that she lends him a sense of agency. In the rehearsal that ultimately sees him lose the part of Desdemona, Amrith protests the character's response as her husband suffocates her in her sleep:

> …why wouldn't Desdemona struggle? It does not make any sense. After all, she loved Othello and was faithful, and he is a bloody fool believing everyone but his own wife. It doesn't make sense that she would lie there like a meek-and-mild type. It's not realistic. He betrayed her. She should be furious and fight him as he tries to kill her (Selvadurai 221).

Amrith's identification in opposition to Desdemona's lack of struggle is what later seems to provide him with the strength to not be smothered by his self-oppressive identification with Cassio. This change in Amrith is marked, as it is in Donovan's novel, by a dream:

> He was at the very bottom of the sea, but perfectly able to breathe in water. He was involved in the task of pushing an object, many sizes larger than himself, up to the

> surface. It was his mother's cane chair, grown enormous….He was far smaller than the chair and so it was hard work to move it. But he would not quit, and he swam around, pulling away weeds, dislodging a chair leg that was trapped between two rocks, pushing at the chair with his little shoulders and arms. And gradually it began to rise.
> Up…up…up. Towards light (Selvadurai 255).[76]

Through *Othello*, Amrith finds the will to struggle against the feeling of being stifled by his desires and the trauma of his parents' death. This moment in the text, however, also marks a point when Shakespeare is dropped altogether from the narrative. Amrith falls out of Desdemona and into Cassio, and then back into a different kind of Desdemona, and finally out of Shakespeare altogether: these moments of identification and counter-identification are, as Britzman might describe them, temporary "experiments" for "explor[ing] different views of the world" ("Precocious" 49). Amrith mirrors a temporality of anxiety and Britzman's description of pedagogy as central to "how people make meanings, change their minds, use knowledge, pose problems, create new opportunities for living a life" ("Precocious" 49). The boy who lives and grows inside the metaphor eventually—when the vehicle reaches its tenor—recognizes the inadequacy of the metaphor to describe him, and the metaphor falls away. Amrith travels to his mother's grave and, out loud, attempts to describe himself for the first time. He turns momentarily to the Sinhalese word for "fairy," but then refuses it, along with any coherent mode of self-identification: "he leaned forward till his lips were inches from the stone. He whispered, 'I am…,' but he could not continue, for he did not know a decent word to describe himself. And

[76] Phillips' story of the swimming boy, as discussed in chapter two, seems particularly apt given the frequent appearance in these novels of swimming and beach scenes as spatial and temporal metaphors for risk, delay, and the navigation of sexuality's "open waters"; see my discussions of Holland and Donovan in addition to Selvadurai.

he refused to use 'ponnaya.' Finally, he leaned closer and whispered, 'I am…different'" (Selvadurai 267).

By the end of the novel, Amrith has all but mastered the practice of reading as theorized via queer pedagogy in my previous chapter: a combination of "risking the self" (Britzman) and proliferating possibilities for identifying or choosing to refuse identification, all according to the temporality of anxiety. Amrith identifies with certain stories, in opposition to others, reworks some, and recognizes that others are wholly inadequate for his purposes. Like Davy, Amrith dwells among certain places and relations, grows sideways, occasionally desires stasis and pushes back against a looming question mark. Although Amrith's "getting there" seems to be perhaps more fulfilled than Davy's by the story's end, there is no official "coming out" to speak of, no assurance that Amrith's sexuality will concretize into a particular form including a coherent sense of gay identity. Instead, readers are left with a sense of how Amrith locates queerness in ostensibly non-queer texts, and how to play with, truncate, resist, relate to, or entirely refuse certain narratives.

In what follows, I will step outside queer YA as traditionally conceived to explore another text that turns back to Shakespeare as two cousins navigate their sideways relation with one another. Regardless of the fact that it does not feature a same-sex relationship at its narrative core, Hand's *Illyria* has much in common with the other texts in this chapter in that it speaks to and problematizes questions of queer visibility in YA. Unlike Donovan and Selvadurai's novels, however, *Illyria* allows us a glimpse of its queer adolescents' "there"—what kind of adulthood emerges from an adolescence where an anxious temporality plays a central role.

**Dwelling with the Lord of Misrule: Elizabeth Hand's *Illyria***

Set in Yonkers, NY, from the 1980s through the present day, *Illyria* tells the story of Madeline and Rogan, first cousins in a large family descended from a famous actress. Unlike *I'll Get There* and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, Hand's lyrical novel, albeit quite queer, does not deal with same-sex attraction: "Rogan wasn't gay," explains Madeline, the novel's narrator, "he was in love with me, as I was with him. And that was maybe the only thing worse than being gay." Madeline and Rogan's relationship evokes in them the same feelings of taboo, queerness, and uncertainty as same-sex desire does for Davy and Amrith; the looming question mark towards which queers often feel themselves growing—as described by Stockton—also haunts *Illyria*, in addition to the recurring problem novel trope of having non-normative sexual desire at the crux of the narrative's tension.[77] As teenagers, Madeline and Rogan hide their intense physical and emotional relationship from their disapproving families by coordinating clandestine trysts in a secret attic that Rogan discovers attached to his bedroom, where the pair uncovers a miniature toy theatre that inexplicably/magically produces snow, sound, and light. Rogan and Madeline's passion for theatre is awakened by their Aunt Kate, who takes them to a number of Broadway shows, and together the cousins are cast in their school's production of *Twelfth Night*: Madeline as Viola and Rogan as Feste, despite Madeline's insistence that Rogan be cast as Sebastian since "we really could be twins, they wouldn't have to make us up, we already look alike—" (Hand). Although Madeline and Rogan are physically similar, they also possess fundamental differences. Rogan has natural acting talent and a beautiful, haunting singing voice, whereas Madeline, who cannot sing, also feels that she must work much harder than her cousin

[77] I am indebted to Nat Hurley for eloquently pointing out that *Illyria*, much like *I'll Get There* and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, "treats the conventions of closetedness with a pronounced reverence."

to deliver a convincing performance: “I might not possess glamour; I might not be a magician,” she narrates, “but I could learn to be a good carpenter. And I could learn to be a thief” (Hand).

Eventually, Aunt Kate makes arrangements for Madeline to audition for theatre schools in London, but refuses (out of jealousy and/or a desire to separate the two) to do the same for Rogan. Before Madeline can decide whether or not she can bear to be away from her cousin, Rogan’s father discovers their secret attic (and an array of condom wrappers), and, enraged, destroys the toy theatre, beats Rogan, and chases Madeline from the house. Forbidden from seeing her cousin, Madeline moves to London, graduates from theatre school, and becomes a moderately successful performer, although she claims to have “never shone, not even for a moment, the way [her] cousin had” (Hand). Years pass, and the two cousins meet briefly in New York, where Rogan—now addicted to heroin—appears “gaunt, his skin so thin [Madeline] could see the capillaries beneath, a faint blue fretwork starred here and there with red where the vessels had burst” (Hand). Decades pass, and the pair is again reunited after Aunt Kate’s funeral; Rogan has recovered from his heroin addiction, released an album produced by an industry bigwig, and is the caretaker for the family’s former estate. Rogan brings Madeline up to his old bedroom and presents her with the toy theatre, which he has meticulously reconstructed and configured to represent a scene from their high school production of *Twelfth Night*. The novel ends with the two now-fortysomethings locked in an embrace and the theatre’s magical “snow, real snow, impossible snow, falling in a moonlit column from the ceiling onto the paper stage as Rogan sang” (Hand).

*Illyria* is not a YA book with visible LGBT content, yet the sideways relations and anxious motions and forms of delay it contains—all products of Madeline and Rogan’s relationship—are quite queer, and the text grows even more provocative when placed side-by-

side with Donovan and Selvadurai's novels. Most evidently, *Illyria* fits with *I'll Get There* and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* given how a particular Shakespearean text complements and buttresses the novel's themes. As Madeline and Rogan's English teacher explains, the play "is not governed by our laws—that's what the holiday of Twelfth Night is all about, a time when the Lord of Misrule takes over and our world is turned upside down" (Hand). Theatre—the toy theatre, the school's theatre, and theatre-as-metaphor—functions in a similar fashion for Madeline and Rogan, granting the cousins space for intimacy outside the watchful gaze of their families. In *Illyria*, theatre bears a striking resemblance to childhood as theorized by Bruhm and Hurley, which "allows a little more play for the child prior to the moment of ascension into that heterosexual [in *Illyria*, normative and non-incestuous] future" (xiv). This description resembles the upside-down world of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*: women fall in love with women disguised as men, but all is righted (i.e. properly heterosexualized) by the play's end. What Madeline and Rogan desire, however, is to dwell in this exceptional space, where their relationship can escape the normalizing force of their families' discipline.

Madeline and Rogan's relationship plays itself out in a way that resembles Davy's relationship with Fred and Altschuler: as motion inside a space of delay that follows the rhythm of the queer double-take. These characters have a sense of growing towards something unknown—again, Stockton's question mark—and on the way, they experience stops and starts, sideways relationships, and a longing for delay, often expressed through metaphor. The first page of *Illyria* makes it clear that Madeline and Rogan require genre and metaphor to understand their relationship, and the tropes they select evince a dark sense of the unknown: "I arrived early in the morning, Rogan before midnight," Madeline explains:

> Later, when we were adolescents, the facts of our birth (we always thought of it as our birth) conveniently fulfilled our need to find meaning in everything about ourselves. So Rogan was darkness, I was light, and over the years the metaphor was extended to include just about every doomy literary reference you can imagine—Caliban and Ariel, Peter Pan and Wendy, Heathcliff and Cathy, Abelard and Heloise, Tristan and Iseult, Evnissyen and Nissyen…You get the idea (Hand).

Madeline and Rogan feel themselves growing towards an uncertain tragedy, a question mark that disguises only doom. In order to account for their relationship, they turn to a series of literary texts that span multiple genres (children's literature, myth, more Shakespeare), all of which have tragedy in common. Throughout *Illyria*, this sense of approaching catastrophe is manifested in shipwreck imagery—a shipwreck being, of course, the narrative contrivance that condemns Viola and Sebastian, the twins of *Twelfth Night*, to what initially appears to be lifelong separation; this should additionally recall the train crash imagery in *Baby Be-Bop*, which functions similarly as a source of fantasy, both erotic and anxious, for Dirk. Not only do Madeline and Rogan play sexually at being shipwrecked under the family porch and in their secret attic ("We'd hold each other and pretend we'd been shipwrecked….We knew what we were doing, even though I never quite had a word for it"), but the toy theatre's stage contains "a beach of golden sand with a ruined ship silhouetted against a wintry sun," and during a kiss with Rogan, when Madeline tries to "summon" the magical delay of the toy theatre (represented by "snow, the icy glitter of footprints, and a sun the size of a thumbprint through pink and amber clouds"), she can only see "ash and a tangle of broken masts" (Hand). When Madeline is with Rogan, in other words, she craves delay but feels herself moving towards a shipwreck, one that haunts her even in the space of the toy theatre, which otherwise permits her and her cousin to

dwell in their queer relationship. Most hauntingly, when Rogan's father destroys the toy theatre, Madeline "drop[s] beside Rogan and rake[s] through the drift of torn paper, trying to find something that had not been destroyed. But there was only shredded cardboard and gilt, matchstick-size splinters that had been topiary trees and damp gauze bearing the faintest shadow of a ship's mast" (Hand). Shipwreck wrecked, metaphor realized, this is the moment in *Illyria* when Madeline and Rogan are forced apart for decades.[78]

Just as one non-normative sexual object, penis-dog Fred—until he meets his untimely end, at least—allows Davy to anxiously delay his "trip" towards the queer question mark of Altschuler, another—theatre—permits Madeline and Rogan to delay their trajectory towards their inevitable shipwreck. Unlike Fred, theatre does not propel Madeline and Rogan into other queer relations: it enables and is animated by their queer relationship with each other, and their relationship with theatre is, in itself, a queer and sexual one. (The toy) theatre marks the space where they can safely have intercourse; (the school) theatre is (non-coital) sexual space, inflamed with desire—it feeds Madeline and Rogan's desire for each other, the audience's desire for Rogan, and Madeline and Rogan's desire for theatre itself: "Everyone in that auditorium felt it: everyone was bewitched [by Rogan's performance]," narrates Madeline about a rehearsal of *Twelfth Night*; "I felt drugged, light-headed with desire and raw adrenaline….It was like sex—it was sex, magnified somehow and transformed into a vision we could all see, all share in; and there was Rogan, grinning and looking as happy as I'd ever seen him outside of the hidden space in his room" (Hand). After the rehearsal, "lying with Rogan in the attic," Madeline recalls, "I felt nearly delirious with arousal, and what I now know was pure, unchecked joy" (Hand). Unlike

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[78] This moment is also reminiscent of *The Tempest*, another Shakespearean text that features a shipwreck.

Davy and Amrith, both of whom exhibit a certain degree of cluelessness when it comes to their sideways relations, Madeline recognizes the desire that infuses her relationship with the theatre. As I have already illustrated, however, all three characters demonstrate the same anxiety about growing towards the unknown. Lying with Rogan in their other theatrical space, the attic with the toy theatre, Madeline narrates: "I was afraid to guess at what might be there, beyond the tiny stage; afraid to give a name to what we saw there, just as I couldn't give a name to what I felt for my cousin. Magic; love" (Hand). The theatre, for Madeline and Rogan, marks this space of delay and desire, and it itself is a site of animated or sideways growth-within-delay, where the same story is told over and over again, night after night, with minor variations, just as the toy theatre produces snow whenever Madeline and Rogan are in its presence. Madeline and Rogan's desire for delay and for each other is, in fact, what animates the toy theatre.

The theatre as space of anxious temporality is most clearly illustrated through a lengthy passage where Madeline is once again describing her cousin's performance as Feste:

> It was as though I were alone in the attic. Only now, the toy theater had grown to the size of a real one. I watched my cousin, his slender form pacing in front of the footlights, the scrim behind him backlit so I could see the faintest suggestion of tree limbs and the outlines of a wrecked ship, the moon rising above distant mountains, and the blue shadows of the other actors. His voice echoed from the rafters, so piercing and full of heartbreak I felt as if that burning wire had been thrust into my skull. When he finished, he stepped backward and gave a small, plaintive bow, then straightened as, slowly at first, then with the sudden irrevocable rush of water flooding a broken building, the place erupted into applause (Hand).

Most notable in this passage is the sentence structure, which simultaneously suggests delay and movement, as though action is unfolding in a frozen scene, outside of regular time and space: Madeline is inside both the real theatre and the toy theatre, alone and surrounded by people, watching Rogan. Although this paragraph describes action—Rogan's movement, his echoing voice, the "burning wire" of Madeline's desire—the dangling adverb "as" in the passage's final sentence suggests delay, slow motion, an alternative temporality that stands in contrast to the story's otherwise briskly paced narration. "[Rogan] straightened as," Madeline begins, but the arrival of the modifier ("the place erupted into applause") is delayed until the sentence's conclusion: in-between we are given two contrasting accounts of how time is passing—"slowly" quickly becomes a "sudden irrevocable rush"—both descriptions are bundled together in the nearly frozen moment of Rogan's bow, and both remain incomplete until Madeline finally indicates that the audience's applause is what's gaining momentum (Hand).

Elsewhere in the novel, when Madeline and Rogan are apart and away from their erotic, theatrical spaces of anxious temporality, time passes quickly and progresses in a linear fashion, and the pace and syntax of Madeline's narrative shift accordingly. Madeline's description of the time in-between her encounters with Rogan are described in short, economical sentences:

> I had a few halfhearted relationships, and a drawn-out affair with a married woman, an actress I continued to work with, off and on, until her career outstripped mine. I still read about her occasionally, small items in *Time Out* or *Vanity Fair*. In love, as in theatre, I never had any magic. True, I never flamed out. And I never shone, not even for a moment, the way my cousin had (Hand).

Reunited with Rogan at the end of the novel, in contrast, Madeline's narration once again lingers in single, frozen moments that seem to exist in a space of delay that defies the forward progression of time:

> He kissed me. He smelled as he always had, of smoke and sweat, his mouth bitter with nicotine. I could feel the wind through the cracks in the walls, and then a slow shifting, as though the entire house moved around us. Behind my closed eyes it all began to take shape again, the carpets in their muted colours unfurling across the wooden floors, white lace curtains at the windows, wisteria blooming on the porch outside, and the echo of footsteps on the stairs above (Hand).

Now fortysomethings, Madeline and Rogan return to the same physical space where they grew up, and the same figurative space of delay (the toy theatre) that allowed them to move sideways, intimately, with each other. The novel concludes with a lengthy sentence that powerfully evokes this sense of anxious time through the reconstructed toy theatre:

> The eddies rose and fell with my cousin's voice, sweeping over all of us in waves, matchstick trees and painted moon and cardboard figures in a toy theatre, snow and shipwreck and stage all whorled together into one great bright storm with Rogan and me at its center, motionless in our embrace, long after his voice fell silent, long after first light struck the stony face of the Palisades and the frozen river far below (Hand).

The protracted sentence that suggests a single moment stretching into perpetuity, the cousins' "motionless," unending embrace, and the "frozen river" all suggest a final return to the pleasure of stasis that Madeline and Rogan always gleaned from one another and the temporally exceptional, anxious and erotic space of the theatre.

*Illyria* is distinct from *I'll Get There* and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* in a few important ways. In *Illyria*, the sideways relation of cousin-love isn't displaced as it is for Amrith; Rogan and Madeline actually have sex, and neither one of them is especially repentant about it (given how "queer" they are made to feel by their family members). For Madeline and Rogan, anxious temporality produces a space that enables sexual pleasure in addition to the pleasure they glean from delay itself, just as Davy derives pleasure from his delay-oriented relationships with Fred and the stuffed coyote. Unlike Davy, however, Madeline and Rogan use delay to enable their present pleasures (i.e. to prolong their present, queer relationship) while still, like Davy, attempting to forestall growth towards the looming question mark of "growing up." Davy and Amrith, however, are more ambivalent about their relationship to delay: Amrith, certainly, craves the preservation of the time spent with his cousin (much like Chuck's desire to linger with McLeod in his "golden cocoon"), but as much as this desire emerges from his attraction to Niresh, Amrith's growth within the metaphor of Iago is also an attempt to anxiously postpone the conscious realization of his desire. Madeline and Rogan, on the other hand, quite directly desire delay and the anxious erotics of their relationship to theatre and each other, all of which is "whorled together" in a snowstorm of desire and sexuality (Hand). Unlike Davy and Amrith, Rogan and Madeline know exactly what they want: there is no confusion about their queer desires, no lack of awareness about the metaphors in which they grow sideways, and they use delay to enable their relationship to take place.

Taken together, these three books—*I'll Get There*, *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, and *Illyria*—do different work with queerness, delay, and sideways growth. Donovan and Selvadurai's novels suggest that sideways relations (dog and cousin-love, in particular) take place in the space of childhood/adolescence, but they leave ambiguous how these relations might

play out in adulthood. These two novels conclude, that is, without indicating whether or not their protagonists will necessarily arrive at a "there," whatever "there" might signify, be it identification with an adult gay identity or something else, like Amrith's refusal of "ponnaya" and settling upon "difference," which is in many ways a queer anti-identity. *Illyria*, the only novel among the three where we actually see the children grow into adulthood, returns us to the erotics of delay, queer cousin-love and Madeline and Rogan's childhood spaces of desire, and a reconstruction of the erstwhile destroyed metaphor of the toy theatre. In other words, we see what "there" looks like for Madeline and Rogan, and it is identical to the "trip" of their childhood. While the ambiguous endings of *I'll Get There* and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* productively leave dangling the queer question mark of growing up, *Illyria* more definitively punctures the cultural myth that growing up entails growing into something other than the queer sideways relations of childhood. Returning to Stockton via Freud's assertion that "lingering" is a source of pleasure en route to "the ultimate goal," what *Illyria* evinces is that, for Madeline and Rogan, lingering is the ultimate goal: the cousins choose the perversion of diversion over a more normative telos (Queer Child 25). In this sense, *Illyria* functions to challenge what critics are demanding from queer YA: a certain kind of role modelling narrated from the ostensibly stable, resolved, teleological position of adulthood; a "there" at the end of a trip that has overcome the queer ambiguities of adolescence. Along these lines, although *Illyria* might not be considered a queer YA novel by the standards of, say, Cart and Jenkins, the novel nonetheless functions to trouble queer YA as a whole, demonstrating that the genre and its attendant queernesses are in excess of visibly LGBT characters.

