

**Theorizing Trans Readership:
Examining Ways of Reading Trans Themed Young
Adult Literature**

by

Robert Bittner

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MA, University of British Columbia, 2011

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Approval

Name: Robert Bittner
Degree: Doctor of Philosophy
Title: *Theorizing Trans Readership:
Examining Ways of Reading Trans Themed
Young Adult Literature*
Examining Committee: **Chair:** Dr. Jennifer Marchbank, Professor
Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies

Dr. Helen Hok-Sze Leung
Senior Supervisor
Associate Professor

Dr. Elizabeth Marshall
Supervisor
Associate Professor

Dr. Peter Dickinson
Supervisor
Professor
Department of English

Dr. Stuart Poyntz
Internal Examiner Associate
Professor
School of Communication

Dr. Gwen Athene Tarbox
External Examiner
Associate Professor
Department of English
Western Michigan University

Date Defended/Approved: January 11, 2017

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Abstract

While there appears to be an expansion of gender and sexuality studies within the field of young adult literature criticism, the vast majority of scholarship privileges the study of gay and lesbian identities, as well as binary gender identities—either male or female. There is not much treatment of those who identify as *other* or *in between*. In the 1990s articles began to address topics of cross-dressing and responses to cross-gender behaviour—in response to changes in the field of psychology, namely the removal of homosexuality and the addition of Gender Identity Disorder (GID) in the Diagnostic and Statistics Manual of the American Psychological Association. Explicitly trans identified characters were not published by mainstream publishers until after 2004 in the wake of Julie Ann Peters’s *Luna*. Using a queer theory approach to children’s and young adult literature focuses more on sexuality and sexual attraction, but the addition of various trans studies approaches—research that looks to bodily transition and modification—along with reader-response theory (Rosenblatt), allows for a more complex exploration of transformation and the notion of gender as something fluid and transitional. By working to combine queer and trans theoretical approaches with literature and the transgender body and experience, I begin working in a more complex way with new and emerging issues in literature, such as intersexuality, asexuality, and two-spiritedness. This requires moving beyond rigid gender dichotomies and homonormative/transnormative identities which are presented even within queer, gay/lesbian, and feminist studies; an exclusion which could become an inclusion with the use of transgender studies in the field of children’s and young adult literature. This study will look to find commonalities or divergent purposes between what occurs in theoretical studies and what actually matters to trans and queer young adult readers. I engage in interviews with queer and trans identified teens, as well as librarians in order to gauge what teens readers want and how they read trans and queer characters within available YA fiction. In this way, children’s and young adult literature scholars will have the ability to better understand the purpose and usefulness of textual analysis and gatekeeping processes.

Keywords: Trans Studies; Queer Studies; Young Adults; Literature; Reading; Recognition

To Nathan, a husband. *

*But really, “To Nathan, who has stood by my side at every point on this journey.”

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And to all the brave trans and queer youth who bravely face each new day even in the face of incredible adversity. Never give up.

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LUKE

*They told me
No.
Said, 'What are you?' said, 'you gotta choose'
Said, 'Pink or blue?'
And I said I'm a real nice color of
magenta
everyday extremists that made this world just black
and white solid stripes
of a penitentiary uniform, imprisoned ourselves with nothing
but the ideas of who was on top and
who was on bottom,
bathe yourself afterward,
perhaps for the sake of hygiene, they told me, but gently
make sure that soap and water doesn't wash away your
definition—
red and sore down there from the moment those red
curtains opened,
exposing me to the cry of "It's a—"
and
fill
in
the
blank*

-Susan Kuklin, *Beyond Magenta* 150

Chapter 1. Introducing Trans Young Adults

1.1. Introduction

Children's literature scholars, educators, and librarians engage in many debates regarding what children and young adults read, as well as what should be published and written for young readers in the first place. Reading habits of young people are hypothesized through analyses of book sales, the presentation of various awards, and statistics on library circulation; however, adults do the majority of purchasing and publishing of children's and young adult literature, problematizing many of these attempts at understanding reading behaviours among young people. Current analyses of queer issues and experience in young adult literature have had a profound effect on conversations about what types of books should be produced and promoted in the marketplace. Much of the conversation about queer, and gay and lesbian theories and politics within literature for young readers does not often include interactions with actual queer/trans youth to determine their own methods of reading and desired themes for inclusion in books currently being published. As such, this research project aims to fill the gap between pure theoretical readings of existing YA texts and practical reading habits and behaviours as informed by interviews with trans and queer teens, utilizing ethnographic research and, to a degree, audience studies. I examine the limitations of theoretical readings when reading habits of actual trans and queer teens are not consciously included as a part of such theoretical examinations.

