from *Beyond Borders: Queer Eros & Ethos (Ethics) in LGBTQ Young Adult Literature. Eds. Darla Linville & David Lee Carlson. New York: Peter Lan, 2016.

CHAPTER SEVEN

After Homonormativity

Hope for a (More) Queer Canon of Gay YA Literature

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INTRODUCTION

The last 3 decades have seen an escalation of LGBT texts for young readers, both picture books and YA novels, and a move away from texts written and marketed primarily for the adult reader but with the younger reader as a secondary audience (Cart & Jenkins, 2006). Consider the bildungsroman-styled texts that now represent "classic" gay and lesbian literature: novels such as Edmund White's (1982) *A Boy's Own Story* and Rita Mae Brown's (1983) *Rubyfruit Jungle*, which were written with an adult readership in mind, also reminded readers what it was like to "come out," to experience those first pangs of same-sex attraction, as well as the fear of what might happen if the wrong person found out. Because the protagonists were on the cusp of adulthood, these novels, for the young people who could find them, also served as important sponsors of an emerging queer literacy (Lynch, 2000). These novels, and others, such as Holleran's (1978) *Dancer from the Dance*, Lynch's (1983) *Toothpick House*, and Duplechan's (1986) *Blackbird*, began to offer readers somewhat mainstream novels that recognized "gay" and "lesbian" as orientations and identities, as more than phases, mistakes, accidents, or the sexual experience of rape, violence, or pedophilia. As these writers and stories began to emerge after Stonewall, helping to establish *gay* and *lesbian* as recognizable and relatively stable identities, publishers and writers alike discovered a market for young readers who were discovering their sexual orientations (Kidd,

1998). Anthologies such as *Queer 13: Gay and Lesbian Writers Recall Seventh Grade* (Chase, 1998), as well as now-classic gay-themed novels (*I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*; *Dance on My Grave*; *Trying Hard to Hear You*; *The Man without a Face*) often provided images of gay youth as either highly troubled individuals or individuals for whom their sexuality was a significant problem (Cart & Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, 1988; Trites, 1998). These texts are also predicated primarily on the notion that there is an identifiable readership of (mostly) gay and lesbian youth to consume such texts; these are readers who see themselves in the protagonists, but may come to see themselves as "problems" in such problem novels. At least, that has been the prevailing reading of these texts and the tragedies that typically befell their protagonists or their protagonists' lovers.

For example, in surveying early texts such as Donovan's (1969) *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* and Chambers's (1982) *Dance on My Grave*, Trites (1998) suggested that the "genre [of gay YA fiction] has a well-entrenched tradition of delegitimizing its own agenda" (p. 149); using a Foucauldian lens, she argued that "the rhetoric these texts employ to construct gay discourse is more repressive than it is liberating" (p. 143). For Trites, and for Jenkins (1988), the gay characters tend to be drawn from a very narrow pool of humanity: they are white/Anglo, they are usually middle/upper-middle class, their experience of "coming out" is typically marked by a romance/relationship that ends badly. On the surface, the descriptions these critics offer of the texts seem hard to dispute. And when compared to the ever-expanding number of LGBT YA texts at the turn of the century, it's easy to see these early forerunners as somehow problematic and unsupportive for young readers. Certainly, there are now texts that embrace more "liberating" experiences for gay youth than those that Trites and Jenkins initially explored. Consider the (mostly) happy endings that characters in the following texts enjoy: Alex Sanchez's *Rainbow Boys* series, as well as his *God Box* and *So Hard to Say*; David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy*; Bret Hartinger's *The Geography Club*, *The Order of the Poison Oak*, and *The Last Chance Texaco*; Bill Konigsburg's *Out of the Pocket*; Robin Reardon's *A Secret Edge*; and Benjamin Saenz's *Dante and Aristotle Discover the Secrets of the Universe*.

And yet, as we read two of the most recent novels by acclaimed YA authors Bill Konigsburg (2013) (*Openly Straight*) and David Levithan (2013) (*Two Boys Kissing*), we see two novels that seem to echo some of the now overlooked complexities of identity, as well as the sophistication and nuance of narrative that we find in the now dismissed novels *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* and *The Man Without a Face*. While these earlier novels can certainly be read in the ways that Trites, Jenkins, and others have read them, we've come to see these readings as reflective of their own time, as well: the arguments these critics make are part of a liberal-humanist tradition, one in which we have had to argue for something more and better for queer youth. This argument made sense in the 1980s and

1990s when these initial texts stood alone as the *only* representations of gay youth and coming of age. However, in the current context, we have many more options. Against this richer and more diverse background of queer representation, what might it mean to return to those early narratives of gay YA fiction and read them through contemporary queer theories of multiple and nuanced identities and performances? What might these novels do to complexify staid notions of what it means to be "gay"?

In this chapter, we argue that contemporary identity-based texts tend to replicate homonormative structures while doing little to disrupt identities and trajectories that would provide alternative/queer spaces for exploring self and other. To highlight these problems, we turn to recent queer theory (Edelman, Halberstam, Muñoz) and two seemingly disruptive/queer YA texts (Levithan's *Two Boys Kissing* and Konigsburg's *Openly Straight*), in order to ask how we might push current simplistic notions of gay YA literature into queerer frames, and by so doing, re-claim dismissed or "dated" YA texts such as those by Donovan and Holland.

