

Codes, Silences, and Homophobia: Challenging Normative Assumptions About Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary LGBTQ Young Adult Literature

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Abstract Since the publication of the first young adult novel to deal with issues of sexual identity, John Donovan's (1969) *I'll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip*, over 200 novels have been published centered around gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning (LGBTQ) characters and conflicts (Cart and Jenkins, 2006, *The Heart has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969–2004*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press). In significant contrast to early texts, many authors in recent years have sought to promote inclusion of LGBTQ individuals and to present LGBTQ characters in a positive light. To do so, they frequently create antagonistic homophobic characters and situations that provide a sense of realism (Crisp, 2009, *Children's Literature in Education*, 40, 333–348). In this paper, I present several representative examples from these novels that challenge homophobia, but ultimately leave it intact. Text excerpts are drawn from the numerous contemporary realistic LGBTQ-themed texts, published between the years 2000–2005, and marketed to young adults. I then contrast these texts with the novel *Boy Meets Boy* (Levithan, 2003). Through the novel's blurred genres and inventive use of linguistic features, *Boy Meets Boy* is able to more effectively undermine 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.

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Since the publication of the first young adult novel to deal with issues of sexual identity, Donovan's (1969) *I'll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip*, over 200 novels have been published centered around gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning (LGBTQ) characters and conflicts (Cart and Jenkins, 2006). The majority of the early texts in this field largely depicted homosexuality as a passing phase; as incurring retribution through ostracism, violence, and even death; and as a "lifestyle" that dooms characters to dreary, isolated lives (Cuseo, 1992). A shift toward more progressive inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning (LGBTQ) characters began in the late 1990s, highlighting some of the sociocultural shifts toward acceptance of LGBTQ individuals in this time period. Indeed many of the young adult novels currently being published present homophobia as the major problem of the novel, while seeking to normalize LGBTQ identities (Crisp, 2009; Kidd, 1998).

In this article I draw upon a larger study of 17 LGBTQ-themed novels (see Appendix 1), in which major characters and conflicts centered around issues of sexual and gender identities (Wickens, 2007). The novels were written primarily in the genre of contemporary realistic fiction and were published between the years 2000–2005, marketed to young adults, namely youth 13–17 years of age. The characterization and conflict development centered on LGBTQ-themed issues and the books had received significant positive literary acclaim, here demonstrated through a starred review in the journals *Horn Book*, *School Library Journal*, or *Booklist*, and/or its status as recipient of a major young adult book award winner/honor, i.e. National Book Award, American Library Association's Printz Award.

I highlight the use of textual discursive analysis (Fairclough, 2003) to investigate the use of multiple linguistic features as they signify central contemporary and historical discourses around sexuality and gender. To do so, I first present several representative examples from these novels that challenge homophobia, but ultimately leave it intact. Text excerpts are drawn from the following books, in the order in which they appear in the article: *Rainbow Kite* (Shyer, 2002), *So Hard to Say* (Sanchez, 2004), *My Heartbeat* (Freyman-Weyr, 2002), *Empress of the World* (Ryan, 2001), *Keeping You a Secret* (Peters, 2003), *Finding H.F.* (Watts, 2001), *Love Rules* (Reynolds, 2001), *Eight Seconds* (Ferris, 2000), and *Geography Club* (Hartinger, 2003). I then turn to the novel *Boy Meets Boy* (Levithan, 2003), as it serves as a powerful counterpoint to the majority of the other LGBTQ-themed young adult novels in its ability to disrupt normative assumptions around sexuality and gender.

While contemporary LGBTQ-themed novels generally denounce various misconceptions about gays and lesbians, promoting instead a progressive inclusion of diverse LGBTQ identities, Levithan's (2003) novel *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. First, the title evokes the