Also crucial to these three novels is the anxious temporality of the queer double-take, through which characters enact a looking back to other genres and texts that enables them to

navigate their sideways relations and the tension between delay and forward movement. Curious, for example, is the way Madeline and Rogan draw on tragic characters, texts, and imagery to understand their relationship, yet they ultimately locate themselves within a comedy—*Twelfth Night*—which, as Heather Zwicker points out, is constituted by a "recuperative cycle," usually culminates in "marriage and sometimes childbirth," and carries a "pedagogy [that] insists on a predictable happy ending" (166). While *Illyria*'s ending could be considered "happy" or "recuperative," the novel nonetheless queers traditional comedic form by installing two cousins in the protagonist roles and allowing their sexuality to flow through and into unconventional spaces and objects. The novel turns back again and again to multiple texts, but only to demonstrate the inability of any one narrative or genre to represent a "truth" about their relationship. In other words, *Illyria* demonstrates both the importance and the inadequacy of narrative without visible LGBT content. Although *Twelfth Night* provides the primary frame for the cousins' relationship, Rogan is cast as Feste, not as Sebastian—the part he originally seeks, so he could be Madeline's twin—and Madeline never ends up playing Viola as an adult, as her grandmother once did. Towards the end of the novel, Madeline and Rogan even reflect on the imperfection of *Twelfth Night* as a means of conceptualizing their relationship: "We could have been twins," Madeline tells Rogan; "I wonder if it would have been different. If there had been a girl in your family" (Hand). At a certain point, then, Madeline and Rogan's understanding of themselves through *Twelfth Night* hits a wall and fails: Shakespeare's text is, ultimately, a metaphor both essential and inadequate for the way Madeline and Rogan understand and interpret their relationship. At a certain point, then, the novel must turn away from Shakespeare, which it does in its final scene: the novel's final image is a scene of delay that reduces the significance of *Twelfth Night* to "matchstick trees and painted moon and cardboard figures in a

toy theatre," while the focus is instead on the centrally-located Madeline and Rogan and their frozen embrace (Hand).

Turns away from Shakespeare also occur in Donovan and Selvadurai's novels: in *I'll Get There*, although *Julius Caesar* provides a site for anxious reading, Davy eventually slides through other sideways relations; and, as I have already discussed, *Othello* drops out of *Swimming in the Monsoon* as Amrith moves from Iago to Desdemona to "Ponnaya" and lands on "different," suggesting *Othello*'s inability to properly contain his story. In a way, given how these three texts handle Shakespeare, we could think of them as belonging to what Matt Kozusko calls the "saved-by-Shakespeare genre," which includes stories that capitalize on "the power of Shakespeare to bring about transformations in audiences who watch the plays and in the actors who perform them" (169). Kozusko pays specific attention to two contemporary films that draw on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to argue that Shakespeare has become "a space, sanctioned by the cultural status of the plays and adorned with their language, in which a certain kind of story can take place" (169).[79] "Saved-by-Shakespeare" texts "operate in the mode of melodrama," Kozukso explains, and are thus "concerned to elicit sympathy for a beset protagonist in whom the [text]'s audience recognizes a truth, an innocence, a virtue that is undervalued or altogether unseen by the world around him" (169). Certainly, this description could apply to Donovan, Selvadurai, and Hand's novels: Shakespeare functions to create a space where certain (queer) relationships take place, and certain (queer) identifications/counteridentifications are made, culminating in some sort of transformation. Davy's relationship with Altschuler begins through *Julius Caesar*, which also provides a model for reading; Amrith's experience with *Othello* leads

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[79] These films are *Dead Poets Society* (Peter Weir, 1989) and *Were the World Mine* (Tom Gustafson, 2008).

him to recognize his desire for his cousin; Madeline and Rogan have their passion for theatre awakened through *Twelfth Night*, their passion for each other inflamed by their onstage experience, and Rogan discovers the power of his singing voice through Feste. In this sense, as Kozusko writes, Shakespeare's "genius at work…turns out always to be a function of something else" (169). Shakespeare indeed becomes a space for these stories to unfold: stories about queer desire and the anxious search across genre for the proper genre and language to describe queer desire, a search that is constantly stalling and starting, turning and returning, backwards and sideways.

These novels depart from Kozusko's characterization of "saved-by-Shakespeare," however, in that they feature characters whom Shakespeare does not ultimately "save." A key convention of saved-by-Shakespeare, Kozusko explains, is the text's "privileging the language of the plays and assigning to the poetry the abstract power to bring about the change that will drive the narrative towards conclusion" (174). Conversely, in Donovan, Selvadurai, and Hand's novels, Shakespeare is a space of delay, of dwelling, of double-taking: these narratives are driven towards conclusion, however ambiguous, only by virtue of Shakespeare's departure from the text and the protagonist's turn away from Shakespeare. Recall, for example, the way Shakespeare drops from *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* and Amrith's declaration of himself as "different"; Davy's attachment to Fred, delay, and the stuffed coyote; Rogan and Madeline's return to the stasis-oriented relationship of their adolescence. For Kozusko, "whether the transformation is effected by a performance of Shakespeare or a reading of such a performance, the result is enlightenment, revelation, vindication; and whether the result is comic or tragic, it is brought about in a space provided by Shakespeare" (175). In these three novels, the "result" is not brought about by Shakespeare, but rather something outside of Shakespeare; although

Shakespeare might catalyze transformation, he also creates a space for the delay of the ultimate effect of this transformation, sometimes indefinitely. Shakespeare, in this sense, seems to mark a space of perpetual "getting there," but never an arrival.

To conclude this chapter, I turn towards a final text—James St. James' *Freak Show*—which turns inward to its own genre, the "problem-realism" novel, in order to subvert the very tropes that have come to define the genre: those I've been heretofore illustrating through Donovan, Selvadurai, and Hand's novels. St. James offers us a campy sendup of problem-realism texts, a critique that cleverly points to the incoherence of a genre that critics anxiously attempt to define in relation to visibility and realism.

**Camping the Problem Novel: James St. James' *Freak Show***

Like critics of queer YA, *Freak Show* looks backwards towards the melancholic themes of the problem novel era. Unlike these critics, who disavow the affect associated with the childhood and adolescence of queer YA, *Freak Show* gives the problem novel a wholehearted queer embrace: St. James spins a narrative that relies heavily on camp, in form and content, to both heighten and subvert the narrative contrivances that dominate the LGBT-themed problem novel. I argue that St. James "camps" the problem novel to expose its artifice and resist the pedagogical imperative of queer YA to root its stories in either a "problem novel" version of reality or its alternative, the novel with characters whose sexuality is of no major consequence or interest. Through the unique and over-the-top voice of his self-professed "superfreak" drag queen narrator, Billy Bloom, St. James positions himself within queer YA while using drag and camp to offer a critique of the transparency and integrity of this same genre's grand narratives (192).

A range of theorists including Susan Sontag, Judith Butler, and Carol-Anne Tyler have written on drag and camp, but I want to highlight the elements of camp I believe are most relevant to this chapter. Providing a brief history of the term, Creekmur and Doty explain:

> For some time (at least since the model embodied by Oscar Wilde), this queerly 'different' experience of mass culture was most evident, if coded, in the ironic, scandalous sensibility known as camp—perhaps gay culture's crucial contribution to modernism. An attitude at once casual and severe, affectionate and ironic, camp served to deflate the pretensions of mainstream culture while elevating what that same culture devalued or repressed, thus providing a strategy for rewriting and questioning the meanings and values of mainstream representations (2).

Along these lines, Sontag claims that "[t]he whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to 'the serious'. One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious" (62). Drag, as theorized by Butler and others, is a campy practice: through artifice and exaggeration, drag "effectively mocks," as Butler famously argues, "both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity" (186). In *Freak Show*, St. James' campy drag queen character and the form of his novel play with and ridicule the conventions of both gender and genre: masculinity, femininity, and queer YA itself.

*Freak Show* contains basically all of the elements and plot points of the LGBT problem-realism novel, many of which are seen in Donovan and Holland's texts: the distant, disapproving father; the alcoholic mother; the social outcast protagonist's move to a new school; the closeted

jock love interest;[80] and the turning-point gay- and/or animal-bashing and/or death.[81] Yet all of these elements are heightened and exaggerated to the point of absurdity, accomplishing precisely what Sontag and Doty describe: *Freak Show* dethrones the earnest and serious problem novel; it deflates the genre's pretensions; and it provides a strategy for interrogating the role of these recurring tropes in YA more broadly, and queer YA more specifically. For St. James, queerness in YA is what invites and compels the recurring tropes of the YA problem novel, but queerness—in this case, genderqueerness and the campiness of drag, specifically—is also what simultaneously undercuts and critiques these same conventions, exposing the anxious underpinnings of queer YA as a genre that coheres with uncertainty around YA tropes and critical expectations regarding the genre's didactics of visibility and the stability of LGBT identity. This is St. James' version of the double-take: a turn to the problem novel in order to camp and critique it, followed by a turn to a version of queer YA rendered transparent as anxious genre.

Take, for example, the novel's opening, which seems to be a direct attack on the call for "realism" in YA and an introduction to both the excess of Billy Bloom and the narrative itself. Here, Billy begins by directly addressing the reader:

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[80] The "closeted jock" does not appear in Donovan's novel, but it does many others, too many to list here. Recall, as discussed in chapter one, Thomas Crisp's critique of the recurring YA trope, the "Tragic Closeted Jock" as seen in the *Rainbow Boys* series ("Trouble" 226). For other examples, see Jim Grimsley's *Dream Boy* (Algonquin Books, 1995), Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Pocket Books, 1999), and Brent Hartinger's *Geography Club* (HarperCollins, 2003). Hartinger's website even features an article entitled "Why Are So Many Gay Teen Stories About a Geek in Love with a Closeted Jock?" (brenthartinger.com, 1 May 2013, last accessed 20 Sept. 2014).

[81] Like *Baby Be-Bop*, many queer YA novels feature homophobic violence that has catastrophic effects on their characters. See, for particularly brutal examples, the tar-and-feathering of Sandra Scoppettone's gay protagonist in *Trying Hard to Hear You* (1974), the rape of her lesbian character in *Happy Endings Are All Alike* (1978), or the gay bashing in Bette Greene's *The Drowning of Stephan Jones* (1991). More recently, see *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999) and *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012), among many others.

> Now get up—*slowly*—and go to the full-length mirror. Take off all your clothes and look at yourself—*Really look at yourself.*
>
> Now go have a good cry. God is cruel, I know, I know.
>
> That was to let you know what you're up against: reality.
>
> Your goal is to do away with reality. Reality is for poor people. It's for ugly people with no imagination and no hope.
>
> ***Reality is for everybody else*** (St. James 4).[82]

Billy goes on to provide detailed instructions to the reader on how, precisely, to do away with reality using layers of makeup: "Feel the rhythm of the powder puff. *Darling, you're doing fine.* Now, BEAT THAT FACE, GODDAMNIT! Be generous! Be liberal! Throw it in the air and run through the cloud! Put it in a flour sifter and grind it onto your face. More! More!" (St. James 5). Already, the reader is not only instructed to disregard any claims on reality the novel or its genre may make, but also participate in a kind of self-queering through a narrative adorning of the elements Billy himself uses throughout the novel. In other words, the reader is asked to identify with and even become Billy for the novel's duration—a character, that is, who looks back at the "reality" of the problem novel and turns away with campy disdain.

As a new student at what the novel's back cover describes as "the ultrawhite, ultrarich, ultra conservative Dwight D. Eisenhower Academy" in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, Billy is immediately subject to homophobic harassment and bullying at the hands of his peers. Billy's reaction, however, is to push back at them by taking his drag queen persona as far as possible. He eventually goes to school in monstrous drag, dressed as a swamp bride, complete with green

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[82] The novel's over-the-top page layout, which combines the frequent use of capitalized, italicized, and bolded sentences with extravagant decorative swirls to divide chapters, is a crucial part of the novel's formal campiness. Although I am unable to accurately replicate everything here, my quotes are as faithful as possible to St. James' form.

skin, a grotesque dress made up of petals, leaves, sequins, and beads, seven pairs of eyelashes, and Cheerios glued to his face. Outfit complete, he declares: "BEHOLD THE GLORY OF THE SWAMP! Puny humans—looks upon me with wonder and awe! You shall soon know the power of my drag! Bow down before me, for I am TONDALAYO POTATO-HEAD!" (St. James 81).[83] This is the outfit that pushes his homophobic classmates too far and causes them to beat Billy into such a state that he is hospitalized for several weeks.

Although his description of the beating is horrific, St. James never allows the excess and humour of Billy's voice to slide into earnestness or sincerity. Billy narrates: "a dozen arms pushed me to the floor, where a dozen boots stomped on my face….I was bleeding, but from where? And did they just break a rib? And what was that giant crunch?" (84). However, this is followed by Billy's remark that "Flossie [the maid] would probably have to identify the body. Father would never break up a golf game to claim responsibility for a dead homo swamp zombie. 'GET THAT THING OUT!' he would bellow to Flossie if it came to that. 'JUST PUT IT IN A BOX AND SHIP IT TO HIS MOTHER'" (St. James 84). On the following page, when Flip, the school jock and object of Billy's desire comes to his rescue, there is a shift in perspective, suggesting that Billy is both experiencing the violence and narrating it as though he is the heroine of a campy action film: "Flip had come to save me. Just like in my dreams. 'Leave him alone!' he screamed. And from the Skycam above, we see the shock waves those words caused, rippling out in wider and wider circles, flattening everybody and everything in their path" (St. James 85). Here, we see Billy's self-awareness as a fiction, his knowledge that he is a specific kind of character operating within a particular genre.

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[83] A campy reference indeed, Tondalayo (perhaps intentionally misspelled?) refers to Tondelayo, the character played by Hedy Lamarr in the 1942 film *White Cargo*. Tondelayo is a seductress who lives on a British plantation in Africa and seduces all men who cross her path.

The beating in *Freak Show* has a different effect than it does in many other queer YA novels: instead of driving Billy into the closet, causing him to internalize his status as a martyr-target-victim, or, as in *Baby Be-Bop*, catalyzing what could be read as a kind of coming-to-resilience/resolution through a newfound storytelling capacity, Billy responds with only more excess, risking further violence with a panache generally unseen in LGBT problem novels, all in the name of challenging his queerphobic classmates to risk their worlds—to see outside their limited taxonomies of gender and sexuality. This risk further recalls chapter two of this dissertation: Billy's is a risk that flies in the face of the "at-risk" approach to queer youth, which strives to identify, reduce, and eliminate risk. Billy demonstrates not only a definitive unwillingness to reduce risk in his life (as opposed to, say, Dirk from *Baby Be-Bop*'s wish to be storyless), but also a desire *for* risk and a full commitment to increasing the overall riskiness of his school environment. Upon his return to school, Billy's level of flamboyant, risky subversiveness hits its peak: under the protection of his closeted jock lover/saviour Flip, Billy declares himself a kind of drag queen superhero, "Superfreak," with her own catchphrase: "Gender is a choice, not a life sentence!" (St. James 219). "A ray of light. A dawning realization," Billy narrates:

> If, as SUPERFREAK, I'm all powerful…
>
> And I'm finally in control…
>
> If it's up to me…
>
> Then. Well…
>
> And I knew what I had to do. …
>
> I was given this newfound strength to right wrongs and build a better future (St. James 194).

Billy runs for prom queen as Superfreak and makes it his mission to "use [his] drag to challenge the system," and only partially succeeds: he ultimately loses the prom queen election, upending any readerly expectations that the story might end in triumph and redemption (St. James 201).

Just as Billy constructs his own excessive and self-consciously artificial drag persona, he also seems to have a hand in shaping the story itself, detailing his experiences with an awareness that invites the reader to recognize the artifice of the story in which he exists. In other words, Billy demonstrates the malleability of the queer YA problem-realism novel's narrative conventions through the way he himself rereads, restructures and rewrites these conventions. In one instance, he humorously demonstrates this awareness to a friend: "[Flip]'s just been back-burnered temporarily while I deal with the overwhelming STURM UND DRANG of my BILDUNGSROMAN. Yes, I meant to say that. It's German, darling, and it refers to all the grunt and snuffle I go through coming of age in this crap factory called Florida, and trying to make sense of it all" (St. James 282). Another example of Billy's play with narrative convention is in how he describes his relationship with his parents. In a parody of the tense father/son relationship in other queer YA novels, Billy traces his troubled relationship with his own father back to the moment where Billy first expressed his distaste for barbecued meat (St. James 114-115).[84] Similarly, we also receive exaggerated and ridiculous descriptions of Billy's alcoholic mother, who is like a parodic version of Davy's mother in Donovan's novel. "So she was often drunk. Knee-walking drunk," explains Billy:

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[84] See, for example, Julie-Anne Peters' *Luna* (Little/Brown, 2004), widely recognized as the first YA novel to feature a trans character. In this novel, the father/son conflict partially emerges from Luna's desire to do stereotypically feminine chores around the house. Cris Beam's *I Am J* (Little/Brown, 2005) also features a trans character with a troubled relationship to his father.

> "Muv has a case of the dropsys," she'd say, and I'd carry her to her room, which was no easy thing. I was only eight years old, and small for my age. …
>
> "I'm just a chrysanthemum in a coal mine," she'd moan—and I would wipe away the falling tears. "I know, Muv!" I'd agree. "Me too," even though, of course, as usual, I HAD NO IDEA what she was talking about. It all just sounded tragic and glamorous, and I wanted in (St. James 95).

Crucially, elements of Billy's characterization of his mother are later revealed by Billy himself to be lies: "There are no guarantees here, people," he explains, "You pay your money, and you take your chances!" (St. James 175). Billy's unreliable narration and exaggeration of convention speak to the artifice of the queer YA problem novel more broadly, undercutting the genre's ambition to represent the "reality" of queer youth: we can't access queer youth "reality" if the queer youth in question refuses to give it to us, or rather exaggerates it and makes it feel so artificial that any claims to reality become either meaningless or impossible.

As I have argued, critics of queer YA are intent on capturing a kind of reality and visibility that have a very specific didactic relationship to its imagined young audience. *Freak Show*, however, sits uneasily among this aspiration, in that it double-takes us back to the problem novel to make claims to realism but simultaneously camps and subverts these claims. *Freak Show*'s place in queer YA is nicely articulated in a moment from the novel where a TV reporter doing a story on Billy's run for prom queen asks Billy to describe himself. First, the reporter suggests "Gay? Bisexual? Transgender?" and Billy replies that he's always been partial to "preen queen" (St. James 211). The reporter declines, insisting that "we should stick to established terms. Maybe something like 'Gender-bender'? 'Transvestite?'" and Billy suggests "TRANSVISIONARY…Gender obscurist?…Or GENDER OBLIVIATOR!" "Keep it friendly,"

replies the reporter, "what about the standard 'drag queen'?" This exchange continues until a passer-by hisses "FREAK!" at Billy upon spotting his "breathtaking androgyny." Billy is pleased, and the reporter concedes: "Okay … the title will say, Billy Bloom: Self-proclaimed Superfreak" (St. James 212).