IN A QUEERER TIME AND A QUEERER PLACE

In titling our project "After Homonormativity," we seek to explore and exploit two parallel and conflicted trajectories at work in contemporary gay YA literature: (1) a search for and an embrace of normativity, and (2) a hope that there might be more to a queer existence than mere normativity. For writers who grew up in more homophobic times, there seems to be a desire to make gay YA texts "normative," to provide a space where the "homo" is normal, regular, accepted, valued. And given the number of gay teen suicides that make the news, it's clear that gay youth need as much support and encouragement as they can get from whatever venue. But with this increased visibility has also come a very particular, very narrow view of what's visible, what's normal, resulting in what Lisa Duggan and other scholars have come to call "homonormativity" (Duggan, 2002; Halberstam, 2005; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2014). Duggan (2002) saw this "new neoliberal sexual politics" as a politics "that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (p. 179). For many queer scholars, the current fight for marriage equality represents just such a thrust toward domesticity and consumption (Conrad, 2010; Warner, 1999). Concerning LGBTQ YA texts and characters, Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan (2014) have likewise expressed concerns "that these limited representations reify neoliberal ideas about sexuality's relationship to race and class, and encourage gay assimilation into normative but problematic, nonequitable institutions" (p. 2). While it does not often show up in discussions of YA

literature, an oversight this collection seeks to address, queer theory has attempted to problematize normativity in its various guises, both homo- and heteronormativity.

For example, Lee Edelman's (2004) *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Jose Esteban Muñoz's (2009) *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, and Judith Halberstam's (2011) *The Queer Art of Failure* provide important critiques of the neoliberal push toward accumulative market capitalism and individual achievement as the ultimate values of Western culture. Edelman has argued effectively that a "reproductive futurism" is central to the American mindset; his book demonstrates how important the figural or phantasmatic child has become as the commonplace against which there is no argument: how does one argue "against" the child? How does one do anything that knowingly jeopardizes the yet-unknown future of this figural child? For Edelman, "the figure of the Child, enact[s] a logic of repetition that fixes identity through identification with the future of the social order" (p. 25); therefore, as opposed to the gay or lesbian domestic who "reproduces" through birth or adoption and refocuses his/her life on the child-as-potential, the (childless) queer embodies "that order's traumatic encounter with its own inescapable failure" (p. 26). In this way, the queer stands as a type of rejection of the future, a radical acceptance of the here and now. In a similar way, Muñoz (2009) embraced queerness as "that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing" (p. 1). In the queerness of potentiality, Muñoz found a kind of "nonbeing that is eminent, a thing that's present but not actually existing in the present tense" (p. 9). This potentiality is not the same as the one Edelman critiqued in *No Future*; rather, this is a potentiality that remains futural in order to disrupt and unsettle the present. Halberstam engaged this anti-teleological thread in queer theory by suggesting that embracing failure can become one way of disrupting the neoliberal push toward domesticity and consumption. For Halberstam, failure "recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities" (p. 88).

We introduce this particular strain of queer theory in order to provide one way of reframing the texts we discuss in the rest of this chapter. In particular, these anti-homonormative theories encourage us to question what visions and values we're seeing in current gay YA texts, while also asking why we may take it for granted that the current texts are inherently better, more sophisticated, or more nuanced than older, often dismissed texts. For example, it has become commonplace to think of feminism and several other social-political-theoretical movements as coming in "waves." Of a writer or text, we might say, "Well, that's more of a first-wave feminist text" or "This writer represents the second wave of feminism." While the wave metaphor of history and thought might be useful for making categories and thinking about how ideas seem to change over time, we also know that this wave metaphor of history is predicated on a belief that what comes later is somehow better, "more feminist," than what came before. Gay YA texts can also be placed in a series of "wave" chronologies. We could say that texts such as Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* and Holland's *The Man Without a Face* represent first-wave gay YA literature; these texts suggest that non-heterosexual characters may exist, but their sexuality exists in a shadow-world of the text. This wave would naturally give way to the second wave of texts such as Chambers's *Dance on My Grave*, Hale's *Cody*, and Holmes's *Jack*; here, the characters' sexualities are more central to the text, the protagonists "come out" and come to understand themselves as gay. Third-wave texts would embrace the "orientation" of a gay sexuality; characters in these books see their "coming out" as a natural and normal activity, a "coming into" themselves. Ultimately, then, we might argue in such a telos that the next wave of LGBT YA fiction would showcase not simply one or two characters' "coming out" and "coming into" but would showcase a larger world of sexualities, gender identities, racial identities, class identities, etc. To that end, the next section of this chapter examines two such books, Bill Konigsburg's (2013) *Openly Straight* and David Levithan's (2013) *Two Boys Kissing*, but we do so not to suggest that this imagined four-wave structure of the last 50 years is real or accurate, but in order to challenge the homonormative impulse to do so.

WHERE HAVE WE GONE

Before we reclaim *I'll Get There* and *The Man Without a Face*, we want to look at two current texts that seem to highlight the beginnings of a more queer canon of YA literature. The first novel, Bill Konigsburg's (2013) *Openly Straight*, which follows up his somewhat successful football-themed first novel *Out of the Pocket* (2008), is built on the premise that a teenager, Rafe, who has been very out and proud and accepted in his liberal Colorado town, decides to return to a closet of his own choosing by moving to Natick, an all-male boarding school in Connecticut, and letting everyone assume he's straight. This move, Rafe tells us, will finally let him be "normal" ("I'm tired of it. I'm so tired of being the gay kid. I don't want this anymore. I just want to be, like, a normal kid," p. 133); it will enable him to be just himself, to be more than the gay teen that everyone knows is gay, the token gay kid that people pride themselves on being so open-minded around. *Openly Straight* flips the conceit from early gay literature that one needed to hide, that one might be "found out"; the closet is now something that the gay character runs to in order to prove to himself and others that he's *more* than just gay.