romance genre as it is traditionally understood, in which boy meets girl, boy and girl break up, boy and girl get back together with a fairy tale happy ending. The basic narrative structure holds true, except that in this case the lovers—Paul, the protagonist, and Noah, the new kid in town—are boys. Second, the novel is part farce. In the book Levithan creates a backdrop in which straight guys sneak into queer bars, the cheerleaders roar into the high school pep rally on Harleys, and the star quarterback is also the homecoming queen. Third, the novel is part contemporary realistic fiction. Paul's best friend Tony is also gay, but his parents' devoutly conservative Christian beliefs force him to sneak out of the house to be with his friends.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in a critical queer poststructuralism that highlights the specificity of historical-cultural contexts and the specific sign, systems, and languages they engender, especially as they impact sexual and gender constructions. According to Foucault (1972), discourses serve to contain and build objects and concepts. They demonstrate the boundaries between and among disciplines and bodies of knowledge. But these discourses are produced in a complexity of fashions and arenas—sometimes cooperatively, sometimes competitively, sometimes hierarchically. Through the privilege accorded certain speakers, particular discursive contexts, and institutional sites, certain ideas themselves become privileged and as established as truths. These “truths” then become disassociated from their historical contexts to appear natural, normal, or inherently true. In the same vein, these same processes, again culturally and historically situated, can preclude some ideas from even being thought (Foucault, 1972). In a very real way, they become incomprehensible.

Drawing upon these discursive processes Foucault noted, other poststructural theorists have observed the manner in which we understand gender and sexuality (Butler, 1990, 1993; Sedgwick, 1990). Butler (1990) contends that gender is “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time, to produce the *appearance* of substance, of a natural sort of being” (pp. 43–44, emphasis added). As such, gender is not something one *has*, but something one *enacts*—and can enact differently in different contexts. Having learned cultural and social mores regarding sexed and gendered bodies, individuals then perform in that manner, e.g., girls playing with dolls and boys playing with footballs, because that is what they learn is appropriate for their gender. Nevertheless, through language and discourse, culture constructs the boundaries that define properly manifested expressions of gender.

Within a modern Western context, one central organizing principle of gender is the notion of heteronormativity—that proper femininity and masculinity are equated with heterosexuality. To be considered a proper woman/man, one must also be heterosexual, and to transgress social norms around sexuality is also to have one's gender called into dispute. As Butler (1990) observes, it is only because certain kinds of gendered identities, or ways of enacting gender, “fail to conform to those norms of cultural intelligibility, [do] they appear as deviant failures or logical impossibilities”—not

because they are essentially so (p. 24). In this way, cultural norms around “proper” and accepted gender identities is policed through regulation of sexual arrangements.

Methodology

To understand the critical interplay between texts and contemporary discourses around LGBTQ issues (Fairclough, 2003), I concentrate upon various linguistic features, identified through textual discourse analysis, that call attention to specific ongoing cultural norms and discourses around sexuality and gender.

Textual discourse analysis is critical to this study as it specifically attends to the explicit connections between language and power. It assumes that “language is an irreducible part of social life, dialectically interconnected with other elements of social life, so that social analysis and research always has to take account of language” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 2). Textual discourse analysis also assumes that instantiations of ideological viewpoints can be isolated and pinpointed. As such, text analysis comprises a significant point of study of power structures, especially in regard to the effects of texts in promoting, maintaining, undermining various ideologies (van Dijk, 2008).

Within this frame, textual discourse analysis in this study comprised three major components: genre structure, grammatical structures, and attribution of word meaning. First and foremost is the awareness of significant genre structures. Since these are novels, story grammar, narrative conflict, and development of characters illuminated much of this process. As young adult fiction, particular familiar motifs were observed, e.g. non-existent parents and conflicts around identity. However as LGBTQ-themed novels, these motifs could be potentially ensconced within struggles with sexual and gender identity, specifically, fears of isolation, ostracism, and parental/ peer non-support.

One central element of textual discursive analysis involves the examination of grammatical structures. Analysis of grammatical structures included, but was not limited to, nominative and predicative phrasing, descriptors, and word collocation (frequent word associations that causes them to appear synonymous) (Fairclough, 2003). Investigation of nominative and predicative phrasing explores the question: Who are the primary actors or agents in the narrative? What major social forces are at work? How do the characters respond? For example, in the novel *Rainbow Kite* (Shyer, 2002), the protagonist Bennett quietly endures years of homophobic taunts and humiliation until he eventually attempts suicide. The narrative resolution, however, comes not from his own shift in personal agency, but from his classmates at his middle school graduation. When Bennett goes onto the stage to receive his diploma, he receives a powerful affirmation from his peers and the principal:

“I think your fellow graduates and the students of Clara Barton want to make it all up to you,” the principal said, and there was another loud cheer. “You’ve become an emblem of our tolerance and we want to know we’re sorry for what you’ve had to go through,” he continued. Someone yelled, “BENN-NETT!