The overall project consists of three main parts: an exploration of the history of LGBT studies intersecting with children's and young adult literature studies, a literary analysis of one specific YA text, and interviews with librarians and young adult readers. I will be using research from library studies and education scholarship to explore the role

of gatekeepers¹ and processes through which certain books and types of literature are promoted and disseminated. Next, I analyze one chosen text—*Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (2012), by Kirstin Cronn-Mills—using transactional reading theory (as developed by Louise Rosenblatt in her seminal work, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*), informed by a selection of queer and trans theoretical frames (as adapted from Kate Bornstein, Judith Halberstam, Jay Prosser, Kathryn Bond Stockton, and Susan Stryker, among others). A full account of the process for choosing this novel is presented later in the introduction. I complement this literary analysis with data gathered from interviews with young adult readers (ages 15-18—secondary school students—living in the lower mainland of British Columbia) in order to determine, through a series of five case studies, various reading methods and strategies, as well as to better understand what young adult readers want to see in the literature they consume.

In this project, I argue for the inclusion of a more rigorous trans theoretical framework within literary analysis. Queer theory is more than simply a reimagining of gay and lesbian theory; it works to disrupt people, events, history, and other facets of existence beyond sexuality and gender. Similarly, trans studies works with much more than simply a troubling of binary gender. Trans theories instead work to unravel the notion of changing and *becoming*, which is the foundation of identity according to Susan Stryker. By this, I mean that “becoming” is a part of transgender identity as “trans” is about passing across borders, in this case gender—young people pass from male to female and various positions in between within their daily lives and throughout their lifetimes. In their introduction to *The Transgender Studies Reader* (2006), Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle write about the possibilities and implications of using transgender studies in various other fields of research: “The frameworks for analyzing and interpreting gender, desire, embodiment, and identity now taking shape in the field of transgender studies have radical implications for a wide range of subject areas.

¹ Gatekeepers in the context of this research refers to those individuals and organizations who are in charge of selecting, promoting, censoring, or controlling access to certain types of literature containing various subjects or thematic elements.

Transgender phenomena have become a topical focus in fields ranging from musicology to religious studies to digital media . . .” (3)—and, I would argue, children’s literature studies.

In a similar vein to Stryker and Whittle, Kenneth Kidd notes that “[c]hildren’s literature scholars have learned a lot from queer theory, and queer theory, while it has no particular obligation to children’s literature, could benefit from greater and more diverse engagement with it” (185). Even as queer theory benefits the study of children’s literature, as Kidd notes, the inclusion of further transgender studies scholarship will expand the possibilities of children’s literature studies on a larger scale where gender is concerned. Kidd goes on to state, regarding Stockton and the queer child, “Perhaps the ‘growing sideways’ metaphor, or *something we’ve yet to envision*, would work better” for analysis of children’s texts (emphasis added; 187). Both Kidd and Stockton acknowledge the benefits of approaching various components of human gender and sexuality from a queer perspective, and yet they also acknowledge that queer studies has its limits in terms of negotiating with certain elements of gender and fluidity. Perhaps something more—something different—is necessary in order to allow for a deeper engagement with current complexities of gender, sexuality, and childhood/children’s studies:

While queer studies remains the most hospitable place to undertake transgender work, all too often *queer* remains a code word for ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian,’ and all too often transgender phenomena are misapprehended through a lens that privileges *sexual* orientation and *sexual* identity as the primary means of differing from heteronormativity. (emphasis added; Stryker, “Evil Twin” 214).