As he begins to fit in at Natick, Rafe develops a close friendship with Ben, a smart jock whose best friend, Bryce, has had to leave school after a bout of depression causes his parents to worry about his health and safety. For Rafe, Natick

offers a way to understand himself as male in ways that he felt his being labeled gay foreclosed on; almost as soon as he arrives, Rafe finds himself on a sports team, being "one of the guys": "I'd never thought of myself as the kind of guy who wanted to fit in with the jock crowd, but here I was, swelling with pride at being given a nickname" (p. 15). This new "Jock Rafe" (p. 18) begins to enjoy the privileges of heteronormativity, which he thinks involves never having to question his sexuality or his gendered place of privilege in the world.

Equally important, we think, is that part of Rafe's "problem" with being out and proud, why he's frustrated being "gay" first and a person second, is the homonormative sense of identity and sexuality that he has internalized: "For me, the whole coming-out thing was about finding a boyfriend. I mean, why else would you come out? Because it's so much fun to be oppressed? No, you come out because you want to find love" (p. 90). Like so many gay YA novels, which seem to be constructed as a hybrid of bildungsroman and romance, Rafe initially sees being "out" as being about finding another person to love, not about loving himself, exactly, or about being part of a history or culture of queer peoples. Where queer theory challenges us to rethink interpersonal relationships and to embrace complexity, homonormativity works to prevent those options; the purview of homonormativity is in replicating normative structures for coupling and the nuclear family. Trapped in this space, one embraced by most of the gay YA novels published in the last 20 years, Rafe sees "coming out" as a functionalist enterprise, one whose goals (he thinks) are not currently his own. However, in developing an intense friendship with Ben, Rafe begins to embrace, yet again, the structures and values of homonormativity, and he feels guilt that he's "hiding" in this new closet at Natick. He remembers the time his father, a vegetarian, attempted to host a hog-roast for the neighborhood: "I felt like that tofu pig, grotesque and in the spotlight and horrible, dishonest in a way that felt so basic that it hurt me behind my eyes to think of it" (p. 244). In the world of homonormativity, gay youth have one trajectory: be gay. Any other identity or exploration is "dishonest."

Ultimately, Rafe isn't the most interesting queer character in *Openly Straight*; we might even argue that he's not a queer character at all: Ben is. Ben, who ends the novel with his heterosexuality seemingly intact, stands out as a queer figure who was most open to exploring his sexuality. Rafe already knew he was gay when he began his friendship with Ben; Ben assumed they were both heterosexual. As Ben tries to figure out what he's feeling for Rafe—it seems more than friendship but what would that mean?—he is the figure who takes a chance on a queer set of emotional and sexual possibilities:

> "I swear to God, I wish I really was gay. I'd totally marry you."
>
> I had had enough wine to do what I wouldn't have done otherwise. I rolled over onto my side and faced Ben, looking deep into his soulful, kind eyes.
>
> "Should we try it?"

> Ben took a deep breath and closed his eyes. "I can't figure out any way to get closer to you, and I feel it. Like I want to get closer. It's not sex I want, it's just ..."
>
> I kissed him then, on the lips, keeping my lips there until he kissed back. And he did, he kissed back, and we opened our lips slightly and then wider, and our mouths were two Os pressing together, and I could taste his tongue because it was so close to mine. Ben breathed into my mouth. It felt like I'd shot to the moon, this pulsing, rushing roller coaster from below that overtook my body, and I shook. (p. 242)

In this key scene, Ben is able to express his own confusion and uncertainty about sexuality, about a need for closeness with another man but not necessarily a sexual need. In some ways, this mirrors the needs that Rafe expresses earlier in the novel about wanting to be a jock, to be part of the guys, to have a sense of closeness with other men that isn't only sexual. Yet in contemporary American culture, one in which males have to be *either* straight or gay (because bisexuality remains a taboo option), Ben and Rafe are both trapped in rigid and unforgiving spaces. Both are constrained by the social strictures implicit in the homonormative agenda. For these characters, there's little left at the end, once Rafe "confesses" that he already knew he was gay, than to maintain a mutual and respectful distance. Ben sees this as a betrayal of his trust, and at least when the novel ends, cannot reconcile his friendship with Rafe. Rafe joins the Gay-Straight Alliance and comes out to the school. While this novel provides a furtive glimpse at the non-normative, Konigsburg ultimately foreclosed on possibility, trapping his characters in the current seeming rigidity of binary sexuality and gender roles.

David Levithan's (2013) *Two Boys Kissing*, in some ways gestures toward a different, possibly more queer, set of options for its panoply of young characters, even though it too remains somewhat trapped in an identity fixation. To start with, Levithan does something in his book that very few other gay YA novels do: he provides not just one or two, but an almost staggering host of gay and queer protagonists and narrators to tell the stories of the novel. While previous gay YA novels, in combining genre conventions of bildungsroman and romance, have tended to focus on a central gay figure "coming out," often as part of a search for or discovery of love either returned or unrequited (*Boy Meets Boy*, *Rainbow Boys*, *So Hard to Say*, *Geography Club*, *Vast Fields of Ordinary*), it has been the rare novel that finds its narrative center in some non-discovery or non-romantic plot (e.g., *Saints of Augustine*, *In Mike We Trust*, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*).