BENN-NETT!” and more kids picked it up: “BENN-NETT! BENN-NETT!” was all you could hear... (Shyer, 2002, p. 203)

While their positive display of affirmation is certainly uplifting, analysis of such nominative and predicative phrasing reveals that it is this action of his classmates that provides Bennett with his final redemption, rather than any action of his own.

Attention to descriptors was equally important: in what ways did the authors portray the different characters? How do these characterizations point to underlying authorial messages and themes? One frequent theme is the framing of individuals with homophobic attitudes as being in the wrong. For instance, in the book *So Hard to Say* (Sanchez, 2004), the main character Frederick, who just began questioning his own sexual identity, talks with his classmate named Iggy about the years of humiliation that Iggy has suffered:

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

In another book, *My Heartbeat* (Freyman-Weyr, 2002), the narrator, 14-year-old Ellen, researches the topic of homosexuality to understand an insinuation made about her older brother—that he and his best friend are a ‘couple.’ In doing so, she comes to align homophobic attitudes and behavior with ignorance, uncharacteristic of intelligent, reasonable people. Because of this, she claims that being gay in contemporary society is “no big deal.” She observes, “There’s AIDS to worry about or getting attacked by a redneck, but that’s about it. Only people who don’t know better still think it’s shameful or wrong to be gay, but not people we know. Not smart people” (Freyman-Weyr, 2002, p. 52).

In both cases, the authors craft the text to create empathy for and understanding about LGBTQ individuals and identities. In the first example the description of perpetual abuse and taunting against a young child based on the perception of being gay, being different, creates such empathy. The second example, the associations are even more explicit, in which “smart” people understand that being gay is no big deal. Such characterizations—constructed through careful use of nominative, predicative phrasing and descriptors—pervade these texts in which homophobic attitudes, behaviors, and individuals are renounced.

Consideration of word collocations is also especially important in LGBTQ-themed texts, given the historicity of collocations around the homosexual/heterosexual bifurcation: heterosexuality as “natural” and “normal” and homosexuality as “unnatural” and “abnormal,” as well as other collocations with homosexuality, such as “sin,” “immoral,” “disease,” and “sick” (Foucault, 1972). Analysis of such collocations necessitates an interdiscursive analysis, which is an extension of intertextuality (Fairclough, 2003). While intertextuality commonly refers to allusions or references in one text to that of another, interdiscursivity suggests important associations between a given text and its prevailing genre or discourse (Fairclough, 2003). Thus, interdiscursive analysis attends to “how different genres, discourses or styles are articulated (or ‘worked’) together in a text” (p. 218). As such, I would look

for such occurrences, asking such questions as: How were LGBTQ identities positioned? With what were they associated—in what contexts and for what purposes? To what discourses did they allude? How might readers respond to such associations?

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

"I'm not worried about her. She really digs Aunt Mim and Laura."

"Laura?"

"Yeah, she's my aunt's girlfriend."

"Girlfriend?" I squeak before I can stop myself.

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

While in most of the novels, the use of the term "dyke" is commonly used to denigrate presumed characters presumed to be lesbian, here it is framed from a point of affection. The italicized font of "bother" indicates a tone of challenge rather than defense. Such careful attention to such linguistic and textual elements facilitates the reader's comprehension of the author's intended meaning thereof.

Findings

While the central problem in books with gay and lesbian characters historically has been homosexuality, in many contemporary LGBTQ novels homophobia is the overarching "problem" (Cart and Jenkins, 2006; Crisp, 2009). 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 behaviors.