I argue that transgender theories are a necessary inclusion in young adult literature criticism and analysis because, while queer theory looks to the in-betweens and attempts to trouble binaries of gender and sexuality, transgender studies often addresses the role of the medical—specifically in relation to transsexuality—and the complexities of existing in a state of transition, for those not willing or not desiring to undergo bodily modifications. Transgender studies in relation to YA literature also allows for an exploration of physicality and sexual fulfillment in queer sexual acts that differ from socially normative understandings of hetero- and homosexual sex. This can be seen in the

treatment of sex in heterosexual romance versus homosexual romance stories (the latter texts rarely explore sexual fulfillment of any sort), and when it comes to transgender YA narratives, sexual fulfillment is treated mainly as an impossibility due to commonplace feelings of panic and disgust in the face of nonconforming bodies. This is not to say that queer theory is entirely about instability and transgender theory is necessarily about stability, but rather that the two theoretical frames cause a tension which allows literature critics, and researchers such as myself, to negotiate the nuances of gay and lesbian versus (or in relation to) transgender subjects, especially when the issues of transitioning or existing between opposite ends of the gender spectrum are present within a text.

Additionally, interviewing trans youth to better understand their reading habits informs examinations of reading desires and whether or not the role of gatekeepers has helped or hindered the ways of reading undertaken by participants of the study. While I fully acknowledge the power of, and need for, theoretical readings of literature for young readers, I believe it is important not to forget the very readers who are so often mentioned within discussions in award committees and among librarians and educators. My dissertation project aims to bring together the realms of theory and criticism of young people's literature with a study of the reading habits of trans/queer young people, to find and understand the tensions at work between theoretical analyses, the selection and dissemination of YA literature, and readers. In exploring these tensions, I aim to mark out territory where transgender studies can develop within the larger realm of literary studies.

1.2. Terminology

It is necessary to begin by addressing the tensions that exist around trans terminology. Part of my research relies on finding youth who identify within a specific identity category for the purposes of the project, however, the very existence of the identity category is incredibly problematic. Potential subjects, for instance, could be relevant to the topic herein but may not identify within the specific terminology that I have used up to this point. It is also necessary for me to acknowledge my own reliance on

specific terms such as “sexuality” and “gender,” both of which David Valentine regards as troublesome in their own right. He writes: “in the emerging fields of transgender activism and transgender studies there is a heavy reliance on the distinction between an unproblematized ‘gender’ and ‘sexuality’ which undercuts the critical impulse of intersectional analyses” (17). And while I understand that ‘gender’ and ‘sexuality’ are not fixed points within conversations about sexual and gender identity, I also must acknowledge that on a practical level, many young people still rely on and adhere to the practice of labeling, even if certain labels are used in an attempt to diverge from socially acceptable, outdated, and/or overly theoretical identity categories (i.e. genderqueer, non-binary, queer, etc.). Due to this reliance on identity categories and my own need to utilize such terminology throughout this project—while acknowledging the difficulties associated with such terms—I attempt to use socially acceptable and relevant terminology that allows for a wide ranging group of participants while still allowing me to keep my study within specific boundaries.

Throughout the project I use certain terminology—much of which is problematic in some particular way, depending on historical context—such as transgender, gender variant, cisgender, and other related descriptors of sexuality and gender categories. Specifically, when it comes to terms such as transgender and cisgender, I refer to Taryn Witten (2014), in the *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, where she discusses the keyword “Somatomorph.” In the article, Witten notes that

prefixes such as *cis* and *trans*—prefixes that emerged from the field of organic chemistry as descriptors of molecular conformation states—when used as modifiers of words like *sex* and *gender*, continue to promote a binary. That is, one’s identity becomes either cis or trans rather than understood to be a continuum in which cis and trans coexist as descriptors within a larger semantic range. (192)

As an alternative, Witten suggests the use of *Somatomorph* as a term to replace these dichotomies, since the term *soma* and *morph*, when placed together, become a descriptor of an identity which allows for identification anywhere along a larger spectrum (191).

However, as I am working more with terms and labels that teens are likely to use and identify with, I will be avoiding somatomorph as a descriptor in this particular project.