Billy and the reporter have this back-and-forth between conventional and much queerer categories in the same way that the novel turns back and forth between problem novel and campy fantasy. In the end, they settle on "freak"—which is also the word that best describes *Freak Show*'s place in queer YA. *Freak Show* looks backward to the problem novel, but in order to subvert it and play campily with its conventions. "Camp," Love explains, "with its tender concern for outmoded elements of popular culture and its refusal to get over childhood pleasures and traumas, is a backward art" (7); indeed, *Freak Show* finds an immense amount of pleasure dwelling in the childhood of queer YA, a time and place that, according to the likes of Hartinger, the genre is supposed to have outgrown. Yet, *Freak Show* is not caught up in the negative affect of those early titles: it makes this backwards turn in order to demonstrate its own incompatibility and discomfort with the very genre to which it ostensibly belongs. In other words, *Freak Show* reads itself as a problem novel queerly through its campy narrator—or, rather, Billy Bloom reads his own story queerly while narrating it, gesturing constantly to its artifice, untruthfulness, an inability to provide something coherent, real, and resolved. This back-and-forth rhythm mimics the pace of the queer double-take: a turn back to a previous genre or way of being (i.e. the more "conventional" categories suggested by the reporter; the novel's roots in a former narrative mode of queer YA), a turn sideways to a queer reading of this genre; another turn back, a sideways turn, etc., stopping and starting, dwelling and moving.

Donovan, Selvadurai, and Hand's novels are also something of "freak" queer YA novels, in the sense that they all contain anxious looks and relations that are in excess of how critics imagine the didactic function of queer YA. These novels share the anxious temporality of the double-take: looks toward other genres in order to explore and develop queer characters and themes, and toward relations that have little to do with traditional ways of imagining "coming-out." Together, these stories undermine queer YA as a genre that coheres around visibility, revealing it to be anxiously dependent on and invested in genres outside of itself, and reinforcing the value of texts without visible LGBT content.

**Looking Back, Looking Forward**

Overall, the novels explored in this chapter invite us to ask what queer YA is saying about queer characters who do not access books with visibly queer characters, turning instead backwards, sideways, and forwards to multiple texts, genres, and relational possibilities. As a result, queer YA itself signifies in ways that far exceed its critical categorization as a genre that hinges on visibility. These books, in a way, testify to the importance of queer visibility in YA *and* the continuing significance of reading strategies for books that are not visibly queer: these are not stories about youth who feel queer or somehow different and pick up *Heather Has Two Mommies* or *Boy Meets Boy*, see themselves reflected therein, and realize that all is right with their gay selves and the world. Instead, they are stories about youth engaging with narratives that are not visibly queer, stories about the complex and multiple possibilities that emerge from those places where "how to be queer" is not directly spelled out on the page. These are stories that feature characters who anxiously enact the queer double-take: a turn back across genre—to the problem novel, Shakespeare, tragedy, comedy, melodrama—and a sideways look, to relationships with dogs and cousins, as means of postponing a trajectory towards the very

destination that critics of queer YA insist is central to the very genre that categorizes these texts. While critics maintain that a sexually transparent, stable and narratologically resolved adulthood defines contemporary queer YA and functions didactically through visibility, this is precisely what the characters in these novels strive to avoid. These are queer YA stories that attest to the instability of queer YA as a genre, but also its relatively unexamined capacity for exploding the way we conceive of relationality and reading, the way desire circulates around anxiety, the permeation of anxious affect and temporality throughout the genre, and the potential of a pedagogy of anxiety as an alternative strategy for reading queer YA.

Although Hartinger might insist that we're there, that we've reached our destination now that queer YA books contain themes and characters that do not ostensibly require reading for latent queernesses, the books themselves seem to suggest otherwise, that the trip is very much still in progress, that reading for and with anxiety is an essential and critical skill. The way these novels turn back to so many other genres also suggests that we are in need of a new lens for thinking about queer YA—and, more broadly, children's literature. In chapter one I argued for queer YA as anxious genre; next, turning back to *It Gets Better*, I will think more broadly about how Dan Savage's popular YouTube project and queer YA can provide methodological tools for reshaping children's literature as a discipline.

**Chapter Four**

Children's Literature and Sideways Growth: The Case of *It Gets Better*[85]

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"I didn't much mind [J.K.] Rowling when she was Pottering about. I've never read a word (or seen a minute) so I can't comment on whether the books were good, bad or indifferent. I did think it a shame that adults were reading them (rather than just reading them to their children, which is another thing altogether), mainly because there's [sic] so many other books out there that are surely more stimulating for grown-up minds."
- Lynn Shepherd, "If JK Rowling Cares About Writing, She Should Stop Doing It." *Huffington Post Culture*, 21 Feb. 2014.

"Although my book is intended mainly for the entertainment of boys and girls, I hope it will not be shunned by men and women on that account, for part of my plan has been to try to pleasantly remind adults of what they once were themselves, and of how they felt and thought and talked, and what queer enterprises they sometimes engaged in."
- Mark Twain (from the preface to *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), quoted in Clark 80).

**On Kiddie Lit and the "Anxiety of Immaturity"**

In her February 21, 2014 piece in the *Huffington Post UK* Culture Blog, Lynn Shepherd advises *Harry Potter* author J.K. Rowling to put away the pen and paper and clear some shelf space for other aspiring authors. Purportedly speaking on behalf of all struggling writers, Shepherd pleads: "[W]e can't wave a wand and turn our books into overnight bestsellers merely by saying the magic word. By all means keep writing for kids, or for your personal pleasure—I

[85] Portions of this chapter appeared as "On Children's Literature and the (Im)Possibility of *It Gets Better*" in *ESC: English Studies in Canada* 38.3-4 (2012): 83-104.

would never deny anyone that—but when it comes to the adult market you've had your turn." A poorly-argued and carelessly-written rant infused with palpable bitterness, Shepherd's piece is laughable, ready fodder for blogs and the vitriol innate to online comment threads, and transparent clickbait on the part of its publisher. Nonetheless, or perhaps precisely because of Shepherd's brazen attack on one of the world's most beloved and bestselling contemporary YA authors, the piece went viral, drawing responses from *Interview with the Vampire* author Anne Rice (who calls the piece a "vicious, cynical, resentful, and thoroughly ugly article"), many literary blogs, and earning coverage from BBC News (see Rice and Zurcher).

My interest in Shepherd's piece stems not from its attack on Rowling, but rather the attitude towards children's literature it evinces and the widespread attention it received. Shepherd, who openly admits to never having read the *Harry Potter* series, nonetheless relegates the books to a realm of fiction reserved for the immature (i.e. children), even insisting that it's a "shame" for adults to waste time with these books instead of consuming other, more "stimulating" titles. J.K. Rowling is free to "keep writing for kids" in Shepherd's view, presumably because children are not the target audience for "stimulating" books, and more obviously because children's literature doesn't mark the shelf space that Shepherd, herself an author of genre fiction, so desperately pursues. Unsurprisingly, Shepherd's piece was shredded by critics for these claims: writer Steven Salvatore Shaw, for example, points out that "it's obvious that Shepherd hasn't bothered to understand the genre that she's trying—and failing miserably—to critique" (qtd in Zurcher). Indeed, Shepherd seems to oppose, blindly and wholeheartedly, the sentiment behind Mark Twain's comments in his preface to *Tom Sawyer*: that adults, in spite of their ostensibly mature and sophisticated tastes for stimulating literature, can be challenged and provoked by the queernesses of children literature's child.

Regardless of Shepherd's folly, the article's publication and the widespread attention it received are symptomatic of persistent cultural anxieties surrounding genre, some of which take the shape of elitism and condescension directed towards children's literature.[86] These anxieties and elisions, as Beverly Lyon Clark points out in *Kiddie Lit* (2004), are a relatively recent phenomenon: "nineteenth-century observers did not make the sharp differentiations between literature for children and literature for adults that we do now," she explains; "Writing for an audience of boys and girls—or, better yet, writing for boys of all ages—did not necessarily diminish a writer's stature. And the audience for all fiction was still conceived of as encompassing both young and old" (81). The twentieth and twenty-first centuries, however, have seen a displacement of children's literature to a fenced-off genre that, according to Lyon, has "only a precarious purchase in the U.S. academy" (50) and repudiates the nineteenth-century belief that "children's reading should overlap with adults' reading" (57).[87] This desire to keep children's literature separate from everything else, Lyon maintains, is partially the product of what she calls a "cultural anxiety of immaturity" that disavows those provocative childhood queernesses that Twain places at the heart of *Tom Sawyer*'s broad appeal (49).

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[86] Shepherd's article also clearly bespeaks a number of anxieties surrounding the novel as commodity, the state of the publishing industry, celebrity culture, and the convergence of "high" and "low" culture.

[87] Similarly, Karín Lesnik-Oberstein (2004) suggests that "the idea that it is somehow suspect to study children's literature in an academic context persists widely, both in the general media, in wider academia, and in some children's literature criticism itself" (1). Of course, children's literature as an area of academic study has grown significantly in the decade since Lyon and Lesnik-Oberstein's books were published, especially since queer childhood studies have become somewhat à la mode in academia. Lyon herself concedes: "Now, at the turn of a new century, the positioning of children's literature seems to be entering a new phase. Thanks to literary criticism that has questioned the received canon, thanks to feminist and other criticism that has explored and celebrated the hitherto marginal, the academy may be becoming more willing to take children's literature seriously again" (76). Nonetheless, the circulation of articles like Shepherd's point to a persistent cultural uncertainty about the "seriousness" of children's literature and its relevance for adult readers, whether their interest is casual or academic.

My goal in this chapter is to pick up on my argument from chapter one, wherein I position queer YA as an anxious genre that perpetually rehearses a nervous uncertainty about its own constitution, and take a step back to consider queer YA's relation to children's literature more broadly, entering the discussion via another node in queer YA's affective economy of anxiety: the "anxiety of immaturity" that circulates around and within children's literature through attempts to render the genre coherent and distinct. Following Stockton, I aim to bring children's literature, young adult fiction, and popular culture into lateral contact to further demonstrate the blurriness and permeability of those boundaries that so precariously divide genres from one another. I take up the *It Gets Better* project as a cultural site for the convergence of children's literature and adult fictions to argue that, while anxieties surrounding immaturity and visibility speak to a desire for discrete borders between genres, the circulation and adaptation of cultural texts like *It Gets Better* across and through multiple genres—what I will refer to as a text and/or genre's "sideways growth"—demand that we improve and widen our theoretical lenses for the study of culture, broadly speaking. In other words, if children's literature has been neglected by the academy, I will argue that it's impossible to do so any longer given that the theoretical lenses of children's literature allow us to explore with such inventiveness the textual and cultural manifestations of that perpetually provocative and anxious relationship between adult and child. I will conclude the chapter with a turn towards another manifestation of generic sideways growth: fanfiction, specifically, slash that mashes up *It Gets Better* with the popular television show *Glee*.

In this chapter, I attempt to avoid the trap of children's literature criticism as described by Lesnik-Oberstein, who argues that critics have been largely unable (at least circa 2004, when her book was published) to step outside of the constrictive idea that "children's literature criticism is

about how to choose books for children" ("Introduction" 4). "The new theory [of children's literature] is permitted to question or change everything about the criticism, at least apparently," she writes, "but the final goal of children's literature criticism itself—knowing how to choose the right book for the child—remains constant and unaffected" ("Introduction" 5). While a partial aim of this chapter is to consider how criticism of children's literature can benefit from an engagement with texts outside the purview of "children's literature" per se, I'm not trying to "improve" the usefulness of children's literature theory for selecting texts for young readers. Instead, I bring theories of children's literature to bear on texts outside of the genre—specifically, *It Gets Better*—to illustrate children's literature's usefulness for reading a broad range of texts. This move springs from anxiety in two senses: it takes up anxieties like Shepherd's that attempt to keep children's literature contained to a certain space on the shelf, both literally and figuratively, instead allowing children's literature to bleed freely into other genres; and it demonstrates the utility of children's literature and and its theories for thinking about adult concerns and anxieties, as illustrated by *It Gets Better.* To elaborate, I now turn to a more in-depth examination of Dan Savage and Terry Miller's popular YouTube project.

### ***It Gets Better* and Children's Literature: An Overview**

In response to a devastating rash of reported queer youth suicides in the fall of 2010, American writer Savage and his partner Miller founded the *It Gets Better* project, a website inviting adults to submit videos that offer messages of hope and encouragement to youth who may be struggling with their sexualities in difficult environments.[88] Fuelled by contributions from public figures like Barack Obama and a host of celebrities including Ellen DeGeneres, *It*

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[88] In the fall of 2010, five American gay teens took their own lives in the span of three weeks (see "Raymond Chase," McKinley, and the opening vignette of chapter one for a reminder of these incidents). For more on *It Gets Better*, see www.itgetsbetter.org (last accessed 29 Sept 2014).

*Gets Better* has garnered widespread attention and received over 50,000 user-created video submissions that have been viewed more than 50 million times ("What is"). The *It Gets Better* book, co-edited by Savage and Miller, was released in March 2011 and appeared on the *New York Times* bestseller list within weeks, and an *It Gets Better* documentary special profiling several queer teens was broadcast on MTV and Logo in February 2012.

As *It Get Better*'s popularity surged, however, critiques of the project quickly surfaced.[89] Tavia Nyong'o notes that *It Gets Better* primarily hails an upwardly mobile class of white gay youth while excluding those for whom adulthood does not necessarily bring a reprieve from forms of anti-queer violence—particularly, Nyong'o writes, "gender nonconforming and/or trans" people. Sponsored by the Gay-Straight Alliance of San Francisco, the *Make It Better* project took aim at the passivity implicit in *It Gets Better*—the idea that simply enduring adolescence will result in improved social conditions—by offering practical tools for taking action against homophobia in schools and communities and on a national level.[90] In a *Guardian* article, Jasbir Puar expresses concern with the narrowing of queerness' significance for both adults and youth: she argues that *It Gets Better* showcases a narrow class of successful adults and reinforces the idea that queer youth are inevitably prone to suicide and bullying. For Puar, many adult *It Gets Better* contributors are invested in versions of the family that stray little—if at all—from the heteronormative, and narratives of upward mobility that "[echo] the now discredited 'pull yourself up from the bootstraps' immigrant motto" ("In the Wake"). She concludes: "And thus ['it gets better'] might turn out to mean, you get more normal" ("In the Wake"). And in a frank Facebook post, queer activist Charlotte Cooper challenges the idea that queer youth require

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[89] Although many of these critiques are authored by academics, most have been published in online venues that seek to mirror *It Gets Better*'s broad reach.
[90] As of 29 Sept 2014, the project's url (www.makeitbetterproject.org) had expired.

adult stories to survive, writing: "I wish there was some kind of an *It Gets Better* campaign in which fucked up queer teenagers give reassurance and advice to windy and pompous bourgie grown-up homos."

There is a provocative tension between *It Gets Better*'s stated purpose and the way it seems to circulate. On one hand, *It Gets Better* claims to be about queer youth: the project directly addresses itself to this audience and the ostensible crisis in which it finds itself.[91] As Savage notes in his introduction to the *It Gets Better* book*,* "the point of the project is to give despairing LGBT kids *hope*. The point is to let them know that things *do* get better, using the examples of our own lives" (6). On the other hand, taking into account the ever-growing array of responses to and critiques of *It Gets Better*, the project appears to be more about adult anxieties surrounding how queer youth should be addressed than about queer youth themselves. As it circulates through a variety of media, *It Gets Better* accumulates (mostly adult-authored) personal stories that echo the project's primary, teleological narrative of development and resilience, and an expansive body of (mostly adult-authored) critical interventions that interrogate the pedagogical value and appropriateness of the message that "it gets better" while gesturing, more broadly, to the project's political failings. In other words, *It Gets Better* does not circulate according to the ways that it imagines its audience.

My focus here is this tension between *It Gets Better*'s purported objective of providing youth with hope and its circulation as a venue for adults to rehearse their anxieties about the relationship between adulthood, visible queerness, and queer youth. *It Gets Better* addresses youth, but its performance of addressing youth is not solely for or even about youth: it is also for

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[91] *It Gets Better*, I argue, is more invested in an identity-based LGBT politic than a queer one. Nonetheless, in this chapter (as in the other chapters of this dissertation), I use "queer" in tandem with "youth" to describe a range of non-heteronormative sexual identifications, counter-identifications and practices that do not necessarily result in a concrete sense of sexual identity.

its own authors, about affirming a stable and visible adult-identified subject position in opposition to a narrative of tumultuous queer adolescence, and about determining the "correct" pedagogical approach to queer youth. While *It Gets Better* belongs to a variety of genres—essay, testimonial, autobiography—the adult/youth relationship it evinces suggests, above all else, children's literature.[92] This is perhaps most immediately evident in that Puar, Nyong'o, Cooper, and other critics of the project approach *It Gets Better* using the classic methodologies of children's literature, as described by Lesnik-Oberstein: although these particular critics are not necessarily in pursuit of "the right book" for the child reader, they are most definitely concerned with illustrating how and why *It Gets Better* is, for a variety of political and pedagogical reasons, the wrong set of stories to be circulating among queer youth; the project instead functions as an assemblage of narratives that serves the investments and attachments of its adult storytellers more than its young queer audience. Recall, from my introduction, Jacqueline Rose's assertion that children's fiction "rests on the idea that there is a child who is simply there to be addressed and that speaking to it might be simple" (1). The genre, she continues, "sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver), but where neither of them enter the space in between" (1-2). As a result, Rose claims, children's literature is impossible: not because it cannot be written, but because it rests on "the impossible

[92] *It Gets Better*'s audience, as imagined by Savage and Miller, might be better described as "teenagers" or "youth" rather than "children" (although Savage uses the word "kids" to describe his audience in the introduction to the *It Gets Better* book), so it may be more accurate to call *It Gets Better* "young adult literature" instead of "children's literature," especially given that the rest of this dissertation is specifically concerned with what I call queer YA. For the purposes of this chapter, however, since I draw on the critical tools that emerge from the study of what is generally understood as "children's literature," I use this term to describe *It Gets Better* and "youth" to categorize its audience while recognizing nonetheless that the project circulates among children, teenagers/youth, and adults alike. Categorizing *It Gets Better* as children's literature, in a sense, also reinforces the anxious boundaries that divide these genres: *It Gets Better* is children's literature and queer YA and a book for adults, but its status within each genre is slippery and tenuous.

relation between adult and child" (1). In other words, the child of children's literature is always a product of adult fantasies about what childhood is or should be: there is no real child to whom children's literature is addressed (Rose 10).

While acknowledging the tragic fact that real queer youth are taking their own lives as a result of hostile and oppressive social conditions, I want to put Savage and Miller's project into conversation with Rose to consider the (im)possibility of *It Gets Better*. The project addresses itself to troubled queer youth but, as I will illustrate, it is ultimately more about the relation between adult-identified storyteller and imagined audience than anything else. Yet, *It Gets Better*'s circulation suggests that Rose's "middle space" between adult and child is not as untouched as she claims. The project is founded upon an impossible adult/youth relationship, yes, but this impossibility—and the exclusions produced through the limited way that *It Gets Better* imagines its audience—is what drives *It Gets Better*'s widespread circulation across media and the large body of critique it has generated from a variety of sources. In other words, *It Gets Better* both supports and complicates Rose's argument about impossibility. The project is structured around fantasies about a particular young queer audience, and critics meditate anxiously about whether or not *It Gets Better*'s pedagogical approach is the correct one given this same audience, but these responses and critiques produce a discursive space that interrogates the adult/youth relation upon which the project rests. While we could say that *It Gets Better* enters Rose's untouched middle space, drawing on Stockton enables us to acquire a different metaphor that conceptualizes the project's circulation and its effects with greater nuance while enriching our critical approaches to children's literature more broadly: the notion of "growing sideways" (11).