Positioning Homosexuality Negatively

Heteronormative assumptions, including homophobic attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, provide the root of the internal and external conflict for the characters in the majority of LGBTQ-themed books. The basis for these attitudes often draws upon historical allusions to homosexuality as a psychiatric deviation and illness. For instance, in Shyer's (2002) novel *Rainbow Kite*, the main character Bennett complains about his friend's dad prohibiting Jeremy from visiting anymore. He comments, "I'm contagious, see? Mr. DeWitt thinks what I've got is *catching*. And

I don't mean a *virus*" (p. 155). Similarly, in Peters' (2003) *Keeping You a Secret*, the main character Holland discusses her new friend (and love interest) Cece with her mom. "'Where did you pick up this Cece?' her mom inquired. My head raised to meet Mom's eyes. Her tone of voice annoyed me. 'You make her sound like a disease'" (p. 135). After Holland's mom learns about the relationship between Holland and Cece, she throws Holland out of the house, yelling "'I didn't raise you to be a lesbian!' She made it sound like the filthiest word in the English language. 'It's sick. Perverted. *You're* perverted'" (p. 181).

Intertextual allusions to Biblical scripture, which characterize homosexuality as a sin, are also fairly common in these texts. For example, in the novel *Finding H.F.* (Watts, 2001), the main character H.F. and her best friend Bo joke about the hell and brimstone sermons in connection to homosexuality they have heard all their lives in rural Kentucky:

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

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

Also from the novel *Love Rules* (Reynolds, 2001), a group of high school students wanting to start a gay-straight alliance confront significant resistance from adults and other students alike. They too use references to perversion and Christianity to support their prejudice.

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

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

I wonder if she's trying to tell me something about how to live my life, but then I realize that the non-jocks are members of the campus Christian group. They are standing just outside the door, holding hands, heads bowed. As soon as we walk through the door, they start chanting in unison, 'No to perversion! Yes to Jesus!' (Reynolds, 2001, p. 231)

In another excerpt from the same novel, homosexuality is described as both perverted and unpatriotic, as when the high school principal argues, "You can't have students flaunting their total disregard for tried and true mainstream values without getting a reaction from those who uphold our American way of life" (p. 143). Then later the school newspaper reported:

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

As such, homosexuality is connected with ideas of perversion, deviance, and being anti-American.

It is striking how these textual references invoke intertextual allusions to Biblical or scriptural discussions of homosexuality and historical psychiatric writings without ever mentioning them by name. But more important is the manner in which they invoke interdiscursive elements, given the historicity around the homosexual/heterosexual binary: heterosexuality as “natural” and “normal” and homosexuality as “unnatural” and “abnormal,” as well as other collocations with homosexuality, such as “sin,” “immoral,” “disease,” and “sick” (Foucault, 1972).

While these associations are meant to provide a sense of realism, as they tie into these broader homophobic discourses, the novels themselves largely seek to challenge the normalcy of heterosexuality as compared to homosexuality (Crisp, 2009; Wickens, 2007). The text excerpts position homosexuality negatively through homophobic assertions and innuendo about gay and lesbian individuals to serve as catalyst points to which the protagonists, and the reader, may respond and resist. For instance, after Holland's mom kicks her out of the house in *Keeping You A Secret* (Peters, 2003), Holland develops a new sense of agency, as she comes out to her closest friends and develops a new sense of community. Likewise some of the characters in *Love Rules* (Reynolds, 2001) seem to endure endless harassment and abuse for being LGBTQ, being “deviant,” or even an ally of someone who is LGBTQ. However, knowing their legal rights, they eventually refuse to remain victims and remain silent. The reader may similarly come to question the stereotypes and the injustices perpetrated against LGBTQ individuals.

Reinforcing Secrets Through Coded Language

The hegemony of heteronormativity has historically compelled LGBTQ communities to create linguistic codes that have served as passwords providing entrance and familiarity among those within the communities and exclusion from distrusted outsiders (Chauncey, 1994; Howard, 1999). Communities often used metaphors or roundabout phrases to discuss themselves, as in the following example from the novel *Finding H.F.* (Watts, 2001). H.F. comments how her best friend Bo had never directly “come out,” but spoke about himself in couched phrases:

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

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

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

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

“You have a date?” Bobby asked him.

“No,” Kit said. “I'm off women, too.” (p. 80)

John has recently broken off a long-term heterosexual relationship, so he is not questioned when he comments that he is “taking a break from women for a while.” Knowing that Bobby does not know about his gay sexuality, Kit mimics John’s words, but with weighted meaning. Given the indirectness of word choice, it appears as a form of code, only understood by those “in the know.”