Two Boys Kissing, as the title suggests, involves romantic, or at least physical, entanglements, but the richness and diversity of characters and their stories are about much more than romance. We learn quite early in the book that the titular kissers, Craig and Harry, are no longer romantically involved: their relationship has morphed into "a friendship strong enough to withstand the disappearance of kisses" (p. 46). There's also a budding relationship between Avery and Ryan; both

see themselves as outsiders: Ryan, a blue-haired boy identifying as gay; and Avery, a pink-haired trans boy. There's Cooper, who uses the Internet to meet anonymous men and boys:

> He is sitting on his bed, and he is wrestling within himself, and ultimately the only thing he can think to do is go on the Internet, because life there is just as flat as real life, without the expectations of real life. (p. 5)

There's Peter and Neil, who are just starting a relationship; their parents are supportive, Peter's openly and Neil's by not talking about it but also not getting in the way either. And there are a host of other minor characters: some straight, some gay, some lesbian, some trans; some old, some young; some living, some dead; some Asian American, some African American, some Anglo—in this way, *Two Boys Kissing* presents what may be the most diverse group of characters we've seen in a gay YA novel. And while the action and title may center on the Anglo couple, it's clear from the beginning that what everyone is watching, either in person or on the Internet or from beyond the grave, these two boys kissing, is an illusion, a performance of a relationship that does not properly exist, a simulacrum of homonormative coupling that the other stories in the novel unravel and multiply; this central conceit, in fact, seems to call into question the dominant homonormative premise of the gay YA canon.

Likewise, by including the voices of dead queer characters (we are ultimately uncertain of the genders and identities of all the "we" that make up the omniscient narrative voice, though they seem primarily male), readers have access to more than one generation of LGBT characters:

> We are your shadow uncles, your angel godfathers, your mother's or your grandmother's best friend from college, the author of that book you found in the gay section of the library. We are characters in a Tony Kushner play, or names on a quilt that rarely gets taken out anymore. We are the ghosts of the remaining older generation. You know some of our songs. (p. 3)

These dead narrators contextualize the events of the novel and reflect on the meaning of what they're seeing. For the adolescent reader, this collective narrator suggests that being gay is not new or individual; it is not a singular or unique experience, though it might feel that way. In short, these narrators provide a sense of history and continuity, of culture and longevity, that nearly every other gay YA novel is missing. As with the characters represented in the text, these narrators further the sense that being gay (or bi- or trans or queer) is a complex and multifaceted experience. Both structurally and thematically, *Two Boys Kissing* voices the trope "you are not alone" quite loudly.

At the same time, however, Levithan (2013) limited the novel in ways similar to Konigsburg: in this case, the deceased narrators cannot help but critique and

evaluate the behaviors, experiences, and feelings of the young protagonists from second-wave, identity-driven homonormativity. For Cooper, who uses the Internet and phone apps to meet men, the narrators are quick to contextualize those behaviors as dangerous and desperate, as a reflection of a damaged sense of self:

> "Cooper's loathing of everyone else—his parents, the people in his town, the men he chats with—is surpassed only by his loathing of himself." (p. 36)

> "Cooper feels anonymous, and that suits him fine." (p. 75)

> [Cooper] is angry at his father, angry at his mother, but mostly he's come to feel that all this was inevitable, that he was born to be a boy who must sleep in his car, that there was no way he was going to make it through high school without being caught. (p. 117)

> "Cooper, meanwhile, refuses to grasp. He refuses to hold. He refuses to feel." (p. 154)

While we do not disagree that Levithan has constructed a character in Cooper who is unhappy with himself, a character who seems tailor-made to reflect the still far-too-frequent gay teen suicides, we have to wonder why? Why should these narrators, who "were once the ones who were dreaming and loving and screwing [who] were once the ones who were living" (p. 1), why should these narrators embrace only the couples in the novel who reflect, even if a lie, the values of homonormativity? With Cooper, Levithan offered us a character who seems to be suicidal because he has not found love; in the absence of it, he has not learned to love himself or to dismiss his parents' contempt for his being gay. Cooper is ultimately saved by a passerby on the bridge he intends to jump from, which helps makes *Two Boys Kissing* solidly part of the second wave of gay YA literature, but its diversity of characters and experiences, like *Openly Straight*, suggests that the genre may be ready to enter a third wave. But what to do about identity?

WHERE WE WERE GOING

To put that question another way, what happens when "identity" is off the table? Or rather, what happens to queer YA fiction when *identity* is not offered as the sine qua non of either sexuality or the adolescent bildungsroman? In ways noted above, the second wave of gay YA texts has found itself bound to notions of identity that have begun to chafe. By reclaiming some first-wave texts, where identity itself was not the driving narrative obsession, we believe that we might begin to ask questions of texts for young readers that begin to enable a third wave of queer YA texts to emerge. To that end, we return to John Donovan's (1969) *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* and Isabelle Holland's (1972) *The Man Without a Face* and argue that, despite their limitations, these earlier texts offer provocative alternatives to thinking about sexuality in fixed categories of identity.

In terms of the longer history of LGBT/queer YA fiction we have been tracing, Donovan's and Holland's novels occupy an important place in that they both paved the way for the representation of homosexuality/gay issues and characters in young adult fiction. Donovan's text is typically cited as the first book written for young adults specifically to deal frankly with homosexuality, while Holland's is credited with being the first to present an adult homosexual in a somewhat positive, albeit still ambiguous, light. Both novels depict teenage boys grappling with dysfunctional families and searching for intimacy during times of trauma.