Queer theorists including Stockton have recently levelled critique at sites that, like *It Gets Better*, privilege futurity as a normative temporal orientation. Puar reads *It Gets Better* through Laurent Berlant's concept of slow death, a "concomitant yet different temporality of relating to living and dying" ("The Cost").[93] As discussed in chapter one, Edelman's *No Future* attacks the ideology of "reproductive futurism" that functions as the "organizing principle of communal relations" (2), and Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* explores the AIDS crisis and youth subcultures as disruptive forces in heteronormative and capitalist commitments to reproduction and longevity. Recall that in *The Queer Child*, Stockton argues that we require a new spatial metaphor for growth since our language of child and adolescent development is impoverished. To account for how queer or "proto-gay" children grow and delay growth in ways that exceed what she calls "the vertical, forward-motion metaphor of growing up," Stockton introduces the metaphor of "growing sideways," which "suggests that the width of a person's experience or ideas, their motives or their motions, may pertain at any age, bringing 'adults' and 'children' into lateral contact of surprising sorts" (11). Using sideways growth as a heuristic for conceptualizing *It Gets Better*'s accumulation of critiques and responses helps us imagine how the project brings youth and adults into the kind of contact Stockton describes. Rose maintains that children's literature "is clearly about [the impossible relation between adult and child], but it has the remarkable characteristic of being about something which it hardly ever talks of" (1); what Stockton's argument provides, in the context of *It Gets Better*, is a method for thinking about how the sideways growth of a text—or even an entire genre—creates space that *does* address and critique this relation in meaningful and productive ways.

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[93] Puar, summarizing Berlant's argument, explains that "slow death describes populations that are marked out for wearing out." For more, see Berlant's "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)."

Examining *It Gets Better*'s sideways growth allows us to conceive of the project's circulatory accumulations as part of the project itself: as Stockton brings adults and children into contact, so too am I putting the project's "inside" and "outside" into conversation, interrogating not only the stories published directly within *It Gets Better* but also how (if at all) the project circulates amongst and is responded to by audiences of all ages. In other words, this is not a linear mode of analysis that traces the development of *It Gets Better*'s adaptation from website to book to documentary and focuses only on the project's adult-authored and youth-aimed stories, but rather a method for textual analysis that considers non-linear circulations and accumulations that may occur and grow outside of how a text seems to imagine its own circulation.

In what follows, I will illustrate the following claims about *It Gets Better*: (1) as a work of children's literature, *It Gets Better* rests on an impossible adult/youth relation in that it invents the youth it seeks to address (there is no "real" youth behind the idea of *It Gets Better*); (2) this impossibility is responsible for the project's political failure since the youth *It Gets Better* imagines is limited and exclusionary, or to paraphrase Rose, the project believes that there is a queer youth who is simply there and easily spoken to; (3) precisely because of its impossibility and political failure, the project succeeds as productive cultural discourse in its generation of countless responses and critiques; and (4) the circulation of *It Gets Better* troubles Rose's argument about the middle space between child and adults, since the project demonstrates a sideways growth that brings adults and youth into contact with one another. Thinking *It Gets Better* as children's literature permits a critique of the project that points to its (im)possibilities, failures, and successes, and it also has the potential to reshape our approaches to children's literature more broadly.

**Political Failure and the Impossibility of *It Gets Better***

Before addressing *It Gets Better*'s political failures, which spring from the limited version of queer youth the project imagines, I want to acknowledge some of the project's strengths, many of which are shared with visibly queer YA (as discussed in chapter one). Without a doubt, the wide reach and popularity of the *It Gets Better* campaign contributes to increased awareness about homophobia, bullying, and queer youth suicide, social issues that persist in spite of the ostensible progress being made in the realm of liberal gay rights in our North American context. We can safely speculate that many queer youth who regularly confront homophobia or feel isolated due to an uneasy fit with normative expectations surrounding gender and sexuality have been touched by an *It Gets Better* video. As Savage writes in the introduction to the *It Gets Better* book, "thousands of LGBT adults who thought they were going to contribute a video found themselves talking with LGBT youth, offering them not just hope but advice, insight, and something too many LGBT youth lack: the ear of a supportive adult who understands what they're going through" (6). Since, as Savage notes, many *It Gets Better* videos are created by openly LGBT adults, we can also credit the project for heightening the visibility of non-heterosexual identities, which might in turn provide young people with a broader sense of sexual possibility. For youth who grow up in areas where queerness seems invisible, *It Gets Better* may provide them with a sense that a non-heterosexual existence is, in fact, possible.

Critics concerned with the political failure of *It Gets Better*, on the other hand, primarily emphasize two points. First, as Puar puts it, the project has undeniable "affective attachments to neoliberalism": investments in the growth, development, and productivity of the individual as opposed to a broader interest in social collectivity and the forging of creative modes of relationality ("The Cost"). *It Gets Better* largely suggests that the ideal telos of an individual's

development is a monogamous relationship, stable career, and family—all of which constitutes a heteronormative model of existence according to queer theorists, and when replicated by people in LGBT communities, is frequently dubbed "homonormative" and understood to have close ties with neoliberalism.[94] The queer critique of neoliberalism and hetero/homonormativity is lucidly articulated by Warner: "Like most stigmatized groups," he asserts, "gays and lesbians were always tempted to believe that the way to overcome stigma was to win acceptance by the dominant culture, rather than to change the self-understanding of that culture" (50). Critics of *It Gets Better* take issue with the project's emphasis on acceptance and conformity, and its overall disavowal of the potential of queerness to create and reshape nonnormative social worlds. Next, and most important to this chapter, these critics gesture to a longstanding critique of how queer youth identity gets narrated and interpreted: adults often understand queer youth as Eric Rofes' "Martyr-Target-Victims"—the voiceless, passive, suicide-prone victims of inevitable anti-queer violence and bullying (41). As Susan Talburt argues, this trope not only limits the complexity of the discourse surrounding queer youth, but it also "[constitutes] a production of subject positions in which adults administer a group with problems and needs—and participate in inventing those whom we would help" (18). Indeed, the way *It Gets Better* coheres around a very specific idea of queer youth is what structures the project's impossibility and is responsible for its political failure. As I will illustrate, *It Gets Better* imagines a limited and exclusionary version of queer youth that is ultimately more about its adult authors. Inspired by Rose, "instead of asking what children want, or need, from literature," I want to ask "what it is that adults, through literature, want or demand of the child" (137). More specifically, in this case, I will explore what adults ask of queer youth through *It Gets Better*: what investments, in other words, adults have in the

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[94] See, for example, Warner's *The Trouble With Normal* and Duggan's "The New Homonormativity."

pedagogical approach to and representation of certain versions and narratives of queer youth, and the anxieties—as manifested in *It Gets Better* narratives—that these investments make apparent.

*It Gets Better* presumes a queer youth audience with specific kinds of mobility.[95] According to the project, to survive the transition into adulthood queer youth must be (1) physically and geographically mobile, moving from small towns to big cities that are ostensibly more accepting of non-heterosexuals; (2) upwardly-mobile in terms of class and career; and (3) able to move through a linear and teleological narrative, one that sees queer youth grow from troubled martyr-target-victims into successful adults who openly embrace an essential and stable sexual identity. While Savage notes the centrality and importance of hope to *It Gets Better*, the project's version of hope has particular content that can be accessed only by making particular movements through time and space that are available only to particular individuals. *It Gets Better* fails politically in part because of these exclusionary spatial and temporal assumptions: spatial in that the project suggests that queer youth must physically relocate in order to survive, and temporal in the project's insistence on futurity and rehearsal of a simplistic, linear narrative of progression from tumultuous adolescence into stable adulthood.

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[95] For the purposes of this chapter, I have limited my analysis to the hundred and five *It Gets Better* stories contained in the book version of the project. Featuring textual transcripts of videos curated by Savage and Miller as well as a handful of original contributions from gay public figures, the book also functions as an archive of core texts, those ostensibly deemed by Savage and Miller as truest to the project's central narrative. In the book, there are undeniable similarities across stories that raise questions about who gets to be a representative teller of an *It Gets Better* tale and why, how contributors reimagine and renarrate their lives in relation to an imagined audience of young queer martyr-target-victims, and the significance of moments of disruption in the repetition of these stories. The *It Gets Better* book is the clearest embodiment of the project's impossibility: it exists to reinforce and sell the project's foundational message while containing the possibilities for resistance to this message that circulate readily through other media like the internet and the project's own YouTube site. In other words, the *It Gets Better* book seeks to widen the middle space between youth audience and adult author.

The narrative framework of the vast majority of *It Gets Better* stories can be described as follows: I was raised in a conservative small town and/or in a conservative family and/or as part of a conservative religious community. I was bullied violently at school, felt isolated as a result, and contemplated suicide. I endured high school and moved to a big city and/or attended a college with a diverse campus. I found a community of like-minded queers, accepted my true self, and came out. Love, a successful career, and a family followed. Many queers have lived and/or are living lives that echo this narrative, and I do not intend to diminish the real experiences of *It Get Better*'s storytellers. However, with a few small exceptions, reading the *It Gets Better* book cover-to-cover is like reading and re-reading this story over and over again. Under the guise of telling one hundred and five stories, the *It Gets Better* book essentially tells only one, and its characters are almost always the same: adult-identified authors who have made the transition from troubled adolescence into the safety and sexual stability of adulthood, a place from which they can directly address their audience of martyr-target-victims and didactically advise them to follow a specific narrative.

A key plot point in almost every chapter is the narrator's relocation from a small town to a city or college. Brinae Lois Gaudet explains that "the cool thing about high school…is it doesn't last forever….Once you get out of high school you are free….You can go see the world. You can do things; you can get an education; you can make something of your life" (28). Joseph Odysseus Mastro counsels queer youth to move as soon as possible: "If you're in high school and you're gay, bisexual, or transgender, and you're being tormented, find some way to get through school and then get to San Francisco, get to the Bay Area, get to Miami or Chicago or New York City" (209). And A.Y. Daring stresses the critical importance of this type of mobility: "I can attest to the fact that I honestly, legitimately, literally do not know of a single queer adult

who graduated from high school and went on to bigger cities and bigger schools and didn't eventually find a place where they belong" (65). In Daring's story and many others, non-mobile queer youth, youth unable to readily relocate, youth who simply choose to stay put, and their opportunities for finding acceptance and community are left excluded and unimagined.

Of the hundred and five stories in the *It Gets Better* book, there are two narratives that deviate from the standard "move, or else" story. Stephen D. Lorimor is the only contributor to claim that "college was worse" (238). In her playful story entitled "Rockin' the Flannel Shirt," Krissy Mahan extols the virtues of being a rural-dwelling queer. "As a person who lives in the country and doesn't have a lot of money, I can tell you that not all gay people are urban or rich," she writes; "I've been really happy being a big rural dyke. So, if you want to live in the country, or just can't move away, you'll be fine" (71). Mahan's narrative is also noteworthy for the way it encourages movement away from community and into relative isolation: "One of the nice things about being in the country is you don't have to deal with people all the time. There's land out there, and you can just get away. Go build yourself a little fort in the woods….You'll be a butch dyke and you'll be hot. Everyone will love it. It will be good" (71). It is striking that stories like Mahan's are so rare in *It Gets Better*; her account is lost in a mass of pro-urban narratives that demand particular types of physical and geographic movements from queer youth.

In the standard *It Gets Better* story, moving to an urban centre enables upward-mobility, career growth and the accumulation of physical, emotional, and financial assets: "Do what you love to do," writes Dave Holmes, "and I guarantee you there is a place in this world where someone will pay you to do it. So find it" (191). While it is undeniably important for young queers to recognize that they too can obtain employment, the problem as Puar illustrates it lies in the simplistic way that successful queer adulthood is equated with a successful career and

particular forms of neoliberal relationality ("In the Wake"). "I am a gay man who loves his life," proclaims Darren Hayes, former member of pop duo Savage Garden; "I have a career that I love. I've got a partner that I adore beyond all comprehension. And I am surrounded by friends and family and a community who accept me and support me for who I am" (151). Jenn and Erika Wagner-Martin advise readers that "we're not so different from those kids from high school who used to harass us and pick on us for being different….I have my family. I have my life. I get up and go to work every morning" (97). And Jessica Leshnoff claims that she and her partner are "ridiculously normal. As in: We fall asleep on the couch together and watch movies and go grocery shopping and do laundry and go to Starbucks and make meat loaf….And you'll have that one day, too. You really will. I promise" (252). In his introduction, Savage remarks: "without gay role models to mentor and support them, without the examples our lives represent, [youth] couldn't see how they might get from bullied gay teenager to safe and happy gay adult" (3). Indeed, *It Gets Better* imagines that queer youth must make the exact transition from precarious adolescence to the sanctuary of adulthood that Savage describes. Conversely, however, I ask of Savage's dialectic: can "happy gay adults" imagine themselves as such without enacting a retrospective turn, as described in my previous chapter, towards the image of the "bullied gay teenager"? Is it the troubled gay teen who requires the image of the happy gay adult to survive, or vice-versa?

The more *It Gets Better*'s grand narrative is staged, the more the adult-identified speaker's fragile subject position and, concurrently, the project's impossibility become clear: through its direct address to an imagined audience of young martyr-target-victims, *It Gets Better* functions primarily as a medium for the anxious rehearsal of fixed and resolved adult identities that exist by virtue of their opposition to this audience. The project's retrospective narratives of

movement through space, class, and time, told with the distinct pedagogical force of a second person address, evince contributors who imagine themselves as having navigated the martyr-target-victim/out-and-proud narrative and achieved an ending that enables them to become *It Gets Better* storytellers: adulthood is a vantage point from which they look knowingly back on youth as a period of flux and turmoil that ultimately produces a complete adult self. In this way, the turning-back of adult-identified *It Gets Better* contributors mirrors the turning-back of queer YA critics, as discussed in chapters two and three; just as YA critics reflect on the "adolescence" of queer YA—i.e. the problem novel—with the intent of asserting the superior (or, at least, much improved) state of contemporary queer YA, so do *It Gets Better* contributors turn back to their own adolescences—most of which read like problem novel excerpts—in order to assert and buttress a similar narrative of progression and improvement. Moreover, similar to how critics like Hartinger describe the ideal queer YA character as sexually resolved, *It Gets Better* is rife with the language of essentialism, as though sexuality concretizes and becomes transparent once uncovered and is never again subject to change: "Finding my true sexuality has changed my life and I wouldn't change anything that I went through for the world," writes Hunter Brady; "I have found who I really am and I am happy now. And that is all that matters" (144). Brady is a 16-year-old, not an adult in the traditional sense, and yet she qualifies as an *It Gets Better* storyteller because she has successfully progressed from martyr-target-victim to stable, confident bisexual. The "I" in *It Gets Better* is adult-identified, if not traditionally so: a subject position that has earned the pedagogical capacity to imagine and address an audience of queer youth, an audience that serves to shore up the speaker herself.

The speaker's adult-identified position, however, is ultimately always a precarious one; the repetitive rehearsal of the *It Gets Better* backwards turn serves as an attempt to mask this

underlying anxiety. Again, similar to critics of queer YA (who are concerned about the uncertain future of queer YA and its potential effects on readers), the anxiety of *It Gets Better* storytellers stems in part from a desire for the project to fulfill its stated objective of contributing to a remedy for the ongoing crisis of queer youth suicide and the uncertain future of queerness that this crisis represents. Queer YA critics want to fashion the genre into something hopeful that represents a particular version of a queer future; *It Gets Better* contributors want the project to function in a similar manner. For this objective to be accomplished, however, stories must be made to fit the provided mould: queer YA stories must contain visibly queer and sexually resolved characters; *It Gets Better* stories must be recounted from a sexually resolved adult-identified position that can turn back and narrate an overcoming of the martyr-target-victimhood of adolescence. Anxieties are most palpable—in criticism of *It Gets Better* and the stories themselves—when these stories are seen to not fit, or are interpreted as pedagogical misfires.

The anxious cracks in the rickety foundation of the *It Gets Better* storyteller's position slip to the surface in Lynn Breedlove's story. He writes: "when I heard about this project, I thought, 'I never got bullied so I have nothing to offer,' but then I remembered they always called me 'weird' in grammar school, and I didn't have many pals" (228). *It Gets Better* requires a martyr-target-victim narrative in order to assume the position of the pedagogical "I." This is what enables Barack Obama—president of a country where, despite his pro-marriage equality stance, homophobia remains institutionalized on numerous levels—to tell an *It Gets Better* story, in which he claims that "I don't know what it's like to be picked on for being gay. But I do know what it's like to grow up feeling that sometimes you don't belong" (9). All individual differences may apply, so long as they narrate hardship, culminate in resilience and success, and participate in the address to *It Gets Better*'s imagined audience. Breedlove, however, goes on to deviate

slightly and tell one of the few stories in the *It Gets Better* volume that celebrates queer creativity and its potential for imagining non-heteronormative social forms: “If I had had a family who said they would love me only if I pretended to be someone I wasn’t, things might have turned out differently,” he writes; “but if you have that kind of family, you can make your own family who will love you unconditionally. That’s why queers call each other Family. We create one that will love us for who we are. We have drag moms and dads, dyke uncles, and matriarchal mamas” (230). Breedlove’s version of the family differs dramatically from the others in the collection in its view of social and sexual relations as fluid and changeable: queers can remain relationally creative instead of accepting *It Gets Better*’s telos and insisting on the sedimentation of their sexual selves.

*It Gets Better*’s repetitiveness recalls Judith Butler’s “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” in which she describes heterosexuality as “an incessant and *panicked* imitation of its own naturalized idealization” (as described in chapter two of this dissertation) (314). Butler continues:

> That heterosexuality is always in the act of elaborating itself is evidence that it is perpetually at risk, that is, that it ‘knows’ its own possibility of becoming undone: hence, its compulsion to repeat which is at once a foreclosure of that which threatens its coherence. That it can never eradicate that risk attests to its profound dependency upon the homosexuality that it seeks fully to eradicate and never can or that it seeks to make second, but which is always already there as a prior possibility (314).

In this case, *It Gets Better*’s repetition functions to sell the project’s grand narrative, disavow its exclusions, reinforce its imagined audience, and sustain the fantasies of stable sexual identity expounded by the project’s adult storytellers. In terms of the impossible relationship between

adult and youth the project evinces, minor variations in narrative like Mahan and Breedlove's stories are insignificant. All *It Gets Better* stories are about how adults (or adult-identified youth) imagine pedagogical and temporal relationships to the youth on the other end of *It Gets Better*: the project's dominant repetition of this primary narrative produces the exclusions and adult/youth relationship that are responsible for *It Gets Better*'s impossibility and political failure.