While examples of such “coded language” were few in these texts, numerous characters demonstrated fear about being “found out” for fear of losing their friends or fear about what their parents/relatives would do. Such is the fear in *Geography Club* (Hartinger, 2003) in which several gay, lesbian, and bisexual characters create a club where they can gather at school but not be found out. They solve this problem by creating the Geography Club, a club with a name that sounds so boring that no one would think of joining. As such, the name of the club itself becomes a code word. Given that historically homosexuality could only be discussed in similarly coded language, these excerpts evoke those concerns for secrecy and safety, underscoring homosexuality as “the love that dare not speak its name.”

In this way, the above textual references evoke discourses around homosexuality that position it negatively. On the one hand, gay and lesbian characters have a sickness that needs curing and/or are sinners who need saving. On the other hand, they are deviants who need to be avoided, thrown out, and restricted so their perversion cannot and will not spread. Either way, these excerpts evoke both psychiatric and Biblical discourses that position homosexuality negatively. In a similar fashion, the use of “coded language” underscores the language of secrecy that has evolved in queer communities to protect individuals from possible negative repercussions of being “out.” While the overarching purpose of these texts appears to be to challenge such discourses, they nevertheless fail to provide any other ways of thinking.

However, Levithan’s (2003) *Boy Meets Boy*, through its blurring of genre and inventive use of linguistic features, 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.

Challenging Assumptions Around Children and Sexuality

One pervasive set of discourses around sexuality concerns children: that children themselves are asexual beings. This idea derives from the broader construction of childhood in opposition to adulthood: adulthood is construed as knowledgeable and corrupt while children are unaware (ignorant) and pure. From this perspective, sexuality is acquired with maturity rather than considered an intrinsic characteristic of one’s humanity (Pollard, 1993). Despite documentation of healthy sexual behaviors in children and youth by psychiatric and medical communities (Friedrich et al., 1998; Larsson and Svedin, 2002; Sandnabba et al., 2003), it remains largely unthinkable among the broader public for children to be aware of their own sexuality or to express that sexuality in any way. In a heteronormative society that *naturally* presumes children are heterosexual until told otherwise, a child’s awareness of a nonnormative sexual identity is denied. Moreover, it becomes

completely untenable for a responsible adult to acknowledge such “wantonness.” However, Levithan (2003) challenges these assumptions by suggesting that a child might be in fact aware of a nonnormative sexual identity, which in turn could be affirmed by a responsible adult. In the following excerpt the main character Paul recalls an early memory, in which he accidentally sees his kindergarten report card on which his teacher acknowledges his gay identity as one of several personal attributes.

I've always known I was gay, but it wasn't confirmed until I was in kindergarten.

It was my teacher who said so. It was right there on my kindergarten report card: PAUL IS DEFINITELY GAY AND HAS VERY GOOD SENSE OF SELF.

I saw it on her desk one day before naptime. And I have to admit: I might not have realized I was different if Mrs. Benchly hadn't pointed it out. I mean, I was five years old. I just *assumed* boys were attracted to other boys. Why else would they spend all of their time together, playing on teams and making fun of the girls? I assumed it was because we all liked each other. I was still unclear how girls fit into the picture, but I thought I knew the boy thing A-OK. (Levithan, 2003, p. 8)

What is striking is how Levithan capitalizes on his narrator's perspective to challenge “commonsense” assumptions and make the extraordinary seem ordinary and the ordinary seem extraordinary. The emphasis on the word *assumed* here, as denoted by the italics, particularly signals this shift. Typical understanding of homogenous (boy–boy) versus heterogenous (boy–girl) play is challenged through Paul's alternate perspective: “Why else would [the boys] spend all of their time together, playing on teams and making fun of the girls? I assumed it was because we all liked each other” (p. 8).

After his kindergarten teacher explains that “gay” refers to boys who like other boys, she elaborates on the “whole boys-liking-girls thing” (p. 12).

Mrs. Benchly asked me if I'd noticed that marriages were mostly made up of men and women. I had never really thought of marriages as things that involved liking. I had just assumed this man-woman arrangement was yet another adult quirk, like flossing. Now Mrs. Benchly was telling me something much bigger. Some sort of global conspiracy.