I'll Get There is a gentle book about 13-year-old Davy, who has to move to Manhattan to live with his alcoholic mother after his current guardian, his grandmother, passes away. His parents are divorced and he sees his father only periodically. Much of the first half of the book is taken up with Davy's transition to Manhattan, where he tries to deal with his mother and finds solace in playing with Fred, his dog. Early on, the book subtly announces that one of its major themes will be intimacy between males. In one of the scenes between Davy and his father, the two share a cab ride after spending some time together. Davy, looking for warmth and comfort during this unsettling time in his life, describes their physical intimacy as father and son:

> He puts his arm on my shoulder. I am pleased he does that. I move toward him in the taxicab. He holds me closer to him, and I don't know what gets into me. I kiss my father. It is the first time I've done that since I knew what I was doing and had some control over what I did. He has kissed me before, like this morning when he came to get me at Mother's. But he has never really kissed me as though he wanted to. Not that I remember. He holds me for a minute, and then I guess we decide that men don't get gushy over each other like this, and he lets me go. We don't say anything else until we get to Central Park. (p. 64)

The exchange seems rife with typical tensions between fathers and sons, a simultaneous desire to be close and an inability to navigate physical intimacy. Eventually, Davy befriends a classmate, Douglas Altschuler, and in one sweet scene, during which the boys are wrestling on the floor with the dog, they kiss:

> 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 isn't like that dumb kiss I gave Mary Lou Gerrity in Massachusetts before I left. 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. (p. 149)

The boys briefly discuss what happened, with Davy asking, "What was that all about?" and Altschuler responding: "I don't know." But they quickly return to playing with the dog and some play fighting, perhaps in an effort to reassert a sense of masculinity. Davy describes their playing as rough: "I mean very tough. I mean a couple of guys like Altschuler and me don't have to worry about being queer or anything like that. Hell, no" (p. 150).

The kissing scene between the boys serves as an interesting counterpoint to the kissing scene with the father. In both cases, the male characters are somewhat at a loss for how to proceed; they all seem to want the physical intimacy, but are uncomfortable with it. Indeed, almost inevitably, Davy and Altschuler start to avoid one another, both questioning what's happened and unsure of what to do next. Davy spends a bit of time questioning himself: "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?" (p. 161). The narrative tension heightens when, due to the mother's carelessness, Fred is hit by a car, and Davy immediately understands the dog's death as punishment for his experimentation with Altschuler: "It is too my fault! All that messing around. Nothing would have happened to Fred if I hadn't been messing around with Altschuler. My fault. Mine!" (p. 180). Davy confronts Altschuler, saying, "We're going to end up a couple of queers ... You know that, don't you? All that junk back there before Fred died. You know what happens, don't you?" (p. 185). Initially, Altschuler thinks Davy is "crazy," though eventually the boys reconcile. The novel ends with both boys agreeing to "respect" one another (p. 199), but inconclusive about whether either one is going to be gay. Davy even proposes that, if they make out with girls, they wouldn't "have to think" about "the other."

This ending is a near mirror to the ending of Konigburg's (2013) *Openly Straight*. Konigsburg's novel concludes in the certainty of identity and identity categories—Rafe is gay; Ben is straight—while *I'll Get There* refuses to make such a claim; the earlier novel seems more open to the possibilities that sexualities might be more nuanced and complex than current discourses allow. Ultimately, even the title of the novel suggests that life, and one's sexuality, may be much more of a journey than Konigsburg's does: in the former, there is the assurance that "I'll get there" but no certainty what "there" is; in the latter, one must be "openly" and obviously one thing or another. While we appreciate that *Openly Straight* offers much more reflection on and acknowledgement of gay/queer desire than *I'll Get There*, we also cannot help but wonder how the latter's nuances of sexuality might disrupt the homonormative imperative at work in so much contemporary gay YA literature.

Holland's (1972) *The Man Without a Face*, published just 3 years later than *I'll Get There*, is a more brooding tale about 14-year-old Charles, who is spending the summer at the beach with his sisters, his mother, and her new love interest. The mother, working on her fifth marriage, despises Charles's father, her second husband, and seems to take out some of her dislike on her son. Charles seems isolated and even morose at times, not connecting with his soon-to-be step-father. He's trying to cram for prep school entrance exams, which he envisions as his way

out of an unsatisfying family situation. But his study skills are mediocre, and he's already failed the exam once, so he enlists the help of Justin McLeod, himself an isolated individual living in a large house on the beach. McLeod is a loner and something of an enigma; his face is horribly scarred from a car accident in which a young passenger was killed, and he keeps to himself to work on writing his novels. He's somewhat feared by the neighbors and rumors circulate about him all the time. But Charles is drawn to him, perhaps because McLeod is also an isolated figure, and eventually they establish a tutoring relationship in which McLeod drives Charles hard, with Charles both resenting and appreciating how he's being pushed.

Charles comes to see McLeod as not just a tutor, but a friend, and he marks this intimacy as unusual, even hard won. He describes his complex feelings after having shared some secrets with others about McLeod's past:

> I wanted to be friends with him, but every time I tried somehow to get through to him again I'd feel like Richard balking at a jump. I couldn't account for it because I had never felt this way before. I've always been a loner. Mother—and all five school analysts—have talked to me about that ad nauseum. Until now, I've felt it was a good thing. It kept me loose. Now all I could think about was that I had ratted on McLeod. It made me sicker than ever. (p. 113)

Like Davy in *I'll Get There*—as well as Rafe and Ben in *Openly Straight*, and Cooper in *Two Boys Kissing*—Charles wrestles with how to be intimate with others, particularly other men.