A tragic example of this failure involves Jamey Rodemeyer, who committed suicide weeks after having uploaded an *It Gets Better* video.[96] Rodemeyer's death is a brutal illustration of Puar's point (and the message inherent to the *Make It Better* project) that *It Gets Better*'s focus on futurity "lets the politics of the now off the hook" ("The Cost"). According to Puar, *It Gets Better* disregards "what suicide might actually be, which is an inability to reconcile the current moment with some projection of the future itself. It's an impassive temporality" ("The Cost"). In other words, *It Gets Better* attempts to force a temporal identification between adult and youth where one may be impossible. As I have illustrated, *It Gets Better* rehearses a linear, largely adult-authored, future-oriented narrative of growth and development in service of an imagined audience of young queers who have access to the forms of mobility that survival ostensibly requires. What Rodemeyer's case demonstrates is that it is possible to participate in the repetition of this narrative—to speak from the position of the adult-identified pedagogical "I"—without being able to live it; Rodemeyer, it would seem, could believe in the possibility of getting better but could not reconcile this subject position with the daily torment and bullying he was experiencing. In this sense, Rodemeyer's death points to the political failure of *It Gets Better*: the future-oriented mobility and stability the project demands is incompatible with how

[96] See Praetorius for coverage of the suicide and a link to Rodemeyer's video.

Rodemeyer, like many queer youth, experience the present. This case further illustrates how the adult-identified "I" of *It Gets Better* requires the invention and pedagogical maintenance of young martyr-target-victims on the other side of the project to sustain the notion that adulthood brings safety and stability: the youth of *It Gets Better* is the child of children's literature, "the [child] which the category itself sets in place," in Rose's words, "the one which it needs to believe is there for its own purposes" (10). Tragically, Rodemeyer's case illuminates the impossible relationship that structures *It Gets Better*: the project's imagined youth audience failed to properly bolster Rodemeyer's adult-identified "I," the subject position that, according to *It Gets Better*, is supposed to be secure and hopeful.

Returning to my earlier point, although Mahan and Breedlove's stories mark moments of dissonance in *It Get Better*'s dominant narrative that are nonetheless part of the impossible relationship that structures the project, these stories also have a different simultaneous effect: they cause *It Gets Better* to grow sideways, producing critique, indicating the project's overall exclusions, and enabling the project to circulate in ways that contribute to its success as productive cultural discourse. As I have argued, the critical attention *It Gets Better* receives has as much to do with the project's status as a cultural phenomenon as it does with the concerns of children's literature criticism: that it is teaching (or attempting to teach) young people the "wrong thing." Precisely because *It Gets Better* is founded on an impossible relation and fails politically on a number of levels, the project circulates in a way that makes something possible. This possibility is the work of critical cultural discourse, accomplished by Breedlove and Mahan's stories—which provide us with narratives about creative social relations that challenge hegemonic notions of age, family, community, and sociality—and political critiques from the likes of Nyong'o and Puar. These critiques and responses take place both inside and outside *It*

*Gets Better*, in a space that is best understood as *It Gets Better*'s sideways growth, which I explore in the following section. These moments are noteworthy interruptions of the forward-oriented progression of *It Gets Better*'s narrative; many are moments of delay that see the future as queer question mark (Stockton, "*Lost*") instead of a zone of stability, and they challenge and disrupt the project's teleological conceptions of growth and growing.

**Children's Literature, Sideways Growth, and the Possibility of *It Gets Better***

*It Gets Better* is striking in its ready and frequent adaptation and mutation into a variety of forms—from web-based project into book into documentary film—and from these core *It Gets Better* texts spring countless responses, ranging in tone from critical to satirical to celebratory, which themselves take multiple shapes. *It Gets Better* circulates feverishly though and across media and technology such that the project grows sideways, bringing adults and youth into a kind of contact that Rose suggests is impossible in children's literature. Mapping *It Gets Better*'s sideways growth not only sheds new critical light on the project itself, but also provides us with a useful methodology for children's literature that approaches the ostensibly untouched middle space between child and adult.

Several children's literature scholars have taken issue with this "space in between" aspect of Rose's argument. Karen Sánchez-Eppler and Robin Bernstein assert that the child at the other end of children's literature is engaged in critical, material reading practices that transcend Rose's "reader, product, receiver" version of the child (2). Sánchez-Eppler argues that tracking how children destroy, scribble in, and cut up books provides new insight into the literary history of childhood (151). Specifically, Sánchez-Eppler looks at how the Dickinson children used their bedroom walls and door as a scrapbook of sorts: she claims that child readers repurpose and resignify texts through material destruction while remaining deeply entrenched in broader

cultural narratives. Taking a similar tack, Bernstein draws on Frances Eliza Hodgson's recollection of how she used dolls to reimagine and stage moments from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Bernstein posits a triangulation of play, literature, and material culture as an entry point into Rose's middle space between the empowered adult author and the passive child reader: "it is precisely these connections that deliver children's literature beyond the paradigm of 'impossibility,'" she writes (167). "*Pace* Rose," Bernstein continues, "children not only receive literature, they receive the co-scripts of narratives and material culture and then collectively forge a third prompt: play itself" (167).

In addition to material evidence of children's interaction and play with texts, the sideways growth of a text or a genre includes what Peter Hunt calls "the peritext—that is, the written (and graphic) material that 'surrounds' the story" as well as "the relationship of the meaning made to things 'outside' the text: the ideological implications of the children's book—indeed, the implications of reading at all" (4). Along these lines, Marah Gubar uses children's theatre as an example of how material outside of a dramatic text itself (i.e. playbills and children's documented responses to productions) and a consideration of the actual theatregoing practices of children are integral to determining whether or not analysis of a text under the children's literature aegis will be productive. "Cutting children out of the loop closes down inquiry," she writes, "whereas acknowledging that their reading, viewing, and playing practices can function as one of the fibers that help determine whether a text counts as children's literature opens it up" (215). As mentioned in chapters two and three, Nat Hurley also addresses the possibility of a middle space between adults and the child of children's literature. In an essay that explores how the ambiguities and impossibilities of children's literature and the way readers play with and respond to texts can be exciting and critically productive, Hurley writes:

> One of the aspects of children's literature that I have always found fascinating is its insubordinations: its sites of dissident or non-conforming children, its failures, its surprising circulations, its appropriations—even its misuses—and especially, to invoke Jacqueline Rose, its impossibilities. The stretch for impossibility makes for some of the best and unruly works of children's literature (119).

I argue that these circulations, appropriations, and misuses, along with the narrative destruction, reconfiguration, and play examined in Sánchez-Eppler, Bernstein, and Gubar's essays, are aptly described as the sideways growth of particular texts and—in the case of children's literature—an entire genre.[97] These approaches to children's literature speak to sideways growth without naming it as such: they track the non-linear circulation and productivity of texts, the material contact between text and child, and analyze the significance of this contact.

*It Gets Better*'s sideways growth includes not only its official incarnations (website into book into documentary), but also what the project generates and accumulates as it travels across media and technology and becomes reshaped and reimagined by people other than Savage and Miller and authors of *It Gets Better* stories. In a way, *It Gets Better*'s sideways growth is the most interesting, productive, and successful thing about it. Gabrielle Rivera's story, for example, not only brings the ostensible inside and outside of the project into lateral contact, but also critiques the adult/youth relationship at the core of *It Gets Better*. Rivera's clip first made the rounds on social media when it was posted to a blog under the title "It Doesn't Get Better. You Get Stronger" (Cage). Rivera's story drew attention because her message seemed to fly in the

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[97] A good example of reader appropriation and "misuse" in the context of children's literature is slash fiction, erotic stories written by fans that feature same-sex character couplings. I would argue that slash fiction is an excellent example of how children's literature grows sideways to take up a space that is both inside and outside of the genre itself. For more on slash, see Catherine Tosenberger's "Homosexuality at the Online Hogwarts: Harry Potter Slash Fanfiction," and the upcoming section of this chapter.

face of *It Gets Better* while calling the project on its light treatment of race and class issues. "As a gay woman of color," Rivera begins,

> I just want to let the youth know that it kind of doesn't get better. All these straight, rich celebrities: they can tell you that it gets better because they've got money and people don't care what they do….But I'm gonna be real, because I live this life and I'm not rich and I'm brown and I probably look like most of you (45).

Although it directly challenges the project on the levels of authorship and ideology, Rivera's story still echoes the narrative of many of the other *It Gets Better* passages: "I'm a normal person that lives her life as a gay individual, has a relationship, and just tries to make it in the world," she maintains (45). The edited text of this video was subsequently published in Savage and Miller's book under the title "Getting Stronger and Staying Alive"—an attempt, it seems, on behalf of Savage and Miller to contain one of *It Gets Better*'s rogue circulations, to demonstrate that even critiques of the project drive it forward. In spite of this text's normative elements, it remains an uneasy fit with the rest of *It Gets Better*: Rivera declares that it does not get better in a book entitled *It Gets Better*, and her video continues to live online outside of the project under its original title, which points more directly to *It Gets Better*'s exclusions and failures. The inclusion of this text in Savage and Miller's book, while reinforcing some aspects of *It Gets Better*'s narrative of mobility, gestures to the incompatibility of *It Gets Better*'s adult-identified storytellers with its imagined audience while simultaneously demonstrating that the project's political failures fuel critical discourse.

There are many other (and significantly more perverse) critiques and parodies of *It Gets Better* circulating on the internet: the "It Gets Bigger" parody, the "It Gets Worse" project (Moylan), and the *It Gets Betterish* web comedy series all poke fun at Savage and Miller's

campaign, while the website *Splitsider* offers a list of the "best" *It Gets Better* parodies (Hoban). Created mostly by adults, these parodies reinforce how *It Gets Better*'s actual circulation contradicts its own self-understanding: these are adult-identified subjects, not youth, who are largely responding and writing back to the project. What the sideways growth of *It Gets Better* exhibits, in fact, is an overall absence of youth-identified voices. Adult-identified subject positions dominate the project itself and the body of response, critique, and parody that *It Gets Better* accumulates. So while sideways growth as a spatial and temporal metaphor for examining a text and/or genre has the potential to bring adults and children into contact (and does, in essays from Sánchez-Eppler, Bernstein, and Gubar), in *It Gets Better*'s case, it is a challenge to find traces of youth-identified readers responding and writing back directly to *It Gets Better*. In this sense, again, the project provides an apt illustration of Rose's argument about why children's literature is impossible: it fails to circulate according to its own expectations, demonstrating instead the messy ways in which adult authorship, fantasies, desires, and anxieties are inextricably enmeshed with how children's literature produces meaning. Yet, the stories that fail to conform to its grand narrative and the critiques that point to the project's political failures are the most productive parts of *It Gets Better*: those moments that indicate discord or slippage in *It Gets Better*'s otherwise feverish repetition of near-identical stories. This is where *It Gets Better* becomes possible: it fails politically but succeeds as cultural discourse, growing sideways into a body of work that addresses the adult/youth relationship represented in the project's stories.

Although there is little evidence of young people directly critiquing *It Gets Better* in widely circulated forums, the project has demonstrated traction in one particular space popular with youth: online fanfiction communities. In what follows, I consider how fanfic mash-ups of *It Gets Better* and *Glee* further demonstrate the sideways growth of the project, the "lateral

contact" between *It Gets Better* and a community generally associated with young people, and material evidence of the tangibility of Rose's "middle space."

**It Gets Better, Slash, Glee**

*It Gets Better* makes a cameo appearance in a season five episode of *Glee* entitled "The End of Twerk." Rachel (Lea Michele) and Kurt (Chris Colfer)—both high school glee club graduates living in New York—decide to get tattoos as a means of celebrating life in the wake of the death of Finn (actor Cory Monteith, whose real-life death prompted the sudden plot twist), who was Rachel's ex-boyfriend and Kurt's step-brother. Kurt, whose arc over the show's five seasons hinges primarily on his sexuality—coming out to friends and his initially anxious father; contending with homophobic bullying at the hands of closeted jock Dave Karosfky; experiencing his first relationship with another boy—decides to tattoo "It Gets Better" on his back as a tribute to the project. Buzzed on the limonata he downs to provide liquid courage, Kurt misspells the phrase for the artist and winds up with "It's Get Better" permanently inked on his back. In a panic, Kurt returns to the tattoo parlour the next morning and laments his failed attempt at rebellion: "My path has been different and exciting considering my background," he explains, "but considering who I think I am and how I see myself, it's like I've taken the streetcar named predictability." The tattooist replies: "Why don't you give me another shot at it? I'm starting to get a sense of who you are." The result: Kurt's tattoo is transformed to read "It's Got Bette Midler" ("The End of Twerk").

*Glee*'s tongue-in-cheek shout out to *It Gets Better* feels, for several reasons, appropriate. On one level, it speaks to the many synergies between the two texts: *Glee* contains a number of plot lines that read like *It Gets Better* narratives—especially Kurt's, whose trajectory entails coming out, overcoming bullying, finding love, moving from small-town Lima, Ohio to big-city

Manhattan, being accepted to the performing arts college of his dreams, and getting engaged to his high school boyfriend (as of season five's conclusion in 2014, Kurt and Blaine are still engaged; *Glee*'s narrative threads, however, tend to be unravelled as hurriedly—and often carelessly—as they are knit together). Both *Glee* and *It Gets Better* have become, I would argue, landmark contemporary queer-themed popular culture texts, and in a sense, they enable each other's circulation: *Glee*'s characters can be read vis-à-vis *It Gets Better* narratives, and several *Glee* cast members—including Jane Lynch and Chris Colfer, both openly gay, and Max Adler, who plays Karofsky, the closeted bully—have contributed videos to the project. It is unsurprising that *Glee*, in its circulation through fanfiction, has accumulated so many traces of *It Gets Better*.

On another level, Kurt's twice-botched tattoo is a funny (and appropriate, for my purposes) illustration of what I've been arguing in this chapter: that *It Gets Better* never circulates as it intends. Kurt's initial attempt at reiterating the project's message results in a version skewed—slightly, but skewed nonetheless—from Savage and Miller's original; his effort to restore the message only produces a phrase completely removed from the project, queer only through the semiotic chain that links Bette Midler to gay culture. In short, whatever efforts *It Gets Better* makes to signify as such, the project's sideways growth always produces an excess of meaning vis-à-vis stories and interpretations that lie outside the scope of the project's stated objectives. Within this sideways growth, however, lie fascinating and provocative examples of how this excess of meaning is taken up and reworked by readers, including those young audiences whose desires, in Rose's view, are legible only as the product of adult fantasies and anxieties. In the case of *Glee* and *It Gets Better*, the compatibility between these two texts also enables the perverse "rogue circulations" (Hurley) and reappropriations of *It Gets Better* that take place in fanfiction, providing an example of youth culture writing back to the project in

forms that don't include outright criticism or videos narrated from the perspective of an adult-identified "I." While we could read *It Gets Better*/*Glee* mashup fanfiction as part of the project's success as cultural discourse, the project is here further repurposed such that it opens a space that both deviates from and exists concurrently with *It Gets Better*'s grand narrative of progression. And, crucially (this being the nature of much fanfiction, especially slash), it demonstrates how slash authors bring critical elements to *It Gets Better* that are missing from its official stories: sex and sexual pleasure.[98]

Fanfiction is loosely defined as "fiction that utilizes preexisting characters and settings from a literary or media text," and is most widely read and disseminated on the internet in forums like fanfiction.net and archiveofourown.org; it is this "unofficial" method of circulation, in fact, that distinguishes fanfiction from what Catherine Tosenberger calls "other forms of 'recursive' fiction" (329). Although fanfiction is not written and consumed solely by young people and fan culture (or "fandom") is not their exclusive domain, "fandom as a space of

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[98] This is not to say that the activities described in *It Gets Better*—going to Starbucks with one's partner, adopting children together—do not provide forms of pleasure. But these pleasures are relatively palatable compared to what Edelman describes as those "sterile, narcissistic enjoyments understood as inherently destructive of meaning and therefore as responsible for the undoing of social organization, collective reality, and, inevitably, life itself"—those forms of queer sexuality that dwell in the negative and eschew hetero/homonormative models for relationality and reproductivity (*No Future* 13). Similarly, Stockton coins "'sideways growth' to refer to something…that locates energy, pleasure, vitality, and (e)motion in the back-and-forth connections and extensions that are not reproductive" (*Queer Child* 13). Sex is crucial to thinking about queerness: "nonstandard sex," as Warner writes in *The Trouble With Normal*, "has none of this normative richness, this built-in sense of connection to the meaningful life, the community of the human, the future of the world," and as a result "it brings queers together" (47). "How ironic," Warner continues, "that so often the first act of gay political groups is to repudiate sex" (48). Part of my intention in this chapter is to bring sex back into the conversation since it indeed seems to have been repudiated by *It Gets Better*. In addition to Warner, Stockton, Edelman, and Bersani (as cited elsewhere in this dissertation), there is ample writing that deals with queer sex, pleasure, and relationality. For an overview, see Nikki Sullivan's *Queer Pleasures: Some Thoughts* (*Social Semiotics* 9.2, 1999). For a superb, recent look at the role of pleasure in queer activism, see Sara Warner's *Acts of Gaiety: LGBT Performance and the Politics of Pleasure* (University of Michigan Press, 2012).

engagement" is widely recognized to be "especially valuable for young fans," granting "younger writers access to a wider audience than ever before" (Tosenberger 329-330).[99] In "Homosexuality at the Online Hogwarts: Harry Potter Slash Fanfiction," Tosenberger provides insight into the increasing participation of young people in a particular genre of fanfiction: slash, which "generally functions in fandom as the binary opposite of 'het' (heterosexual) fic, which features romantic and sexual relationships between characters of different genders" (331). The term "slash," Tosenberger points out, "arose in *Star Trek* fandom in the 1970s, referring to the punctuation mark separating the characters' names (Kirk/Spock)"; although heterosexual fanfiction pairings use identical punctuation, "slash…retain[s] its original meaning of homoerotic romance" (330-331).[100] For Tosenberger, who resists attempts made by fans and

[99] Similarly, in 2006 Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse noted that the "demographics" of fan culture "have shifted: ever-younger fans who previously would not have had access to the fannish culture except through their parents can now enter the fan space effortlessly; financial resources have become less of a concern because access to a computer is the only prerequisite; and national boundaries and time zones have ceased to limit fannish interaction" (13). This is a significant change from Henry Jenkins' early writings on fan culture; in his introduction to *Textual Poachers* (1992, reissued in 2013), Jenkins observes that fan culture's primary demographic "is largely female, largely white, largely middle class" (1). Although Jenkins concedes that fandom "welcomes into its ranks many who would not fit this description" (1), the average "fan" he imagines is also implicitly adult; *Textual Poachers* does not address young people's participation in fandom.

[100] Many critics have written at length on fan culture, fanfiction, and slash. Along with Janice Radway, author of the groundbreaking *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (UNC Press, 1984), Henry Jenkins is one of the first critics who established fan culture as a site of academic inquiry via *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992, reissued 2013), wherein he "buil[ds] on Eve Sedgwick ['s *Between Men*]" to suggest that "genre conventions create highly romantic representations of male-male friendship even as they seek to wall off those feelings from erotic contact between men" (Jenkins and Scott xxiii). "The basic premises of 'slash' fiction," according to Jenkins, include "the movement from male homosocial desire to a direct expression of homoerotic passion, the exploration of alternatives to traditional masculinity," and "the insertion of sexuality into a larger social context" (186). Jenkins' other texts on fandom include *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (NYU Press, 2006), *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (NYU Press, 2006), and the edited collections *The Children's Culture Reader* (NYU Press, 1998) and *Hop on Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture* (with Tara

academics to narrow its definition, slash can consist of "canonical" relationships—those that exist in the original text (i.e. *Glee*'s Kurt/Blaine, or "Klaine")—and the non-canonical, those "slash stories and pairings [that] build upon a reading of subtext that fans claim is present in the canon" (331). In *Glee*'s case, popular non-canonical pairings include Kurt with various straight-identified characters: classmates Finn and Puck, and his teacher Will, for example. Tosenberger insists that we require further analyses of how slash provides "adolescent fans [with] the potential to encounter and experiment with alternative modes of sexual discourse, particularly queer discourse" (330).[101] "Fandom," she argues, "offers young people the opportunity not

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McPherson and Jane Shattuc, Duke UP, 2002). Foundational critical writings on fan culture that emerged around the time of *Textual Poachers*—many of which take up Radway's book to address the role of gender in fandom—include Camille Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* (UPenn Press, 1992), Lisa A. Lewis' edited collection *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media* (Routledge, 1992), and Constance Penley's "Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture" (in *Cultural Studies*, eds. Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler; Routledge, 1992). More recently, in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet* (2006), Hellekson and Busse have explored shifts in fandom given rapid changes in technology. In this chapter, I draw primarily on Tosenberger's unique analysis of how young people navigate and experiment with gender and sexuality through slash, a topic that remains relatively undiscussed in fandom literature.