“But that's not how I feel,” I protested. My attention was a little distracted because Ted was now pulling up Greg Easton's shirt, and that was kind of cool. “How I feel is what's right...right?”

“For you, yes,” Mrs. Benchly told me. “What you feel is absolutely right for you. Always remember that.” (p. 9)

In this section Levithan continues to challenge the privileging of mixed gender relationships over same gender relationships, and extends his critique to reinforce two central ideas. First, young children may demonstrate healthy sexual awareness that also does not presume heterosexuality. As Paul notes, “my attention was a little

distracted because Ted was now pulling up Greg Easton's shirt, and that was kind of cool" (p. 9). Secondly, responsible adults should affirm young children's whole humanity, which includes their sexual identity. Mrs. Benchley states, "What you feel is absolutely right for you. Always remember that." Her statement suggests some concern or worry that Paul's acceptance of his sexual identity would be tested in the future, and her desire to affirm his sexual identity and bolster his self-esteem against future harm. Outside the world of the novel, however, an early childhood teacher, like Mrs. Benchley might be censured for "promoting an aberrant lifestyle" or "corrupting" Paul by affirming that he was absolutely fine just the way he was.

Paul recalls his early years, plainly, as if absolutely normal. For instance, during his elementary and middle school years Paul describes becoming the first openly gay president of the third grade class, dating a boy named Cody, who was supposed to be his date to their fifth grade semi-formal, and in sixth grade helping to start their elementary school's first gay-straight alliance. This all seems extraordinary because it completely counters our understanding of reality: First openly gay president of a third grade class? A boy going to take another boy to a semi-formal in fifth grade? Fifth graders don't have semi-formals! A gay-straight alliance in an elementary school?! It is this juxtaposition of the ordinariness of Paul's retelling: "I didn't really have a life that was so much out of the ordinary" (p. 13) with the seeming absurdity of the events that can open up a space to challenge commonly held beliefs and assumptions, beginning with the construction of children as asexual beings.

Undermining Hegemonic Masculinity

In addition to challenging constructions of children as asexual, Levithan powerfully undermines dominant hegemonic masculinity through the clever exchange of a singular medial vowel. In the following text excerpt, Paul describes the challenge surrounding his campaign slogan for the presidency of his third-grade class.

Joni was my campaign manager. She was the person who came up with my campaign slogan: VOTE FOR ME...I'M GAY!

I thought it rather oversimplified my stance on the issues (pro-recess, anti-gym), but Joni said it was sure to generate media attention. At first, she wanted the slogan to be VOTE FOR ME...I'M A GAY, but I pointed out that this could easily be misread as VOTE FOR ME...I'M A GUY, which would certainly lose me votes. So the A was struck, and the race began in earnest. (p. 11)

The delicious irony of this section plays on the difference of a single vowel. In contemporary society, there are still few openly gay political representatives and society is stratified based on male dominance. While historically being a "guy" has been an asset and being "gay" has not, Levithan reverses them here, so that being gay carries more social capital than being a guy.

My biggest opponent was...Ted Halpern. His first slogan was VOTE FOR ME... I'M NOT GAY, which only made him seem dull. Then he tried YOU

CAN'T VOTE FOR HIM... HE'S GAY, which was pretty stupid, because nobody likes to be told who they can (or can't) vote for. Finally, in the days leading up to the election, he resorted to DON'T VOTE FOR THE FAG. Joni threatened to beat him up, but I knew he played right into our hands... It was a total blowout, and when it was all over, Joni beat Ted up anyway. (pp. 11–12)

Masculinities studies scholar Connell (1995) posits the concept of multiple masculinities that exist along a hierarchy of experience and gender expression. While all men, based on their gender, can access privilege over women, Connell noted how all men are not treated equally, based largely on the form of masculinity they enact. Most notably is hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is that which “embodie(s) the current most honored way of being a man, it require(s) all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimate(s) the global subordination of women to men” (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832).