In another scene somewhat parallel to *I'll Get There*, Charles and McLeod are swimming in the water, eventually rough-housing a bit. Charles is clearly enjoying himself:

> I forgot he was an adult and a teacher and forty-seven years old. I even forgot what I had done to him [the earlier "ratting"]. 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. (p. 117)

And, as in *I'll Get There*, the specter of shameful queerness—what will other people think?—lurks closely:

> I could imagine what all the kids I knew, even Joey, would say about the way I felt about McLeod. But here, lying beside him on the rock, I didn't care. I didn't care about anything. Everything else, everybody else, seemed far away, unimportant. (p. 119)

Unlike Davy, Charles pushes further, wanting to be closer to McLeod:

> "I like you a lot," I said.
>
> There was something beating in his hand or mine. I couldn't tell which. I wanted to touch him. Moving the arm that had been across my eyes 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. (p. 120)

McLeod doesn't pursue a physical relationship at this point, and the two have an exchange about Charles's sexuality. Charles wonders if McLeod thinks he's queer; the other man defers, saying, "No. Everybody wants and needs affection and you don't get much. Also you're a boy who badly needs a father" (p. 121). On some level, little seems to have changed in the 40+ years of writing for YA audiences when it comes to the emotional and physical lives of boys and men: *The Man Without a Face*, like *I'll Get There* and *Openly Straight*, ponders what options are available for boys and men where intimacy—physical, emotional, familial, spiritual—is involved. While later gay YA fiction works hard to name those desires and draw boundaries around them, *Man Without a Face* and *I'll Get There* both seem unready yet to create such boundaries. In that way, these early texts may have something still to teach us about possibility.

Ultimately, in what seems a strange twist on the death of Fred in *I'll Get There*, it's the death of Charles's cat, Moxie, that initiates a physical relationship with McLeod. The boyfriend of Charles' estranged sister kills Moxie, who wasn't supposed to be in the house, and Charles flees to McLeod for comfort. The ensuing scene is touching, if somewhat opaque in physical details:

> After a while he lifted me up and carried me to the bed and lay down beside me, holding me.
>
> 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. (p. 147)

After this presumably sexual encounter, the narrative moves to a swift close. Charles refuses to see McLeod after their intimacy, and instead takes his exam, passes it, and starts the new school year. He feels bad about having just left, so he returns to McLeod's home, only to discover that McLeod has died of a heart attack. He's left Charles a note, however, essentially forgiving him of having taken off and saying that he appreciated the chance to rediscover love with Charles. He also encourages Charles to connect with his stepfather, who seems a decent, if nerdy, man. The novel ends with a sweet scene between them, with his stepfather, Barry, revealing that he had actually known McLeod as a friend.

In retrospect, *I'll Get There* seems a tame, sweet book with an inconclusive ending about the boys' sexuality, while *The Man Without a Face* boldly tackles intergenerational intimacy that leaves its protagonist's sexuality somewhat obscure. On one hand, the frank approaches to homoeroticism and male-to-male intimacy were certainly groundbreaking—and disturbing to some readers. Both books

were frequently banned or censored, and in 1977, Robert C. Small, Jr., could still note in his essay, "And Then There Were None—Take It Away! I Don't Like It," that many unsympathetic readers felt that Donovan's book, like others that treated homosexuality openly, should be "wrapped in brown paper" like porn (p. 245). Other early reactions to these books actually de-emphasized issues of sexuality. For instance, Maia Pank Mertz wrote in 1978 in "The New Realism: Traditional Cultural Values in Recent Young-Adult Fiction" that, in *The Man Without a Face*,

> homosexuality is the least important aspect of the novel; the book's major theme concerns friendship and caring. The one sexual experience that involves Charles and Justin takes place in the last 10 pages of the book .... In this case an ostensibly controversial book becomes, upon close examination, a work that affirms the traditional values of friendship, caring, and family. For it is Justin who encourages Charles to accept his new step-father and to come to terms with the knowledge that his real father had abandoned his family. (p. 103)

Both the outrage elicited by the sexual content, as well as the contortions to sideline such content, seem quaint from today's perspective, particularly given the increasing number of LGBT characters in YA fiction, as well as the frank and often sensitive treatment of sexuality broadly in such works.

What is striking, however, is the critical reception and characterization of much early YA fiction depicting homosexuality, including both Donovan's and Holland's books, which are frequently referenced in the scholarly literature. While these books are typically acknowledged as groundbreaking, they are quickly dismissed by the concern that they are significantly limited, even potentially damaging in how they represent homosexuality. For instance, by 1981, M. Daphne Kutzer, writing for *College English*, described the depiction of homosexuality in books for young people in her article "Children's Literature in the College Classroom":

> While to some their publication may indicate a loosening of the rules about what is and is not permissible for adolescents, a careful reading of these books shows that nearly always the gay character has a beloved pet run over as a direct result of "deviant" behavior, or, worse, ends up dead himself or herself. The message seems to be, in part, that it is all right to know about certain kinds of sexual behavior, but not to participate in them. (p. 720)

In some ways, Kutzer isn't wrong: both of our books with dead pets end ambiguously. Donovan's Davy and Altschuler may have just been going through a phase, and Holland's McLeod, an isolated gay man, is dead by the end of the book, with Charles's own sexuality still undetermined. But is it fair to say that the deaths—of pets or people—are a "direct result of 'deviant' behavior"? After all, in *I'll Get There*, Altschuler reminds Davy (and readers) in the closing pages of the novel that Davy's "magical" connection between what he and Altschuler did and Fred's death is misguided: "What happened to Fred had nothing to do with what we did" (p. 197).