Similarly, where queer and transgender are concerned, I refer to the work of Heather Love, who wrote an entry on the term “Queer” (2014) in the *Transgender Studies Quarterly*. In this piece, Love writes: “If *queer* can be understood as refusing the stabilizations of both gender and sexuality implied by the categories gay and lesbian and opening onto a wider spectrum of sexual nonnormativity, *transgender* emerged as a term to capture a range of gendered embodiments, practices, and community formations that cannot be accounted for by the traditional binary” (172-3). My reason for utilizing elements of both queer and transgender studies is the fact that many trans theorists focus on embodiment, a significant component of my research as much textual representation relies on descriptions of bodies and physicality. Valentine, on the connection between queer and transgender studies, states

despite significant overlap in the intellectual formations of queer and transgender studies, the conceptual fit between them is not seamless. Queer has proved less useful than transgender studies in accounting for embodiment. Trans studies makes accounting for material experience and making space for new forms and experiences of embodiment central (in this aspect, one sees significant links between transgender and disability studies). (174)

As I was reading through the following chapters for continuity of terms, I realized to my own fascination, that in almost every chapter, I used a different descriptor when speaking about queer or trans subjects. In this chapter, for example, I began by using trans* and queer, then switched in later chapters to trans and LGBT, and later still, to LGBT/Queer and transgender. I realized that as I am working within two fields—young adult literature and trans studies—which are currently undergoing constant changes, my own work was shifting just as quickly. Originally, I began using trans* because of what I considered its inclusivity.

Julia Serano, in an exploration of trans terminology notes, “the asterisk is intended to serve the same ‘wild card’ function that it does in search engines—thus,

trans* would include trans, transgender, transsexual, transvestite, and so on” (“Regarding Trans *” n.p.). What I did not realize at the time, was the deeply complex dynamics around terminology and marginalized communities that give way to discomfort around trans* as a term. According to Serano’s research on the topic, people began to pick apart the term aggressively, noting for example that asterisks in sports statistics denote that a particular record is not legitimate, thus implying that trans people are illegitimate under the umbrella of trans* (“Regarding Trans *”). As trans was used first—though not without its own detractors—and trans* has been revealed to be quite troublesome and unsettling to many, I will be using trans instead throughout the following chapters.

What is fascinating in this analysis is the relationship between how various communities—trans and queer communities in this case—discuss themselves using specific terminology, and how academic communities take up these terms, though often more slowly. The process is not a simple one and does not simply flow in one direction, but rather relies on feedback between the subject communities and the academy. This discussion highlights the difficulties in current scholarly work with using terminology that will benefit the research and furthering of important discussions instead of being undermined by various opinions on political correctness. I have since removed the trans* term and replaced it only with trans and transgender, and I have opted for the use of LGBT/Queer for the purposes of opening up my discussion to include many identities and categories without unnecessary accusations of exclusion over neglecting to include any particular letter within the acronym. I use all of these terms with all due respect to those individuals about whom I am writing, and I also understand that there may be those who disagree with my choice of terminology, but as Serano writes, “there is no perfect word: Every term will have its detractors, and so long as trans people are stigmatized in our culture, some people will use these terms in disparaging or exclusionary ways” (“Regarding Trans *” n.p.).

1.3. Trans Young Adult Scholarship

While there appears to be an expansion of (trans)gender and sexuality studies within the field of young adult literature criticism, as examined in the literature review (see Chapter Two), the vast majority of scholarship privileges the study of gay and lesbian identities, as well as binary gender identities—either male or female. There is not much treatment of those who identify as *other* or *in between*. In the 1990s articles on young adult literature began to address topics of cross-dressing and responses to cross-gender behaviour—such representation began to appear with greater frequency in YA fiction after the 1980s—in response to changes in the field of psychology, namely the removal of homosexuality and the addition of Gender Identity Disorder (GID) in the Diagnostic and Statistics Manual of the American Psychological Association. Even Jody Norton, in her article on “Transchildren and the Discipline of Children’s Literature” (1999), focuses more on reading trans-ness into children and children’s literature in a broad sense (i.e. reading transgenderism into cross-dressing and cross-gender behaviour, which still privileges binary gender thinking) until trans-specific literature was published.

Explicitly transgender-identified characters did not begin to show up until 2004 in the wake of Julie Ann Peters’s *Luna* (2004). Instead of employing a specifically transgender theoretical approach—a concept I will address in more depth in the next section—Norton, instead, argues that scholars, in the absence of explicitly transgendered fictional characters, need to work at opening up the possibilities of gender identities within current readings (i.e. reading a male character as female or non-gendered, in order to see how the story changes.) She writes: “Let us hold the speculative space of gender open until we know more, and let us open, in the meanwhile, the socio-political and aesthetic question of the representation of (trans)gender in children’s literature” (430). Using a queer theory approach to children’s and young adult literature focuses more on sexuality and sexual attraction, but the addition of trans studies—research that looks to bodily transition and modification—allows for a more complex exploration of transformation and the notion of gender as something fluid and transitional.