One of the ways that boys and men have shown to create group solidarity and establish social dominance, suggested by hegemonic masculinity, is through homophobic insults (Connell, 1995; Plummer, 2001). This has been found to be particularly pervasive among youth and adolescent males who a) do not engage in a dominant sport and are otherwise typically immune from such taunting and/or b) do not currently have a girlfriend (Pascoe, 2007; Renold, 2005). Those in this quasi-status are most likely to engage in homophobic insults, as the character Ted does above. He uses homophobic taunts—Don't vote for the fag—to regulate his peers and classmates and position himself in a place of hegemonic dominance. However, in the context of this book, that tactic backfires and Paul becomes “the first openly gay class president in the history of Mrs. Farquar's third-grade class” (Levithan, 2003, p. 11). In this way, Levithan again turns commonplace heteronormative practices on their head, first through the clever exchange of simple medial vowels and then the introduction of homophobic discourse to undermine the power sustained by hegemonic masculinity.

Unveiling Secrets

As noted earlier, secrecy, silences, and coded language have long been associated with homosexuality and queer identities, particularly identified through phrases such as “the closet” and “being (or not being) out.” To be identified the “gay kid” in secondary schools is to risk ostracism and verbal and physical harassment (Kosciw et al., 2010). In the following text excerpt, Levithan (2003) again challenges the “normalcy” of silencing gay and lesbian identities by highlighting the tentativeness, the fear that comes with labeling. The main character Paul works with a minor character named Amber on the decorating committee for an upcoming dance. Paul teases her, saying,

“I swear, if you weren't an Old Navy-wearing lesbian Club Kid, I'd probably kiss you now.”

Amber's laugh stops. She looks around to see if anyone's heard.
I've gone too far, I think.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

Amber waves me off. “It’s okay. It’s just that I’m not...well, I don’t like to think of myself as... a Club Kid.”

She smiles again.

“I’ll never think of you that way again,” I promise.

“I mean, I love joining clubs and all. I just don’t want word to get out, okay?”

Her secret is safe with me. (p. 142)

In novels with LGBTQ characters secrets are commonplace with a significant number of characters in the closet worrying over “who knows.” As such, Levithan (2003) plays with the closet motif: the stammering with just the right amount of hesitation as noted by the ellipses. Paul—and probably the reader—assumes that Amber does not want her sexual identity publicly disclosed: “Amber’s laugh stops. She looks around to see if anyone’s heard.” But in this case, her worry is not about the label of “lesbian” but of being called a “Club Kid” [a group of high school students who pad their college resumes by joining lots of clubs that they attend only once or twice]. She disputes the label because she does not want to be associated with “them”—other Club Kids. The understated humor of this excerpt challenges the reader’s assumptions about what should be kept secret and what said aloud. It challenges the taboos and respectability typically accorded one (joining clubs) and not the other (homosexuality).

Conclusion

While blurred genres are becoming more commonplace among young adult literature (Cart, 2004), Levithan’s (2003) structural use serves to create more than a clever narrative. Like most contemporary texts that incorporate LGBTQ characters and conflicts, the novel works to challenge and undermine normalized assumptions around gender and sexuality, especially the homophobic attitudes and behavior they engender (Aston, 2001; Fone, 2000). Most contemporary novels attempt to do this by creating empathetic characters, villainizing homophobic behaviors and characters, and even using the narrative in part as a “how-to” manual to familiarize the reader on different aspects of LGBTQ identities and conflicts (Wickens, 2007). They situate these issues in contemporary realistic settings with which readers are likely to identify. However, as Crisp (2009) notes, the use of these realistic tropes may in fact serve to reproduce homophobia, by implying that homophobia is “too large an issue to confront and is ultimately bad, but inevitable behavior” (p. 339). *Boy Meets Boy* avoids this quandary altogether through its blurred genre narrative structure.

Additionally, because of its blurred genres *Boy Meets Boy* has been difficult to classify (Crisp, 2009). Some have described it as a fantasy (Jessica, 2009; Pandora, 2007), “utopian” (Cart and Jenkins, 2006; Pattee, 2008), and contemporary realistic fiction, as Nancy Garden, the acclaimed author of LGBT fiction, characterized the book (Crisp, 2009). Indeed, the novel has components of all the above. As such, Crisp characterizes the novel as “magical realism,” which “can be used to describe

a text that re-imagines ‘normal’ by re-imagining ‘reality’ in ways that challenge readers to deconstruct both the novel and the contexts in which they live” (p. 340). The book may even feel magical given the ways in which it seeks to “de-center privileged discourses and disrupt what may have previously been taken as ‘logical’ or ‘normal’” (p. 340). This is certainly true of *Boy Meets Boy*, as it actively subverts the privileged discourses around sexuality and gender.