Still, much early YA fiction depicting homosexuality has come under a great deal of criticism. YA author Lauren Myracle (1998) wrote in "Talking About a Revolution" that such fiction written before the '90s almost always depicted homosexuals as meeting "tragic ends" (p. 42); specifically, "In almost all of the YA novels about homosexuality that I've read, the gay characters are 'found out' and somehow punished: this is the way our authors give our world back to us" (p. 43). Writing retrospectively in the same year, Christine Jenkins (1998) noted in "From Queer to Gay and Back Again: Young Adult Novels with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969–1997," an in-depth analysis for *The Library Quarterly*, that Donovan's book is one in which "teen protagonists ... worried about a possible same-sex attraction but finally concluded (often with the help of an adult mentor) that their feelings were simply a stage they were passing through on their way to heterosexual adulthood" (p. 308). In Holland's book, Jenkins finds McLeod possessed of a "flawed (and curiously degendered) identity [due to his facial scarring]" who "has deliberately isolated himself not only from other gay people (apparently, since there appear to be no other gay characters in the book) but from all other people" (p. 316). Such thinking about these books continued, so that, by 2004, in an article for *English Journal*, "Literature for Today's Gay and Lesbian Teens: Subverting the Culture of Silence," Terry L. Norton and Jonathan W. Vare referred specifically to Donovan and Holland to argue that "These works left readers with the overall impression that homosexuality led to a dire outcome and that being gay had no lasting importance, that it was just a phase that one might pass through during adolescence" (p. 65). Even the most recent criticism on YA LGBT work continues this theme. Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins's groundbreaking survey of queer YA literature from 1969–2004, *The Heart Has Its Reasons*, essentially dismissed both books: Holland "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 GLBTQ literature" (p. 22). In his survey of YA literature more broadly, Cart (2010) was even more scathing: "these early efforts perpetuated the stereotypical view of homosexual lives as unrelievedly bleak, lonely, danger filled, and ... doomed to a tragically early end" (p. 155). And while noting their importance as works that introduced queer content into YA fiction, the contributors to the vital collection *Over the Rainbow: Queer Children's and Young Adult Literature* (Abate & Kidd, 2011) barely explored either Donovan's or Holland's novels.

Looking back at both *I'll Get There* and *The Man Without a Face*, we might acknowledge some truth to these judgments but also challenge them. These books are critiqued for representing homosexuality as a phase, but they themselves are somewhat dismissed as just a "phase" in the development of a YA literature toward the representation of out-loud and proud gay identities. In particular, Donovan's and Holland's books become critiqued primarily because they do not affirm a *particular*

gay identity. Recent queer theorists have noted what Elizabeth Freeman (2010) called chrononormativity, which she posited as

> a mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts … Manipulations of time convert historically specific regimes of asymmetrical power into seemingly ordinary bodily tempos and routines, which in turn organize the value and meaning of time. (p. 3)

Freeman is thinking of timetables, schedules, and calendars that organize life into routines, but also the heteronormative pressures to have "achieved" certain goals or life milestones by particular points—such as marriage, child rearing, career status. Such milestones organize, orient, and direct life courses in ways that come to seem natural. But how we understand homosexuality is also subject to chrononormativity. In many ways, the trajectory out of the closet and into self-acceptance and communal identity is another *chrono*-normalizing path, one that narrates an appropriate movement and development. Along such lines, we might argue that scholarly attention to queer YA fiction constitutes a kind of "institutional force," one that has "organize[d] the value and meaning of time" so that Donovan's and Holland's books seem to (always already) fall short; they represent an earlier stage in a desired development toward self-accepting gay identification.

BEYOND THE (CHRONO)HOMONORMATIVE

What's lost in a chrononormative critical approach to early queer YA fiction? In some ways, we miss opportunities to appreciate and understand our past—not only how far we have come toward gay self-acceptance, but a recognition of the difficulty of achieving such self-acceptance. Writing in *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, Heather Love (2009) urged us to take stock of queer histories as vital records of our ever-evolving coming-into-being and coming-into-identification. She understands our orientation toward the future—what Dan Savage urges us, particularly young people, to believe, namely "It Gets Better"—but she also wants us to recognize what's potentially lost in that orientation:

> Given the scene of destruction at our backs, queers feel compelled to keep moving on toward a brighter future. At the same time, the history of queer experience has made this resolute orientation toward the future difficult to sustain. Queers are intimately familiar with the costs of being queer—that, as much as anything, makes us queer. (pp. 162–163)

In terms of YA fiction, such a chrono- (and homo-) normative "orientation toward the future" makes appreciating the struggle to explore homosexuality and queerness in such fiction difficult to appreciate.

But more than this difficulty, it also occludes opportunities to understand these works as both richly part of their historical contexts and as potentially challenging to our own cherished valuation of gay identities. For instance, if we think of these books in the context of early gay liberation, they seem far more provocative. Donald Webster Cory (pen name for Edward Sagarin) and John P. Leroy wrote challengingly in their 1963 book, *The Homosexual and His Society*, that "all effort should be made to prevent and cure compulsory homosexuality and heterosexuality, so that it will be possible for human beings to function better with either sex" (p. 66). Thinking particularly about young people, they argued that,

> With more enlightened attitudes, less hostility, and greater objectivity, we can seek to bring up our children so that they know all that they need to know about sex and its variations, with no shame or guilt associated with them. (p. 66)

Such thinking, initially rooted in pleas for tolerance, would be picked up by some gay liberationists and lesbian feminists as calls to free all people from "compulsory" forms of identification. This early model of gay liberation was in many ways based less on equal rights—though that fight is certainly there—than on the desire to question, critique, and dismantle obligatory structures of identity.

Such an approach may not have been lost on some readers of Donovan's and Holland's books. Writing about *The Man Without a Face* for the 1972–1973 Honor Listing of "Books for Young Adults," one reviewer noted how "[t]he question of homosexuality is handled with taste and directness, and the reader is led to understand a relationship that cannot be categorized by labels, but must be evaluated in terms of broader humane values" (Nilsen, 1973, p. 1300). We see the potential questioning of "labels" in this telling exchange between McLeod and Charles:

> "There's nothing about it to worry you. You reacted to a lot of strain—and shock—in a normal fashion. At your age, anything could trigger it."
>
> "You mean it doesn't have anything to do with you?"
>
> "It has something to do with me, sure. But nothing of any lasting significance. It could have been anyone—boy or girl. It could have been when you were asleep. You must know that."
>
> Yes, I knew that. And I knew all about the male and female in everybody, too. But I was remembering other things. The times, lying on the rock, two of them, that I reached over and touched him. I had touched him. Not the other way around. It scared me so badly I couldn't think of anything else. (pp. 148–149)

Certainly, we can read this dialogue, especially McLeod's understanding of what happened between them, as reifying homosexual behavior for some people as just a "phase." But while the encounter and his feelings have scared him, Charles also characterizes his subjectivity as both multi-gendered and agentful in initiating erotic contact. Moreover, the fact that the book refuses to identify Charles by its

end as either gay or straight might speak less to his having gone through a "phase" and more to his openness to continue to explore his sexuality—that is, to embrace a kind of sexual liberation beyond "compulsory homosexuality and heterosexuality."