It is time to formulate a new system of analysis that does not imply or privilege discussions of sexual orientation when gender and embodiment are at stake, a system where transgender individuals are not left out of the rhetoric of equality and safety within books and in real life. Scholars are only beginning to see the possibilities of using specific facets of transgender theory within literary criticism (as is evidenced in the literature review), though queer theory has been used for some time. The groundwork is there in such a theoretical approach, but the overlaps between transgender and queer theory need to be better acknowledged and utilized. By looking to the intersections of queer theory and theories of embodiment and gender variance, I, along with other scholars, can begin working in a more complex way with new and emerging issues in literature, such as intersexuality, asexuality, and two-spiritedness. This requires moving beyond rigid gender dichotomies and homonormative sexual orientations, which are presented even within queer, gay/lesbian, and feminist studies—an exclusionary practice which will hopefully become more inclusive. It will also be possible to better understand gay and lesbian representation and stereotypes as possibly overly reliant on transphobic language, even if not intended.

This study looks to find if there are similarities or rather, more disparity between what occurs in theoretical studies and what actually matters to young adult readers. In this way I will have the ability to better understand the purpose and usefulness of textual analysis and gatekeeping processes, depending on the responses from the young adult interviewees. What drives my literary analysis in this dissertation is the questions of how my research subjects identify apart from more scholarly theoretical categories of identity and also how that affects their characterization and representation in trans YA fiction.

Within this chapter I lay out the methodology that guides the threefold approach to my project, including literary analysis, an examination of information seeking, and gatekeeping practices. Data generation for this project relies on a series of face-to-face interviews with trans and queer youth, along with interviews with three librarians. I also expand upon the questions which are driving my interests and which will guide the building of a new framework for understanding the intersections of theory and practice

related to youth literature and reading practices, an area of study which is currently in need of greater exploration and engagement. Research surrounding literary analysis consists of a brief overview of gaps in current research, which are expanded on in Chapter Three; however, later in this chapter I provide details of how I decided on the specific text that is interrogated in-depth and which is utilized throughout the dissertation, in terms of critical literary analysis, reception and dissemination within library system(s), as well as reception and analysis from teen readers. Furthermore, this chapter involves an explanation of the ethical components of the interview process, including an outline of the questions I asked youth participants. I then outline the process by which I found subjects, though the full demographic details and a breakdown of statistical information are expanded upon later in this chapter.

1.4. Research Questions

This study is guided by a number of questions, the following being central to my overall arguments and inquiries into the subject of representation and the process of reading and interpreting fictional texts:

Interviews with Research Participants

1. How do young adults choose books to read, and how do they interpret trans and gender variant themes within YA literature?
2. In what ways have studies of gender and sexuality in English, Education, and Library Studies affected critical discussions of children's and young adult literature?

Literary Analysis

3. Are there particular sexual or gender identities that have been privileged or ignored throughout the history of gender and sexuality in children's and YA literature studies, and how can this be reimaged?

4. How does the idea of crossing over—crossing borders without necessarily being recognized—cause trans novels for young people to be read differently than so-called queer novels?

Gatekeeping Practices

5. How are books being chosen for teen literature collections in library settings? What sorts of resources do librarians use to make decisions about what to order for collections?
6. Are certain genres being privileged/promoted over others in collections and library programs for teens? How are LGBT/Queer books being used and promoted (or not) within certain library settings?

Intersections of Research and Theory

7. How have various aspects of transgender theory been used within critical discussions of children's and YA literature, if at all?
8. What gaps exist in critical uses of various aspects of transgender theory to discuss Methodology

1.4.1. Literary Analysis

I begin my analysis by examining ways in which audiences interpret and understand trans characters in fiction, and by positioning readers of fiction as “viewers” of textual characters. This examination begins with a brief introduction to queer literary studies to inform further explorations of readers as viewers. Using this approach, and incorporating theories of embodiment, monstrosity, and somatotechnics, I will analyze the novels noted below, looking for recurring themes, representations of trans bodies and gender variant individuals, and the ways in which categorization is both useful for young people in fiction, as well as problematic in other ways—categorization being paradoxical

in nature, often allowing scholars to narrow down research parameters while at the same time creating difficulties for individuals who defy existing categories.