Situating a text in its generic structure is fundamental to textual discourse analysis, but is problematic with Levithan's (2003) text. Although it promotes a similar activist aim as the bulk of contemporary LGBTQ young adult fiction—to challenge and change normative assumptions about sexuality and gender—through its ambiguous genre structure, powerful humor and wit, subtle exchange of simple medial vowels, careful attention to pauses and hesitation through ellipses, Levithan's text stands in counterpoint to the prevailing propensities within this field.

Foucault (1972) underscored through his archaeologies the processes that enable particular ideas to become privileged while others are scorned and dismissed. Moreover, based on the expertise and credibility accorded certain authoritative voices and institutions, particular ideas have become normalized and naturalized. As a result, it becomes difficult to think and imagine alternative possibilities, namely that very young children could have an awareness and understanding of their own sexual identity or that of others without being “corrupted.” While other texts highlight frequent interdiscursive collocations, e.g. homosexuality as perverse, sick, or anti-American, Levithan avoids this language altogether and through his humor more effectively disrupts these very commonplace collocations. Nevertheless, if Levithan (2003) used farce and satire solely to challenge these assumptions, the reader could too easily dismiss the novel as fantasy (as some do) and to relegate it to the “not possible.” As such, I believe its power to disrupt and interrupt the reader's assumptions would be lost.

That being said, *Boy Meets Boy* is not the only novel to queer such heteronormative processes. Francesca Lia Block's *Dangerous Angel* series is a notable comparison. Also characterized as “magical realism,” her books are part realistic fiction and part lyrical fantasy. *Weetzie Bat* (Block, 1989) first introduces the reader to Dirk and Duck who are in a long term committed relationship, a striking contrast to the early texts, in which gay and lesbians were isolated and doomed to live dreary lives (Cuseo, 1992) and to typical later “coming out” narratives. The presentation of these two characters and their relationship as normal was, and remains, extraordinary.

Another distinctive text involves *Totally Joe* (Howe, 2005), which describes the hopes and anguishes of Joe, a gay character from Howe's earlier novel *The Misfits* (Howe, 2001). The novel is written in the format of an A–Z “alphabiography,” in which Joe tells the story of his life. From his earliest memories, Joe (aged 12) describes how he liked to play dress up, owned at least four Barbies, and went through an Easy-Bake Oven stage. He understands that by cultural norms, he *should* be more like his older brother who likes to play football, but is not. Similar to Paul, we hear through young voices the challenges to discourses that equate childhood with asexuality and/or presumed delayed heterosexuality. Such queer texts disrupt

the “lingering belief that homosexuality is particularly incompatible with, or even antithetical to childhood and its culture” (Kidd, 1998, p. 114).

There is a growing number of queer (LGBTQ) young adult texts and research that queers non-LGBTQ texts (see as examples Cummins, 2004; Pugh and Wallace, 2006). Rabinowitz (2004) notes that under a queer lens, examinations of gender and sexuality provide fresh analysis to character development and literary themes. It enhances and deepens the field. More significantly, 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 the structures that indicate otherness and difference and work to make them normal and usual (Rabinowitz, 2004).

Furthermore, all of these texts understand the powerful socializing forces of children's and young adult fiction. Van Dijk (2008) notes “texts as elements of social events have causal effects—i.e. they bring about changes” (p. 8). The impact for social change in regard to gender and racial equity first drew attention to issues of representation in the 1970s and 1980s. “Every group working for social and political change suddenly discovered what the nineteenth century had so often proclaimed: that children's reading is a potentially powerful influence on society” (MacLeod, 1994, p. 182). Authors of contemporary LGBTQ novels appear to be as equally aware of the potential impact of their books on their audiences. As a result, studying these texts for the ways they enact and engage with ongoing discourses around sexuality and gender helps effectively trace these cultural shifts and their impact on future generations.

Appendix

See Table 1.

Table 1 Finalized book list

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

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