[101] I would argue that the overall silence on the topic of young people, slash, and sexuality speaks to adult anxieties surrounding slash's frequent conflation with pornography and the appropriateness of young (underage) people accessing such material. Although many slash stories contain explicit sex, some critics have attempted to draw clear distinctions between slash and pornography. Jenkins, for example, writes: "If, as [John] Stoltenberg (1989) claims, pornography represents 'sex that has no past (the couplings are historyless), no future (the relationships are commitmentless), and virtually no present (it is physically functional but emotionally alienated)" (107), slash is centrally concerned with how sexual experience fits within the characters' pasts, presents, and futures" (190). Others, like Constance Penley, argue for a view that acknowledges and embraces the pornographic content of slash, claiming that disavowing slash's explicitness "slights [its] pornographic force" (167); see also Anne Kustritz's "Slashing the Romance Narrative" (2003). Similarly and more recently, Ika Willis' "Keeping Promises to Queer Children" (2006) argues for the political edge of slash's sexual content, claiming that slash "can be experienced as *both* a hedonistic, erotic practice which could even be opposed to a thoughtful or critical relation to a text, *and*…a politically loaded practice of decontextualization that reorients a text in order to demonstrate that it bears the trace of a desiring structure not wholly congruent with the most…ideologically obedient reading" (156). For an excellent analysis of intersections between slash and porn, see Catherine Driscoll's "One

simply to passively absorb queer-positive (and adult-approved) messages, but to actively engage with a supportive artistic community as readers, writers, and critics" (334). In other words, fanfiction provides illuminating examples of lateral contact between adult authors and young audiences.

To lay the foundation for her analysis of Harry Potter fandom, Tosenberger conceives of "slash as a space," which she argues is "the most useful way of understanding it; what slash writers have done is to carve out a space for themselves where they are free to tell the narratives they wish, linked only by the common thread of queerness" (334-335). She cites at length a fan's theory of slash as space, which I feel warrants repeating here:

> Slash is not so much queer in the act as it is queer in the space…Slash is a sandbox where women come to be strange and unusual, or to do strange and unusual things, or to play with strange and unusual sand. The women may be queer or not, strange or not, unusual or not. The many different acts and behaviours of slash may be queer or not, strange or not, unusual or not. The queerness may be sexualized or it may not, and what is sexual for one woman may not be for another. The space is simply that: a space, where women can be strange and unusual and/or do strange and unusual things (Julad, qtd in Tosenberger 334).[102]

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True Pairing: The Romance of Pornography and the Pornography of Romance" (in Hellekson and Busse, 79-96). A recent monograph also explores this topic: see Carola Katharina Bauer, *Naughty Girls and Gay Male Romance/Porn* (Anchor, 2012). Finally, Paul Booth has written on convergences between porn parody and slash: see "Slash and Porn: Media Subversion, Hyper-Articulation, and Parody" in *Continuum* 28.3 (2014).

[102] Tosenberger points out that many scholars of fan culture—including Jenkins, Bacon-Smith, and Penley—"report that slash (like most fanfiction in general) is written primarily by women…The existence of slash complicated conventional notions about women's interest in erotica in general, and the types of erotic material women were supposed to be interested in (i.e., heterosexual romance novels)" (333). Slash, however, has evolved to be a much less gendered space; as Tosenberger argues, "In the Potter fandom, it is not just adult women, but young people

Tosenberger's conception of slash as a space for the practice of queerness is reiterated throughout her essay: she writes, for example, that "Potter slash readers and writers have access to a space where queer sexuality, whether teen or adult, can be depicted in its full, messy, exuberant glory, and the emphasis is on jouissance" (346), while maintaining that this messy space is nonetheless "a safe space for [young people] not only to improve their writing skills, but also to explore discourses of sexuality, especially queerness, outside of the various culturally official stances marketed to them, and with the support of a community of like-minded readers and writers" (347). Tosenberger's excellent article very successfully advances academic discourse on the queer work of slash and young fan communities, but her conception of slash as "space"—as well as the temporal implications of this argument—remain underdeveloped. How, for example, can we conceive of the space of slash as relative to the space of the original narrative? Moreover, what temporal relation does slash as space bear to the canon?

Building on the arguments I have made throughout this dissertation, I want to posit a theory of slash as a space of delay and, counter (or perhaps parallel) to Tosenberger's assertion of slash as a safe space, I understand it as a risky one—where readers risk encounters with queerness that may, in fact, become avenues to new desires and relations. Risked is precisely what Britzman describes when she writes of "risking the self": the foundation upon which our sense of self rests; the narratives we use to interpret ourselves and our relations to others. In this sense, slash is also potentially a pedagogical space, where critical strategies for reading and writing are taught, learned, and rehearsed through narratives that are, in many cases, created by

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as well who have a safe space in which to be 'strange and unusual'" (335). I would make the same claim about the spaces of *Glee* fanfiction.

young people.[103] Further, I propose sideways growth as the most apt spatial/temporal trope for thinking through slash. As it circulates within the affective economy of anxiety that partially describes this project,[104] the space of slash, I suggest, functions to both delay a narrative and cause it to grow sideways: it is the equivalent of hitting "pause" during a story, cutting away, and filling in the narrative blanks; of creating stories that exist parallel to the original; of causing the canon to grow sideways by imagining supplemental queer narratives and rendering them material.[105] Moreover, slash is a space where young people can enact, in addition to their sideways desires, forms of delay. Tosenberger suggests that "online fannish discourse affords fans a certain measure of concealment, which proves especially valuable for young fans who fear

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[103] I say "potentially" because, like Julad, I do not want to insist that slash is inherently subversive, queer, or pedagogical. Debates about the critical/conservative function of slash have circulated in a great deal of writing on the subject; Jenkins, in *Textual Poachers*, insists that "not all of slash is politically conscious; not all of slash is progressive; not all of slash is feminist; yet one cannot totally ignore the progressive potential of this exchange and the degree to which slash may be one of the few places in popular culture where questions of sexual identity can be explored outside of the polarization that increasingly surrounds this debate" (221). Similarly, as Tosenberger points out, there is certainly something that feels transgressive about slash: "in a homophobic culture that attempts to police or censor expressions of nonheteronormativity, any depiction of queerness, especially a positive, sympathetic depiction, qualifies as such" (332). However, she also maintains that "it is a mistake to claim that slash is intrinsically more transgressive/subversive of a given text than other forms of fanfiction" (332). As the popularity of fanfiction rises among youth, many scholars have begun considering the applicability of fanfiction to the classroom: see, for example, Fay Jessop's "Exploring Fandom: Teaching Narrative Writing Through Fanfiction" (*English Drama Media* 18: 2010) and Tracey Kell's "Using Fan Fiction to Teach Critical Reading and Writing Skills" (*Teacher Librarian* 37.1: 2009). Absent from all these education-focused essays, however, is a consideration of slash and sexuality, something I hope to address in this chapter. While a (29 Sept 2014) search across databases on the University of Alberta Libraries webpage for "fanfic* AND education" yields 60 results, "fanfic* AND education AND sex*" yields one (Korean language) result.

[104] Jenkins identifies fan culture as a site of anxiety for some critics and scholars, claiming that those "with little direct knowledge or emotional investment within the fan community have transformed fandom into a projection of their personal fears, anxieties, and fantasies about the dangers of mass culture" (6).

[105] Willis notes that "it is only through [the] idea of *supplementation*…that fan fiction can be understood as 'filling in the gaps' in canon. For these gaps may only become visible—may only, indeed, *be* gaps—when the text is read from a position that refuses the illusion of continuity; and textual gaps are filled in according to an associative, not a deductive, logic" (158).

the consequences of expressing nonheteronormative desires" (334); in this sense, in addition to using slash to express queer desire, young people might use slash to delay real-life queer sexual activity or the pursuit thereof, as a space of exploration prior to—or in-between—the physical renderings of queer desires. The temporality of slash may be thought in conversation with the queer double-take as seen, for example, in *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*: just as Davy turns sideways to Fred and forward to the uncertain queer question mark of his relationship with Altschuler, moving, delaying, resisting movement, stalling and starting; slash might manifest itself as a sideways relation with an equally anxious relation to time and space. Slash pauses one narrative while simultaneously unfolding another in tandem; it might delay certain desires or actions on behalf of readers/writers while pushing them forward towards others; it invites readers to risk encounters with forms of queerness that are typically only latent in the everyday texts from which they emerge.

In what follows, I want to track *Glee*/*It Gets Better* fanfiction as one of the project's many circulatory accumulations, to think about how *Glee* and *It Gets Better* interact and cause each other's sideways growth. Specifically, I want to explore how *Glee* both buttresses *It Gets Better*'s success as cultural discourse while simultaneously enabling its perversion—a motion made manifest in Kurt's tattoo. And, crucially, I want to locate *It Gets Better*/*Glee* fanfic as a space that sees the project and its ostensible audience making lateral contact outside of the adult anxieties that gesture to *It Gets Better*'s many political failures. I hope as well to continue demonstrating the haziness of those anxious borders between genre, the usefulness of the critical tools of children's literature for approaching a variety of texts, and the potency of sideways growth as a trope for conceptualizing textual circulation.

*Glee* is the most popular television show on fanfiction.net: as of March 2014, it boasts over 103,000 stories; the next most popular series, *Supernatural*, has slightly under 93,000. It is not difficult to locate fanfic that combines *Glee* with *It Gets Better*: a search of the site provides over ten *Glee* fanfics entitled “It Gets Better” and many more that contain the phrase; similar results appear on archiveofourown.org. Most *It Gets Better/Glee* fanfic was written around 2011, when the project’s circulation was at its peak, and the stories themselves can be classified into a few broad and overlapping categories. First, there are the stories that most directly mimic the themes and ideas of *It Gets Better* itself: these involve characters from *Glee*—including pairings both canonical and non-canonical—making an *It Gets Better* video or somehow interacting with the project. These stories tend to replicate the fundamental *It Gets Better* narrative, describing a transition from troubled adolescence to successful and stable adulthood. Author “for always forever”’s “It Gets Better” story, for example, is set in the future and contains two chapters, each of which describes a different *Glee* couple making a video. The first chapter features Blaine and Kurt; the former has become a successful recording artist, the latter a “rising Broadway star and also the owner of his very own fashion line” (for always forever). The story begins with the couple bickering flirtatiously about how to operate the camera before Kurt begins narrating: “Okay, so, long story short? Life sucked. I was living in a small town in *Ohio* of all places…I was tormented every day. Dumpster tosses, slushy facials; you name it and it probably happened to me. I joined my high school glee club and things got better…” (for always forever, ch. 1). Blaine takes a turn to describe his rise to fame, then the brief story concludes: “Blaine beams and leans in to kiss [Kurt]. When they pull back, Kurt takes Blaine’s hand and then flashes his engagement ring to the camera. ‘It gets better,’ he says quietly” (for always forever, ch. 1). In the second chapter, canonical *Glee* couple Santana and Brittany make a video that ends in a similar

fashion: "'It gets better,' Brittany says to the camera, and she smiles widely, 'Maybe you'll meet your own Santana and you'll be happy forever, like me. I really hope you do" (for always forever).

Author Gemmi999's story describes Finn's discovery of the *It Gets Better* project and his desire to share it with Kurt's father Burt, knowing that Kurt is having trouble with bullying at school, "and then Burt can make sure Kurt sees it and doesn't try to hurt himself because Finn's wanted a brother his entire life and he doesn't want to get one just to lose him again." The story concludes with Finn showing the site to Kurt, and Kurt inviting his step-brother to watch some videos with him: "[Kurt] isn't alone anymore, Finn's his brother and that means Finn's going to be there for him" (Gemmi999). In "It Gets Better: Jock, Glee Dork, Closet Bisexual," Anime Girl23 also sets her story in the future and describes a video made by *Glee* characters, but this time the pairing is non-canonical: Kurt and Noah Puckerman (Puck), a football player who bullies Kurt for much of *Glee*'s first season. Moreover, the video is narrated from Puck's perspective as the coming-out story of a self-described "closet bisexual": "Things were hard and I ended up in juvie my junior year. I was struggling with not having my daughter or my best friend and I was struggling with feelings I didn't want. I was the ladies' man. I wasn't supposed to be having feelings for guys too, but I was" (Anime Girl23). The narrative then follows the pattern of most "real" *It Gets Better* stories: Puck moves from small-town Ohio to big-city New York, reconnects with Kurt, and the pair falls in love. In a passage that could be ripped from the *It Gets Better* book, Puck narrates:

> No matter what your sexuality or your situation is, know that it gets better. If you're already out or if you're in the closet like I was, know that it gets better. You'll get out of high school and you'll find your place. You'll fall in love and you'll find people that

> don't care about your orientation. They'll love you for you. If you give up now, you'll never get to reach that point and that person you'll fall in love with one day won't ever get to meet you. So hold on, because there's so much more out there than high school and family drama. There's a community of people out here that understand and we love you. It gets better (Anime Girl23).

In a final gesture to the ideal *It Gets Better* telos, the story concludes as follows: "The screen went black and a replay button popped up as Kurt wiped a tear from his eye and hugged Noah's arm. Noah ducked his head, eyes focused on the sleeping infant in his arms as his husband kissed his cheek" (Anime Girl23).

Even if the message of Anime Girl23's story is ultimately conservative in its reiteration of *It Gets Better*'s homonormative models of relationality and family, it is worthwhile noting how the project is taken up and redeployed as a narrative frame for the subversion of canonical *Glee* relationships. Here, *It Gets Better* in part enables Anime Girl23's slash reimagination of Puck as a closeted bisexual who later marries "the one out kid at school" he used to bully. *It Gets Better*'s narrative, in other words, is exported as a means of reading and rewriting Puck's character; Anime Girl23 reinterprets his bullying as an act of internalized homophobia that culminates in the outward manifestation of same-sex desire. *It Gets Better* functions not entirely as an address to an imagined audience of young queer martyr-target-victims, but instead as a means of enabling the sideways growth of *Glee*'s characters and narrative arc. The same could be said about those stories that do not necessarily subvert *Glee*'s canon, those that imagine the future of pairings like Kurt/Blaine and Santana/Brittany: these fanfictions may be as conservative as *It Gets Better* itself in their representation of relationships, but they nonetheless take up the project as tool for critical reading. In particular, they demonstrate the malleability of narrative

and the refusal to accept canon as truth, and to once again channel Britzman, they deploy *It Gets Better* as a means of multiplying possibilities for identification across genre and text. *Glee/It Gets Better* slash is a moment of lateral contact between the adult-driven project and the youth-populated online spaces of fanfiction, but this contact sees the project repurposed and recirculated as a narrative frame for the subversion and sideways growth of *Glee* canon.

Another type of *Glee/It Gets Better* story does not necessarily directly reference the project—other than in title—but dwells instead in the martyr-target-victim period of adolescence before concluding with a hopeful turn.[106] Writerbitch92's "It Gets Better" story, for example, describes a violent gay bashing of Kurt in his high school's washroom. He is ultimately rescued by Blaine: "Gently, Blaine placed his arms around his boyfriend, making sure not to squeeze too tight to hurt him, and placed a kiss just behind his ear, promising, 'It will get better'" (Writerbitch92). KlaineForeverLover07's story sees Kurt supporting Marley through her struggle with an eating disorder and bullying at the hands of cheerleader Kitty. "It Gets Better" by There_Was_A_Kat revisits the Kurt/Puck pairing, focusing on friendship in lieu of romance. In this story, Puck finds Kurt sitting alone in the rain in the football field bleachers, depressed due to the bullying he's enduring at school. Like the authors discussed above, There_Was_A_Kat repurposes *It Gets Better* to narrate an intimate friendship between Kurt and Puck that goes much deeper than in canon:

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[106] Most of these stories could be (and are, via fanfiction database labels and tags) classified as "hurt/comfort," a sub-genre of slash stories that "open with the injury or near-death experience of one of the partners (or the death of another significant character); such moments of 'hurt-comfort' force a recognition of the fragility of their relationships, what would be lost should their friend be killed" (Jenkins 209). This particular sub-genre buttresses Jenkins' claim that "the eroticism of slash is an erotics of emotional release and mutual acceptance; an acceptance of self, an acceptance of one's partner" (215).

Kurt's eyes were bloodshot, red lines tracing intricate designs, making his irises stand out in a brilliant contrasting green. But still, they found Puck's own multi-toned brown eyes, the two boys linking in a common bond.

"I promise you, Kurt Hummel, I swear on my life. It *does* get better."

Barely more than a whisper, but firm enough to hear the sincerity behind the words, Kurt finally believed.

Notably, many stories push the martyr-target-victim trope even further and tell non-canonical stories about Kurt attempting suicide. In spite of the dark subject matter, these stories all end hopefully, and usually entail Kurt being "rescued" by another character, typically Blaine or Puck: these latter characters either arrive on the scene just in time to summon an ambulance, and/or convince Kurt that he should choose to live because it gets better. "It Gets Better" by Kyra5972, for example, sees Puck fulfilling a community service sentence by volunteering at the Trevor Project, a youth suicide prevention organization. Kurt phones in for support having just swallowed a bunch of sleeping pills, and Puck dispatches an ambulance in time to save Kurt's life. The story concludes with Puck visiting Kurt in the hospital and suggests a growing intimacy between the pair: "Puck knew that, yeah, it *does* get better. And he was going to make sure it got better for Kurt" (Kyra5972). Hayleighreid's multi-chapter "It Gets Better" is a longer story that sees a very troubled Kurt attempt suicide on several occasions, even after his first attempt is foiled by Blaine and Kurt is subsequently admitted to a crisis centre. After Blaine confesses his love for Kurt, the bullied teen begins his recovery; the story concludes with a brief glimpse of their *It Gets Better*-esque future: "Kurt and Blaine were studying the decorating to their new house. It was two years since the night they both admitted they were both in love with each other, and they were finally going to college. It had been a hard time, but Kurt was finally better.

Just after Kurt finished school, Blaine had proposed" (hayleighreid, ch. 1). "It Gets Better" by AWritersLife is another multi-chapter story, where each individual chapter is written from Kurt and Blaine's alternating perspectives. Kurt's death is again prevented by Blaine, who subsequently encourages his fellow glee club members to make an *It Gets Better* video to support Kurt:

> I…I don't know how many of you have heard of the Trevor Project, but they have something called the 'It Gets Better' program. Part of it is that celebrities—actors, singers, athletes—they make these videos reaching out to LGBT youth, telling them that no matter how bad it seems, no matter how bad they get bullied, it will get better. I think…that we should put together a compilation of all of us sending our own little messages to Kurt (AWritersLife, ch. 5).[107]

After Kurt views the video and is comforted by Blaine ("I love you, Kurt. I love you and I'll do anything for you. It will get better, Kurt"), the story ends on an optimistic note: "Kurt nodded, feeling for the first time since he'd first started thinking about suicide, things were finally getting better" (AWritersLife, ch. 6).