As is evident from the literature review in the next chapter, there is currently a gap that exists in literary analysis where trans and gender variant representation are concerned, particularly relating to more contemporary research in transgender studies. In examining the available existing literature on LGBT/Queer studies within young adult literature criticism I will be able to expand on and modify theoretical approaches noted in the literature review in order to create a more inclusive and complex framework for literature criticism involving trans YA. Throughout the dissertation, I will refer to a number of texts with trans or gender variant characters, though a specific close reading will take place using the novel *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (2013), by Kirstin Cronn-Mills.

Since much of the existing scholarship on trans YA literature involves assertions related to the role of books as windows and/or mirrors of society,² culture, and personal experience, and while YA literature often *is* a reflection of society and socio-political concerns, I do question whether these are issues that teen readers—and specifically trans and gender variant teen readers—actively look for, or if they have other concerns while reading contemporary realistic fiction. This section will be a precursor to the following section, which will examine the reading habits and creation of meaning that comes from reading fiction, through interviews with young transgender individuals. I understand knowledge to be created through an interactive process rather than knowledge being something to simply acquire through the act of reading. Interviews, therefore, rather than serving as a way for me to acquire knowledge, will be a way for me to witness the active process of meaning-making undertaken by the youth participants in the study.

² As a scholar of children's and YA literature, I am not always in agreement with the “windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors” analogy (Bishop, 1990) which is so often adopted within library studies and more informal spaces of literary discussion. However, since it is used so prevalently in mainstream examinations of literature as it relates to readers' experiences, I will be utilizing the terminology from time to time in an effort to hopefully trouble what has become an overly simplistic view of the supposed purpose of fictional narratives for young readers.

Due to the multi-disciplinary nature of my research, I adopt a mixed-methods approach to the overall dissertation, undertaking an exploration of the intersections of critical theory/literary analysis and qualitative research regarding reading habits and youth literature seeking behaviours. There is also a component of my research that relies on a literature review of existing scholarship on gatekeeping in relation to educators and librarians. There have been a number of examinations of such gatekeepers within Education and Library Science journals over the years, and I undertake an evaluation of these studies, paying attention to the treatment of texts with queer and/or gender-nonconforming themes and characters.

1.4.2. Critical Theoretical Analysis

Through a review of existing scholarship on LGBT/Queer studies within the existing academic field of children's and young adult literature in Chapter Two, it will be possible within the remaining critical analysis chapters, to utilize specific components of queer and trans theories in the examination of young adult texts and interviews with queer and trans young people. I engage with theoretical works on children's and YA literature as well as queer and trans theoretical approaches to gender more generally (as developed by Sandy Stone, Susan Stryker, Kathryn Bond Stockton, and Judith (Jack) Halberstam, to note a few of the more prominent figures who will be informing my study.) Another major theoretical foundation for my research comes from Rosemarie Garland-Thompson (2009), whose research on "staring" works in conjunction with the emphasis on recognition and identity that will form the foundations of Chapters Three and Four. Staring is an act that reveals basics of human interaction, how we, as people, recognize and relate to each other based on intelligibility or unintelligibility. The ways in which human beings respond to each other is informed greatly by what we see in front of us and whether or not we understand what it is that we see. Trans and gender nonconforming individuals are often met with stares of confusion, anxiety, and fear, feeding into the very analyses I will be engaging in around representation in young adult literature.

Susan Stryker, on connections between queer and trans theories in “Transgender Studies: Queer Theory’s Evil Twin” (2004), asserts:

If queer theory was born of the union of sexuality studies and feminism, transgender studies can be considered queer theory’s evil twin: it has the same parentage but willfully disrupts the privileged family narratives that favor sexual identity labels (like *gay*, *lesbian*, *bisexual*, and *heterosexual*) over the gender categories (like *man* and *woman*) that enable desire to take shape and find its aim. (emphasis in original; Stryker 212)

This, of course, does not preclude the use of queer theory within a children’s and YA literature context, but does question how effective queer theory works when examining certain components of biological or assigned gender in childhood, as opposed to sexual identity.