Such possibilities are also present in *I'll Get There*, even if they are gentler and more tentative. While Davy's mother worries over whether something "unnatural" has happened between Davy and his "special friend" (p. 169), his father seems far more open-minded. He insightfully—and without initial judgment—asks if Davy has a "crush" on his friend. Davy responds: "I'm not queer or anything, if that's what you think" (p. 173). The follow-up conversation reveals that, on one hand, the critics of this book are right; the father wants to characterize the "crush" as a "phase":

> My father goes on to tell me that a lot of boys play around in a lot of ways when they are growing up, and I shouldn't get involved in some special way of life which will close off other ways of life to me. (p. 173)

At the same time, however, the longer conversation invites us to understand compulsory heterosexuality in larger socio-political terms, as a function of unnecessary bigotries:

> Then Father tells me a lot about how hysterical people sometimes get when they discover that other people aren't just what they are expected to be. He tells me there are Republicans who are always secretly disappointed when friends turn out to be Democrats, and Catholics who like their friends to be Catholic, and so forth. He says that such people are narrow-minded, he believes, and funny too, unless they become hysterical about getting everyone to be just alike. Then they are dangerous. They become religious bigots, super-patriots, super-antipatriotic, and do I understand? I tell him I think I do, but can't people learn to understand other people? He thinks they can, but only if they want to. (p. 174)

We hear in such an accounting the strains of Cory and Leroy, hoping for a different world in which young people can approach sex and "its variations, with no shame or guilt associated with them." And we hear just as much Heather Love's (2009) call to remember "the scene of destruction at our backs" and the "costs of being queer" in the process of moving toward and building a different future.

But *I'll Get There* is more than just a book hoping that "it gets better." At least one character may already inhabit self-acceptance. A rather open-minded Altschuler reflects as such on their fooling around: "I don't care. If you think it's dirty or something like that, I wouldn't do it again. If I were you." In other words, if it feels good, do it. Or not. This seems a rather liberated approach to one's sexuality. And, as with Charles at the end of *The Man Without a Face*, the lack of closure on identification might signal a call for further exploration—with greater maturity:

> "I guess we could respect each other," I say. "Do you think so?"
> Sure," Altschuler says. (p. 199)

While we may want to refrain from reading these works as embracing a proto-queerness, an embrace of full sexual self-determination, we surely do not want to read them as constituting just a "phase" that had to be passed through on the way to a more mature representation of gay identity. Rather, these books speak both to the difficulty of achieving and sustaining that identity, as well as to the value of sexual experimentation.

In many ways, Levithan's book seems a lovely bow to Donovan's, the newer novel taking Donovan's fumbling and insecure boys proudly into public visibility, staging a kiss that is both intimately personal (for the two boys and for those who see them and meditate on what the kiss means) and even political, a bold statement of queer visibility. At the same time, read from our current vantage point, we believe that Donovan's and Holland's books open up possibilities for thinking critically about sexuality and sexual identity in ways that Konigsberg's and Levithan's most recent books are just starting to recover. Viewed through contemporary turns in queer theory, we might say that it is precisely the "failure" of the earlier books to achieve depictions of full-fledged gay identity that makes them most interesting—and that finds recent resonances in characters such as Ben (*Openly Straight*), who represents an openness to exploring sexuality and keeping identifications fluid and full of possibility. As such, these texts, separated by 40 years, collectively trouble a teleological trajectory that reifies *identification* as the goal or endpoint of sexuality.

Recognizing the complexities of sexuality and gender identification, we have focused our analysis on texts about male queerness. But our analysis could hold just as easily, we believe, for books about young women's and lesbians' experiences. Nancy Garden's (1982) novel *Annie on My Mind* seems more exploratory and less judgmental than Madeleine George's (2012) *The Difference Between You and Me.* Both depict female characters exploring their sexuality, but George's book seems less patient with Emily, who is only a lesbian behind closed doors. In contrast to the creative DIY activist and fully lesbian Jesse, Emily's character is conflated with anti-activist, conservative, and corporate interests, which tag her bi-eroticism as not only anti-progressive but shameful. As with other novels in the newer "wave" of LGBT/queer YA fiction, our readerly sympathies are directed decidedly toward avowedly gay-identified characters.

To be clear, our goal in this chapter is not to discredit the present in our recovery of texts from the past. Jose Muñoz (2009) argued in *Cruising Utopia* that any understanding of our queer present must rely on a complex engagement with our histories and a critical assessment of our hopes for the future:

> Let me be clear that the idea is not simply to turn away from the present. One cannot afford such a maneuver, and if one thinks one can, one has resisted the present in favor of folly. The present must be known in relation to the alternative temporal and spatial maps provided by a perception of past and future affective worlds. (p. 27)

In (re)valuing the "alternative temporal and spatial maps" of first-wave queer YA fiction, we hope to alter our collective perception of where we have been and where we are going, in making a robust literature of queer experience available to young readers.

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