It is productive to think through these stories in light of Peter M. Coviello's "The Pistol in the Suitcase: Motive, Temporality, Queer Youth Suicide," itself a response to *It Gets Better* and the various critiques the project has spawned (many of which—Puar and Nyong'o's, for example—I have already taken up in this chapter). Coviello's incisive essay asks us to make a radical shift and think about teen suicide not as "a culmination of motive, the action in which the slow and accretive gathering of impulsive sensations finds at last its most wholly decisive

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[107] *It Gets Better* is here mistakenly attributed to the Trevor Project, evidence perhaps of how the project has become so widespread in cultural discourse that its actual origin is unclear and/or irrelevant. In other words, it is possible to know about *It Gets Better* without knowing where exactly it originated.

expression" but instead as "a search for motive, of an effort to concretize impulses that otherwise remain obdurately illegible and incoherent to the self in which they unfold" (67). Central to Coviello's argument is the multiply-self-named adolescent Frankie/F. Jasmine/Frances of Carson McCuller's 1946 novella *The Member of the Wedding* whom, as Coviello writes, "cannot find *a* self in which to feel at home, a self she imagines she could inhabit without loss or distorting into the expanses of the future" (72). For Coviello, Frankie embodies an adolescence that entails "cyclonic self-shedding, undertaken in anxious proximity to imagined futures that seem to promise only an immobilizing identity—call it 'adulthood'—where there once had been the scary but enabling dislocations of motion" (74). Here, Coviello reinforces two ideas that I have been emphasizing throughout this dissertation. First, in spite of emphasis placed by queer YA critics and *It Gets Better* on queer visibility and the importance of hopeful narratives of progression that culminate in stable adulthood, there remain nonetheless many fictions for and about young people that evince attachments to delay and strong resistances to the telos of adulthood.[108] Next, Coviello demonstrates that Frankie's "scary but enabling" moments of "cyclonic self-shedding" occur in "*anxious*" relation to the queer question mark of adulthood: they follow, in my words, the anxious stop-and-start rhythm of the queer double-take that I describe in-depth in chapters two and three, and they recall my engagement in chapters two and three with Adam Phillips' story of the swimming boy. Coviello argues that Frankie's sense of temporality is one unique to adolescence, taking Puar and Berlant to task for reading teen suicide vis-à-vis a specifically adult temporality that disregards "the specifically temporal idiosyncrasies of childhood and adolescence" that may involve "delicacies of growth and delay, self-accretion

[108] Further, as I will soon demonstrate in this chapter, the space of online *Glee/It Gets Better* slash—which I (following Tosenberger) contend is a space populated by young people—speaks to similar desires and attachments.

and self-dispersal" (67). In Coviello's words, "to associate queer youth suicide too seamlessly with the wearing out of slow death…may be to transpose into adolescence the temporalities of an adult depletion, in a way that misplaces something of the specificity of adolescent dialectics of self-possession and self-dispersal" (74). He continues, eloquently extending this version of adolescent temporality to his reframing of teen suicide:

> Suicide, in this paradoxical framing, is an act of self-annihilation not easily disentangled from something like self-proliferation. Where the dispersal of ways of being in the world across a lateral array of possible selves works (as we can see it work for Frankie) as a strategy of self-protection or self-care—something like Stockton's sideways growth—suicide will, I think, come weighted with just this double valence: as the termination not just of a self but of all possible selves, yes, but also a thing undertaken in relation to the trying-out of provisional selves that so marks the temporal space of adolescence (75).[109]

Following Coviello's nuanced approach to teen suicide and adolescent temporality, then, I want to conceive of *Glee*/*It Gets Better* slash as a space of delay and sideways growth for an anxious trying-out of those ideas surrounding suicide that *Glee* suggests and *It Gets Better* aims to cure, an experimentation with "provisional selves" via *Glee*'s characters. I want to be cautious, here, and avoid making implicit suggestions about author intent: I do not mean to claim that young authors avoid real-life suicide by writing slash, nor do I want to suggest that slash is somehow a remedy to adolescent suicide.[110] Instead, I want to argue that slash marks a space for precisely

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[109] Coviello further reminds his readers of an important and related quote from Stockton's *The Queer Child*: "[O]ur futures grow sideways whenever they can't be envisioned as futures—due to forceful obstances, forms of arrest, or our wish to be suspended in the amplitude of 'more,' as in our simply wanting more time, more pleasure, more leisure, more luxury, more destruction (as odd as that may sound—just 'more'" (qtd in Coviello 76).

[110] I also want to avoid suggesting that I am somehow romanticizing suicide as an exciting or especially alluring narrative trope. As Jenkins points out, similar debates have taken place

what Coviello outlines: the proliferation and trying-on of selves through narrative; the sideways growth of self and the canonical narrative being rewritten. In this sense, slash is a space of risky reading that enables the proliferation of identificatory possibilities, to once again channel Britzman. Crucially, this space is not an adult-authored narrative, web project, or body of criticism: it is a space created and populated by young people; in Rose's terms, a "middle space"—but one that sees lateral contact between adult-authored narrative and young audiences.

In this sense, *It Gets Better* again fails to circulate as it imagines itself: the project, as I have demonstrated, fails politically in its anxious repetition of the same story; it instead provides a narrative structure for the proliferation of stories about suicide—and the selves who desire self-destruction—through fanfiction and characters from *Glee*. Moreover, the slash stories about suicide do not follow *It Gets Better* in the project's emphasis of happy, hopeful adulthood as the ultimate telos of adolescence. Instead, these stories choose to dwell in troubled adolescence, in bullying, suicide notes, and depression, which are heavily emphasized over the brief, albeit consistently hopeful, endings.

I want to conclude this section with an in-depth look at one final story, Susala's "It Gets Better." At 43,000 words—fifteen chapters—in length, Susala's story is one of the longest works of *Glee/It Gets Better* slash and also one of the most popular and well-reviewed: it boasts 105 reviews and 103 "favourites" from fellow fanfic community members (hayleighreid's multi-chapter story, as a point of comparison, has 19 reviews and 57 favourites). Susala's "It Gets Better" is set in the summertime, between seasons of *Glee*: staying true to canon, it nonetheless grows the series sideways, imagining what some of the characters would have been up to behind

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surrounding the question of representing rape in fanfiction: "Heated discussion surrounds works…which some fans charge romanticize rape and others insist allow them to work through the powerful emotions surrounding sexual violence in a less immediately threatening context" (220).

the scenes. On one level, this is self-loathing, closeted bully Dave Karofsky's *It Gets Better* story as well as a post-bullying *It Gets Better* tale for Kurt and Blaine. All of the project's standard narrative elements are in place: Kurt has come out and is in a happy relationship with Blaine; together, they attend their first pride parade and are surprised by the rest of the New Directions glee club cheering them on and singing Lady Gaga's "Born This Way" as the couple marches in the parade; Kurt takes the first steps towards organizing a PFLAG group for his school; Kurt and his father Burt strengthen their father/son relationship as Kurt shows signs of falling deeply in love with Blaine; Dave, on the other hand, struggles with his feelings for and attraction to Kurt, and finally concedes that he must come out to his father. He does so, and is supported by Kurt and Burt: "I now things are hard for you right now, Dave. You are kind of depressed," Kurt tells him; "Take it from me, Dave, I know what that is like. But try to hang in there….It gets better, Dave" (Susala, ch. 6). Not only is this a reiteration of *It Get Better*'s grand narrative on a number of levels, but as a novella, this fanfic would sit comfortably within the genre of queer YA and would likely meet with critical approval: it features visibly gay characters comfortable with their sexuality while also attending to the "realistic" elements of Dave's internal struggles, which are resolved in a hopeful manner by story's end as Kurt and Dave's father meet and agree to work towards reducing homophobia in their community. "This is a small town, Paul," Burt tells Dave's father; "If we stick together maybe we can make it a better place for our kids. Maybe the kinds of things Dave and Kurt are going through won't have to continue. We can hope" (Susala, ch. 15).

What distinguishes Susala's "It Gets Better" from both Savage and Miller's project and queer YA more broadly, however, is precisely what the genre of slash and its online medium enable: the inclusion of a number of graphically-described sex scenes between Kurt and Blaine.

In tandem with Susala's primary narrative arc that describes Kurt and Blaine's first pride, Dave's coming-out, and Kurt's quest to start a PFLAG group at McKinley High runs a second narrative: Kurt and Blaine's summertime sexual play and experimentation. The story's sex scenes, I argue, are moments of pleasurable delay—for characters and readers alike—in the forward movement of the overall narrative. And, like *Illyria*'s Madeline and Rogan (as discussed in chapter three), Susala's version of Kurt and Blaine find a great deal of sexual pleasure in delay itself; in their case, however, this is a pleasure that emerges from the delay of certain kinds of sexual activity until future chapters and, ultimately, beyond the scope of the story itself (this, of course, is also a strategy for tantalizing the reader). Kurt and Blaine's pleasurable, sexual delays bookend the story; in the first chapter, oral sex is deferred:

> "Kurt, honey, I want you in my mouth. I want to *taste* you." [Blaine] squeezed Kurt's thighs for emphasis. This was pretty close to begging.
>
> *Oh, well, since you're already down there…* No, wait.
>
> "Oh my god, Blaine!" Kurt Hummel finally engaged his brain and found his tongue.
>
> "Blaine, no. NO. … Of course I want you to. I just can't in the shower…not the first time anyway" (Susala, ch. 1).

By chapter 13, however, Kurt and Blaine are well beyond the point of deferring such activity, so they turn instead to the erotics of delaying penetrative sex:

> "Blaine, I want you to be honest with me." Kurt rolled his hips [while straddling Blaine].
>
> "What—?"
>
> "Do you ever fantasize about us having sex?" Kurt's body was still; he was waiting for the answer.
>
> "*What*? Of course."

> "I mean *real* sex, Blaine." And Kurt rolled his hips.
>
> "GOD, Kurt! Yes!"
>
> Kurt slightly moved off of Blaine and put his hand on Blaine's erection. "In your mind, how does it work?" Kurt could feel the heat coming through Blaine's cotton shorts.
>
> … "Tell me one of your fantasies, Blaine."
>
> … "This is torture." Blaine sounded almost pissed.
>
> Kurt leaned over Blaine and whispered, "I could make you come while you are telling me about it. Come on, honey. You know you want to talk about it before we do it. You are the *talker*." Then Kurt unbuttoned and unzipped Blaine's fly (Susala, ch. 13).

Afterwards, Kurt and Blaine further discuss the sexual activity that will be ultimately deferred to a point outside the scope of Susala's story:

> "Blaine? Do you think a lot about having sex? I mean proper sex—intercourse."
>
> "Sure. I'm curious. But I don't think I'm ready right now. I don't think *we* are ready."
>
> Kurt nodded and smiled. He put his arm through Blaine's and leaned his head on Blaine's suntanned shoulder. "It's not like we've run out of other things to do" (Susala, ch. 13).

Just as Kurt and Blaine find pleasure in delay—as Stockton describes in relation to *The Pupil*, the pleasures associated with talking in lieu of action (for Kurt and Blaine, talking about future-action as a companion to present-action)—so too do the raunchier chapters of Susala's story constitute moments of delay that interrupt the forward progression of the narrative.[111] In terms of form, the story's chapters are structured such that sex scenes regularly delay the overarching narrative: chapters one, five, eight and thirteen all consist, in part or in whole, of lengthy descriptions of Kurt and Blaine's sexual romps. Susala's narrative, in other words, stalls and

[111] As the author herself writes in a footnote to chapter 13, "I know we have poor Dave hanging out there, but I just thought our boys needed a day for themselves."

starts: driving forward Kurt, Blaine, and Dave's stories, pausing for sex while talking about and imagining future sex, progressing the narrative, delaying it, rinse (literally), and repeat. This anxious rhythm, by this point in the dissertation, is a familiar one.

If we put Susala's "It Gets Better" into conversation with *It Gets Better*—and, certainly, the story's title and content invite us to do so—then we can read Susala's story as enacting a critique of the project on several levels, contributing to *It Gets Better*'s sideways growth and highlighting its dissonances and resonances (to continue my use of Stockton and Sedgwick's terms). First, the story serves as somewhat of an ironic reminder to widely syndicated sex columnist Savage that the pleasures of queerness are not limited to those associated with marriage, family, and the accumulation of material assets: in fact, these pleasures include sex, a subject that remains absent from *It Gets Better*. Next, while the project positions adulthood as the ultimate source of the pleasures of stability and an escape from the pain of adolescence, Susala inserts delay and its many pleasures into the forward progression of the *It Gets Better* narrative structure it takes up and partially imitates. Susala's story, in other words, dwells in the sexual pleasures and discoveries of adolescence instead of emphasizing, like *It Gets Better*, the telos of growing up into adulthood; Susala demonstrates the pleasures that come from lingering in adolescent sexuality (and in reading, writing, and rewriting it) and its forms of delay. This, as I have discussed, is reflected in the form of Susala's slash, which asks its readers to delay pleasure if they want to follow the narrative in a linear manner; pleasure-seekers are, of course, free to skim through and skip chapters in search of sex. Helpfully, Susala's chapters include "an unrepentant SMUT ALERT" whenever appropriate (ch. 13).

Alongside the other stories discussed in this section, Susala's "It Gets Better" also points to the pleasures of slash more broadly: those associated with dwelling in the interval of a

canonical narrative; "pausing" a story to linger in its murky middle while growing it sideways; and the anxious, risky experimentation with and multiplication of temporary selves. This returns us to what I earlier suggested is the most productive effect of *It Gets Better*: its sideways growth, the way it does not inherently move queer youth forward through a narrative of progression as it intends to, but instead lingers—somewhat stuck—in a space of critique, political failure, and the anxious rehearsal of its own singular story. *It Gets Better* and its attendant sideways growth further invite us to reconsider our assumptions about children's literature and YA more broadly.

**Getting Better at Doing Children's Literature?**

Philip Nel and Lissa Paul point out that children's literature is one of the few genres named after its imagined audience, the child it attempts to shape based on the desires and anxieties of its adult authors (1). As I have illustrated in this chapter, the impossibility of this adult/child relationship produces starkly different effects and responses than those ostensibly intended.[112] For Savage and Miller, *It Gets Better* necessitates repetition and reiteration to disguise its impossibility and failure. For critics—like Rivera, for example—*It Gets Better*'s failure invites intervention that results in the project's sideways growth and success as cultural discourse; for slash writers, *It Gets Better* accumulates *Glee* and provides a narrative frame for risky reading and writing, the subversion of canonical stories, and experimentation with sexuality and relationality. Texts like *It Gets Better* that attempt to secure a stable adult-identified subject position by iterating normative forms of childhood often, by virtue of the impossibility of their project, have the most potential for sideways growth: it is precisely through its repeated attempts

[112] Tison Pugh makes a point along these lines, arguing that children's literature attempts to teach children about normative sexuality while simultaneously keeping them innocent of sexuality. "A recalcitrant ideological conflict thereby emerges within the genre," he writes, "in which innocence and heterosexuality clash and conjointly subvert its foundations" (*Innocence, Heterosexuality* 1).

to normalize a specific adult/youth relationship and its failure to do so that *It Gets Better* invites response and critique.[113]

*It Gets Better* speaks to a continuing investment in the perceived power of storytelling, especially as it relates to the growth and development of children and adolescents. As Charlotte Cooper illustrates with such colourful candour, there are always stories that remain untold, stories that in this case could set up much more radically creative ways of being in the world that don't privilege individual movements through a specific, linear, forward-oriented narrative. As Hurley points out, however, "the productive failures of normalization" generate creative new approaches to children's literature, allowing us to think "more about the narratives of sociability and the acts of world-making at play in texts for young people" ("Perversions" 128). *It Gets Better*'s failures are what render it a productive site for thinking about and critiquing not only the relationship between its adult-identified authors and imagined young audience, but also its sideways growth. As contemporary critics of children's literature illustrate—and as *It Gets Better* itself demonstrates—children's literature is much more than printed words on a page. It lies also in the material reading practices of its audience, spontaneous play, the physical destruction of books, the creative resignification of a text at the hands of its readers, and its own provocative impossibilities and failures. Through these failures, and its attendant anxieties, *It Gets Better*

[113] Fairy tales are another example of what I am describing: we can think, for example, of queer/feminist revisionist versions of ostensibly normative and anti-feminist tales seen in collections like Francesca Lia Block's *The Rose and the Beast* (2000), Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch* (1997), and Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (2006). For more examples of this subversive form of writing, what Hurley calls "writing back to children's literature" (126), see her article "The Perversions of Children's Literature."

invites us to take new approaches to children's literature that call for different conceptions of temporality, circulation, and the relationship between author, text, and audience.[114]

Briefly, I want to return to my chapter's opening, in particular Lesnik-Oberstein's claim that "children's literature criticism as it stands, and as it defines itself, cannot succeed in achieving its own aim: finding the good book for the child, through knowing the child and the book" ("Introduction" 19); this mode is what Hunt calls "childist criticism" (*Criticism* 191). When it comes to *It Gets Better* and critics of queer YA, this goal of finding the "good book"—or the right story—for the young (queer) person clearly persists. This is not, however, the goal of what I call "queer childist criticism"—a mode I have attempted to enact throughout this dissertation—which maintains that young people consistently read, interpret, and behave in excess of whatever is understood to be "the good book." To distance herself from childist criticism, what Lesnik-Oberstein offers in her introduction to her 2004 collection "is a writing and thinking about children's literature that does not rest on—or re-introduce at some point, overtly or indirectly—the real child, and a wider real of which it is a part" (19). Yet, reading *It Gets Better* as children's literature reminds us that there *is* a real child—or a real queer youth—out there, and some are taking their own lives, which is a very real issue that demands some kind of address: the urgency of this situation is what contributes to the anxious discourse that circulates so feverishly around the project. Coviello reflects on the problems and dilemmas that

[114] Ernest L. Bond and Nancy L. Michelson point out that fan fiction is making a particular contribution to the changing shape of children's literature as discipline: "the abundance of child-authored literature on the World Wide Web takes the concept of expanded literacies a step farther than the environments of most literary theorists," they argue; "Until recent years it could be argued that there was no real 'children's literature'—published narratives written by young people for young people. However, Internet browsing and publishing software have made this genre a reality" (316).

attend what he calls "the confusion of tongues between the potentially non-invidious generosities of adult care and the scenes of queer adolescent turmoil on which they might appear" (66):

> How do we begin to address ourselves to queer youth, whose futures we might want there to be room for, without defaulting to the cheap promises of bourgeois ascendancy or, for that matter, to the presumption that we know what ails these kids, after all, better than they do, or could? How do we sustain an exchange with queer kids whose refusal of our terms however bright with care—in fact, whose outpacing distance from those terms—may feel to them most like freedom, like authentic possibility, like breathable air? (79-80).

To add to Coviello's series of questions, can we think about children's literature, queer YA, the anxieties and impossibilities of genre, *and* consider the real child/young person on the other end of the text? Can we consider queer YA to be part of an address to queer youth without consistently privileging visibility and stable, resolved sexuality? Can we further our investigation of those middle spaces of lateral contact between adult and youth? As Coviello insists, "There may finally be no way of banishing entirely these urgencies and insistences from the scene of the encounter between the older and the younger. But we might try at least to reorganize and redeploy them, in ways that are, perhaps, generative" (79). In terms of queer YA, this entails a richer sense of those terms and ideas that often accumulate at the site of the encounter Coviello describes: what it means to read anxiously and read for anxiety, to risk the self, to approach growing up with ambivalence, to desire stasis and delay over forward motion. These are the questions I have been posing in my development of a pedagogy of anxiety, and the questions we should continue posing to the discipline of children's literature.

As a means of conclusion, I want to again address Lynn Shepherd's anxiety of immaturity surrounding adults who consume children's literature, reassert my belief in the critical importance of children's literature and criticism, and reiterate why I think the study of children's literature is so crucial to thinking broadly about cultural manifestations of the anxieties surrounding the relation between adults and young people. First, as I have demonstrated throughout this dissertation, children's literature criticism operates as an index of adult anxieties about childhood and a site for the dissemination and circulation of these anxieties. As Rose points out, children's literature itself is also indexical in this sense, but the queernesses, queer readings, and "rogue circulations" of children's literature—the genre's sideways growth—will always be in excess of the adult desires and anxieties that children's literature might seem to express; as Hurley argues, these are among the most fascinating, provocative, and productive aspects of the genre ("Perversions"). What children's literature and its criticism succeeds in doing is providing us with the tools for thinking through these anxieties and, as Coviello illustrates, the stakes of the moment of address between adults and young people—a moment at the very centre of *It Gets Better*. Children's literature and its methodologies cannot—and should not—be ignored in the broader study of culture because, as Edelman demonstrates in *No Future*, the figure of the child is at the very heart of politics; children's literature invites us to consider how we attempt to address that child through literature and criticism, and how our modes of addressing that child are related to how we imagine our own desires, anxieties, and relations. In an era when real queer youth continue to take their own lives, these questions continue to be of undeniable importance.

## Conclusion

(Queer) YA Now and "The Great Y.A. Debate"

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In June 2014, I had the pleasure of presenting some of my dissertation research to a friendly and receptive audience at the Children Literature Association's annual conference in Columbia, South Carolina. After outlining what I understand to be contemporary critics' anxiety about visibility in queer YA, I presented portions of my third chapter—in particular, my reading of Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*—to sketch my concept of a pedagogy of anxiety and gesture to those temporalities, ambiguities, and ambivalences that, throughout this dissertation, I argue present an alternative methodology for approaching queer YA. During the discussion period, I fielded a wonderfully thought-provoking question from an established colleague, Gwen Athene Tarbox, who questioned whether or not contemporary queer YA critics—and the genre itself—were indeed as invested in visibility as I seemed to suggest.[115] Did I find any evidence, Gwen wondered, that recent queer YA is perhaps returning to an iteration of the ambiguity and/or wholesale rejection of identity seen in *I'll Get There*, and are critics embracing these thematic changes instead of continuing to push for characters who, to once again borrow from Hartinger, just "happen to be gay" (212)? In a follow-up conversation over email, Gwen cited two recent, acclaimed novels that feature characters with particularly fluid and ambiguous relationships to gender and sexuality—David Levithan's *Every Day* (2012) and Bill Konigsberg's *Openly Straight* (2013)—to suggest

> a growing sense of confidence among YA authors that it's okay to present gender and sexuality in fluid terms. Even 10 years ago, the idea of presenting queer characters was

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[115] I am grateful to Gwen for posing the question and for her generosity in our email conversation that followed the conference.

> perceived as…putting enough pressure on publishers—but obviously, the idea of a queer YA novel is now solidified enough that authors are moving beyond the traditional coming out narrative…or even Levithan's traditional LGBT romances [e.g. *Boy Meets Boy*] in order to ask other sorts of questions (Tarbox "Re: LGBT Visibility").

Indeed, as Gwen's comments indicate, queer YA and its criticism have shifted significantly since I first began imagining this dissertation in 2009; it has been a challenge to remain astride the explosion of queer YA titles while keeping a steady finger on the pulse of YA criticism both inside and outside of academia. In this brief conclusion, I hope to use Gwen's remarks as a springboard to address some recent developments in queer YA and YA criticism more broadly, putting them into dialogue with the arguments I have made throughout this dissertation.

It strikes me that Kenneth Kidd's claim in 2011 that "queer theorists don't seem to know much about children's literature"—an assertion vital to the foundation of this dissertation—is becoming less and less accurate as children's literature and queer theory grow increasingly conversant with one another ("Queer Theory's Child" 184). As I was in various stages of writing this dissertation, Kidd's own co-edited 2011 collection *Over the Rainbow: Queer Children's and Young Adult Literature* appeared in addition to a number of other volumes that seek to probe the intersections between queer theory and children's literature. In winter 2012, Lance Weldy and Thomas Crisp co-edited an issue of *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* that "address[es] contemporary issues related to sexuality and sexual identity in children's and young adult literature" ("From Alice to Alana" 372); Nat Hurley's 2013 special issue of *English Studies in Canada*, "Childhood and Its Discontents"—cited throughout this dissertation—contains essays that consider queerness and sexuality in relation to childhood and works of children's literature including *Peter Pan* and Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*; and in January 2014, Laura

Robinson edited a volume of *Bookbird* that “explore[s] the queerness in texts intended for children and youth very specifically” (“Queerness and Children’s Literature” viii).[116] Clearly, queer theory and children’s literature are hot topics that promise to continue inspiring exciting and groundbreaking work over the years to come. I hope that this dissertation, which speaks to broad questions about genre while (re)considering individual works of YA, helps advance these conversations.

It is not only in academic circles that interest in children’s literature—and, specifically, YA—has been intensifying over the past few years. With the global success of multiple YA franchises and their inevitable, highly lucrative film adaptations—most recently, Suzanne Collins’ *Hunger Games* and Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* trilogies—YA seems to be under a particularly bright spotlight as readers of all ages flock to purchase these titles. A 2012 Bowker Market Research study, cited by *Publishers Weekly*, found that “55% of buyers of works that publishers designate for kids aged 12 to 17—known as YA books—are 18 or older, with the largest segment aged 30 to 44,” and “78% of the time they are purchasing books for their own reading” (“New Study”). Yet, in spite—or precisely because of—the fact that YA is booming, discourse that evinces what Beverly Lyon Clarke calls our “cultural anxiety of immaturity” (49), as discussed in my previous chapter via Lynn Shepherd’s anti-Rowling rant, seems to be surfacing with growing intensity. Even publishers themselves seem anxious about the effectiveness of the “YA” label as a strategy for marketing books to adults: in late 2009, St.

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[116] Queer theory and children’s literature are also coming into contact in educational contexts. See, for example, Caitlin L. Ryan and Jill M. Hermann-Wilmarth’s “Already on the Shelf: Queer Readings of Award-Winning Children’s Liaterature” (2013), in which the authors “theorize a model of reading literature with children that helps a wide variety of children’s literature texts become fruitful sites for opening up more inclusive conversations about gender and sexuality” (144). In particular, the authors look at “Sendak’s (1963) *Where the Wild Things Are*, Woodson’s (2001) *The Other Side*, DiCamillo’s (2003) *Tale of Despereaux*, and Patterson’s (1977) *Bridge to Terabithia*” (144).

Martin's Press announced a pitch contest to launch the category "new adult fiction," which describes "great, new, cutting edge fiction with protagonists who are slightly older than YA and can appeal to an adult audience" (Jae-Jones). Yet, the publisher seems to concede, the actual differences between YA and New Adult Fiction (NA?) are slim: "Since twenty-somethings are devouring YA," the contest page explains, "St. Martin's Press is seeking fiction similar to YA that can be published and marketed as adult—a sort of an 'older YA' or 'new adult'" (Jae-Jones).[117] Literary critics, too, are demonstrating those age-old anxieties that have been doggedly haunting children's literature: Who should and shouldn't be reading children's literature and/or YA? What are the pedagogical and/or didactic stakes of these books, if any?

As I was completing some final dissertation revisions in September 2014, the massive success of John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*—a YA novel published in 2012 and adapted into a film in 2014—generated a provocative conversation that received coverage in *The New York Times Magazine*, *The New Yorker*, and just about every corner of the blogosphere. If—as Gwen suggested to me following my conference presentation—audiences, authors, and publishers are becoming increasingly comfortable with a broad array of themes being represented in YA, it appears that the widespread appeal and success of YA remains a source of discomfort and anxiety for many critics regardless of the themes and content of the books themselves. This most recent anxious dialogue emerged from an article written by Ruth Graham that appeared in *The*

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[117] The launch of New Adult Fiction has earned, over the years, a significant amount of coverage and critique in the press, most of which is neatly curated by the "New Adult Fiction" *Wikipedia* page (accessed 8 Oct. 2014). See, for example, "'New Adult' Fiction Is Now an Official Literary Genre Because Marketers Want Us to Buy Things," published on 15 Nov. 2012 by Katie Baker of *Jezebel*; and *Publisher Weekly*'s 14 Dec. 2012 piece "New Adult: Needless Marketing-Speak or Valued Subgenre?" (both articles accessed 8 Oct. 2014). Anecdotally, I first learned of this new genre when, in an Edmonton Chapters in March 2013, I stumbled upon a shelf of books with a sign that read: "New Adult Fiction: Take the emotional intensity of all your favourite teen titles, mix in the higher stakes of life as an adult, and you have what everyone is calling New Adult Fiction."

*Slate Book Review*, entitled "Against YA: Yes, Adults Should Be Embarrassed to Read Young Adult Books." Like Shepherd's essay, Graham's polemic relies on a series of broad and transparent generalizations about YA: Graham writes, for example, that "YA books present the teenage perspective in a fundamentally uncritical way" and "these books consistently indulge in the kind of endings…which adult readers ought to reject as far too simple. YA endings are uniformly *satisfying*, whether that satisfaction comes through weeping or cheering." (Clearly, Graham hasn't read any early queer YA titles, which contemporary critics critique on the basis of their unsatisfying endings, as I have demonstrated throughout these chapters). Graham concludes that

> there's a special reward in that feeling of stretching yourself beyond the YA mark, akin to the excitement of graduating out of the kiddie pool and the rest of the padded trappings of childhood: It's the thrill of growing up. But the YA and 'new adult' boom may mean fewer teens aspire to grown-up reading, because the grown-ups they know are reading their books.

The anxiety of immaturity is everywhere in Graham's piece, demonstrating the persistence and potency of the affective economy of anxiety within which YA and its criticism continues to circulate.

Certainly, it is easy enough to critique Graham's piece, and many columnists and bloggers took it upon themselves to do so.[118] One essay that directly addresses the specifics of

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[118] See, for example, Mark Medley's satirically titled *National Post* column "Ruth Graham doesn't go far enough: Adults and kids should only read books aimed directly at their demographic" (11 Jun. 2014); the entry "Is it OK to Read YA?" on the literary blog *The Anxiety of Authorship* (30 Jun. 2014); Alyssa Rosenberg's "No, you do not have to be ashamed of reading young adult fiction" in *The Washington Post* (6 Jun. 2014); the "Should You Be Embarrassed to Read YA?" debate staged on the *Barnes & Noble Book Blog* (12 Jun. 2014); the June 8 2014 interview with Graham on *NPR*; Kat Kinsman's *CNN* piece "Don't be ashamed of

Graham's argument is Laura Miller's *Salon* piece, published two days after Graham's appeared. Miller calls Graham out on her flattening of an entire genre's potential and her reductive reading of Green's novel: "It's perplexing," Miller writes, "to read a complaint about the lack of literary sophistication in Young Adult fiction from a critic who seems insensible to how literary effects are achieved." I am less interested, however, in critiquing Graham than I am in considering the impressive traction her piece received, the conversation it generated, the anxieties about YA this conversation evinces, and how this all relates to those aspects of queer YA I have been exploring throughout this dissertation.

The countless blog posts and articles spawned in the wake of Graham's piece include two longer essays in *The New York Times Magazine* and *The New Yorker*. In the former, published on September 11 2014, A.O. Scott contemplates "The Death of Adulthood in American Culture" with deep ambivalence, arguing that "in doing away with patriarchal authority, we have also, perhaps unwittingly, killed off all the grown-ups." Scott confesses to "feeling a twinge of disapproval" when he spots "peers clutching a volume of 'Harry Potter' or "The Hunger Games,'" but also states that he's "not necessarily proud of this reaction." He claims that many YA novels "advance an essentially juvenile vision of the world" and that "adulthood as we have known it has become conceptually untenable," but concedes that "[adulthood] may never really have existed in the first place." Scott draws on Leslie A. Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) to consider the contemporary "antics of…comic man-boys" and "the bro

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your YA habit" (8 Jun. 2014); and many, many others. A more recent example that echoes Graham's perspective—much less common than those who critique her—is John Patterson's *Guardian* essay "The Maze Runner and the blight of 'Young Adult' Movies," in which the author claims that "I was never much for what's now called young adult lit…These days, young adult seems like the only genre that matters" (4 Oct. 2014). (All texts cited are available online and were last accessed on 9 Oct. 2014).

comedy" vis-à-vis the "apparently sexless but intensely homoerotic connections" between characters who "managed to escape both from the institutions of patriarchy and from the intimate authority of women" in the likes of *Huckleberry Finn* and *Moby-Dick*. As Fiedler suggests, "the great works of American fiction are notoriously at home in the children's section of the library" (qtd in Scott); or as Scott summarizes, "all American fiction is young-adult fiction." He concludes with consistent ambivalence by extending this desire for delay at the core of American fiction/YA to American culture as a whole, arguing that "Y.A. fiction is the least of it. It is now possible to conceive of adulthood as the state of being forever young. Childhood, once a condition of limited autonomy and deferred pleasure ('wait until you're older'), is now a zone of perpetual freedom and delight….The world is our playground, without a dad or a mom in sight. I'm all for it. Now get off my lawn."

In particular, Scott's article flagged for me the centrality of sideways growth, delay, and anxious temporality to a body of literature that extends well beyond the texts I examine in this dissertation. Scott points us to an archive that, alongside those books I've explored throughout these pages, invites us to question how and where the Child functions as a figure of reproductive futurity, as Edelman contends, and/or as a symbol of anxious resistance to a futurity that finds its telos in the kind of "adulthood" that Scott declares dead—if it ever really lived it all. Truthfully, this realization made me anxious: if *all* American fiction is indeed YA, and an ambivalence and/or anxiety towards commonplace notions and temporalities of "growing up" is a constitutive feature of this literature, than am I doing anything at all interesting or original by pointing to queer YA's temporal subversions and sideways attachments? Am I simply engaged in my own anxious rehearsal of generic conventions that could be attributed, as Scott points out, to any number of texts contained under the massively broad umbrella of "all American fiction"?

This may in fact be a valid critique of this project. But what I find so interesting is that, despite the tenacity of characters who long for delay and resist "growing up" as visibly LGBT in YA, these themes and the YA genre continue to generate ample anxious critical discourse. Through this dissertation, I hope to have demonstrated how sexuality inflects upon and shapes those desires and anxieties surrounding delay and alternative temporalities of growth, and how, when sexuality enters the picture, so do a whole new series of anxieties. Critics remain consistently anxious about the status of "growing up," who's doing it, who's doing it *properly*, and who seems to be failing—perhaps because they're reading the wrong books. Sexuality plays an integral role in this narrative, since so much discourse on growth and development is rooted in a definitive telos of (hetero/homo)sexual adulthood; anxieties persist about what this endpoint should look like, how it should be represented, and the pedagogical consequences of representing various permutations of this narrative in texts that ostensibly address young people.

Scott confesses: "I do feel the loss of something here," when it comes to his proclaimed "death of adulthood," yet he also maintains that "the best and most authentic cultural products of our time…imagine a world where no one is in charge and no one necessarily knows what's going on, where identities are in perpetual flux." To return to Gwen's comment, perhaps ambiguity can't be "back" because it never really went anywhere—as I illustrated throughout these pages, queer YA has been attached to various forms of ambiguity and identities in "perpetual flux" even though various critics have maintained that visibility and coherence are integral to a didactically productive queer YA. Just as Scott heralds the "Death of Adulthood" while simultaneously suggesting that adulthood never really existed, Brent Hartinger's declaration "We Got There"—as discussed in chapter two—assumes the end of a particular narrative of sexuality that never quite vanished the way he imagines.

In his *New Yorker* piece entitled “Henry James and the Great Y.A. Debate,” published a week after Scott’s essay appeared, Christopher Beha addresses Scott’s ambivalence and appears initially to make a case for YA as a genre that addresses with nuance these blurry boundaries surrounding child- and adulthood. “There is a difference between art that merely enacts a culture’s refusal to grow up,” Beha writes, “and art that thoughtfully engages with that refusal.” He cites James’ distinction in “The Art of Fiction” between “the artist’s subject matter and his treatment of that matter” to support his claim that “if we assume that subject matter is what defines a book as ‘young adult,’ it doesn’t make much sense to discourage adults from reading a book with that label. It is as much as saying that certain types of human experience are beneath serious adult attention, which I don’t think is true.” Moreover, Beha acknowledges that the YA “label” is often “simply a marketing tool, which isn’t something that a critic ought to be paying attention to.”

Yet, by the end of his essay, Beha’s anxiety of immaturity takes hold of his heretofore carefully reasoned arguments. He argues that oftentimes “giv[ing] a subject a treatment that is more appropriate for a young audience…involves simplifying things—first the diction and syntax, but finally the whole picture of life.” Although it is not “shameful for adults to spend a lot of time reading these simplified treatments,” Beha claims, “it does strike me as strange.” He concludes with a paean to the work of Henry James, Beha’s avatar of all supposedly mature and sophisticated works of literary fiction:

> Much is taken from us as we pass out of childhood, but other human beings who have suffered these losses have created great works of art, works that can only be truly appreciated by those who have suffered the same losses in turn. These works are among the great recompenses that experience offers us. Putting down *Harry Potter* for Henry

> James is not one of adulthood's obligations, like flossing and mortgage payments; it's one of its rewards, like autonomy and sex. It seems to me not embarrassing or shameful but just self-defeating and a little sad to forego such pleasures in favour of reading a book that might just as easily be enjoyed by a child.

Here, Beha makes a series of reductive assumptions about the complexities of YA and how adults and children read. Not only does he imply that YA authors cannot create "great works of art" that deal with loss and that children cannot or do not experience loss, but he also assumes that adults and children will experience the same (fundamentally immature) "pleasures" of reading YA. Lost is any sense of nuance when it comes to genre and the myriad reading strategies people of all ages use when engaging with texts. Ironically, and as I have illustrated throughout this dissertation, (queer) YA tackles with tremendous thoughtfulness the risks, rewards, pleasures, and subversive possibilities involved in reading texts and the world around us. As they navigate sexuality and sexual (anti-)identifications in myriad forms, the YA characters I examined call attention to reading as a complex strategy for multiplying opportunities for identification or the refusal thereof, cultivating alternative temporalities and relations, and critiquing those tropes of genre, growth and development that seem to persistently govern much discourse on children's literature.

When we put Beha into conversation with Maria Tatar's "No More Adventures in Wonderland"—the *New York Times* essay discussed in this dissertation's first chapter—the affective economy of anxiety within which YA circulates becomes all the more tangible. There is further irony in Beha's use of *Harry Potter* as James' immature counterpoint, given that the loss of Harry's parents is foundational to Rowling's entire series; in her delineation of today's dark and "not-so-childish…children's stories," Tatar writes that the *Harry Potter* books "offer

expansive meditations on mortality." YA writers like Rowling, Collins, and Philip Pullman "have successfully produced new literary contact zones for adults and children," Tatar claims, "with monumental narratives about loss, suffering and redemption." Whereas Beha might find these themes appealing, they lead Tatar to "mourn the decline of the literary tradition invented by Carroll and Barrie" who "more fully entered the imaginative worlds of children—where danger is balanced by enchantment."

The debate continues and the anxiety persists with a repetitive rhythm as circular as Davy's dream about the beach. Critics remain determined to pin down the didactic and pedagogical function of children's literature, a rehearsal that points to the shaky foundation of the genre itself. This anxiety, as I have argued, presents not only a point of entry into this critical conversation, but also the tools for fashioning an alternative pedagogy for approaching and engaging with a range of cultural artifacts—including, but not limited to, the perpetually provocative and anxious genre of children's literature.

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