One of the difficulties within more general conversations in less academic settings is the confusion surrounding “queer” (not to say that there is a consensus on queer as a discipline within the academy, of course). Stryker notes that “[w]hile queer studies remains the most hospitable place to undertake transgender work, all too often *queer* remains a code word for ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian,’ and all too often transgender phenomena are misapprehended through a lens that privileges *sexual* orientation and *sexual* identity as the primary means of differing from heteronormativity” (emphasis added; 214). Of course, these generalizations assume some form of coherence between different theorists within a given discipline, be it queer or trans studies. Within this dissertation I will engage with specific theorists and components of the larger bodies of trans and queer theories.

Sandy Stone’s article “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto” (1987) is a foundational text within the larger body of transgender studies. Stone works to question and undermine foundational assumptions of gender and sexuality, and also explores the troublesome nature of medical/psychological discourses that require a concrete measuring tool against which to compare transsexual individuals and their *need* for surgery. Reliance on such absolutes does not allow for the acknowledgement of more

subjective experiences and individual narratives within medicine. Medical and psychological fields require decisions about gender and sexuality to be made by specialists, including doctors and psychologists, rather than the trans-identified individual. Stone's work, in a larger context, addresses the struggle to bring an end to the concept of a universal transgender/transsexual experience. Medical and psychological professions often require trans individuals to conform to just such a universal experience in order to gain access to gender confirmation surgeries.

Throughout much of her work, Stone engages with counterdiscourse related to the unintelligible body. This counterdiscourse relies on a paradox of visibility relating to transsexual/transgender subjects. Trans bodies are on one hand expected to be visible so that they can be seen as trans, but one of the expectations of a universal transgender/transsexual experience (as noted earlier) is the ability to pass or blend in with normalized cisgender bodies. The creation of a counterdiscourse, then, requires the formation of dissonance through mapping refigured trans bodies against conventional gender discourse in order to disrupt it. The paradox in this, of course, is that it requires the refigured trans bodies to be revealed, laid bare for societal scrutiny, thereby no longer allowing the trans individual to go unnoticed among a cisgender majority.. Stone continues: “[i]n the transsexual as text, we may find the potential to map the refigured body onto conventional gender discourse and thereby disrupt it, to take advantage of the dissonances created by such a juxtaposition to fragment and reconstitute the elements of gender in new and unexpected geometries” (231). This fragmenting and troubling of gender through reading transsexual bodies in the context of specific gender frameworks constitutes the attempt to queer gender identity categories. Queering gender, though, while complicating binary frameworks, in many ways causes confusion when attempting to interrogate transgender or transsexual bodies and experiences.

Much like “queer” is often conflated with gay and lesbian identities, “transgender” becomes an umbrella term for all gender-related trouble, as Judith Butler terms it. Stryker writes the following in response to this difficulty of overly welcoming transgender inclusivity:

‘transgender’ increasingly functions as the site in which to contain all gender trouble, thereby helping secure both homosexuality and heterosexuality as stable and normative categories of personhood. . . . It is the same developmental logic that transformed an antiassimilationist ‘queer’ politics into a more palatable LGBT civil rights movement, with T reduced to merely another (easily detached) genre of sexual identity rather than perceived, like race or class, as something that cuts across existing sexualities. . . . (214)

In their introduction to *The Transgender Studies Reader*, Stryker and Stephen Whittle write about the possibilities and implications of using various components of transgender studies in other fields of research: “The frameworks for analyzing and interpreting gender, desire, embodiment, and identity now taking shape in the field of transgender studies have radical implications for a wide range of subject areas. Transgender phenomena have become a topical focus in fields ranging from musicology to religious studies to digital media . . .” (3). And, I would argue, children’s literature studies. This, however, does not fully explain what transgender studies is composed of and what it seeks to understand as a field of study:

Transgender studies, as we understand it, is the academic field that claims as its purview transsexuality and cross-dressing, some aspects of intersexuality and homosexuality, cross-cultural and historical investigations of human gender diversity, myriad specific subcultural expressions of ‘gender atypicality,’ theories of sexed embodiment and subjective gender identity development, law and public policy related to the regulation of gender expression, and many other similar issues. (3)

Transgender studies, in a more general context, engages with language and rhetoric as well, examining inclusion and exclusion of individuals within human rights policies, government and industry regulations, and legal representation. Stephen Whittle calls this notion “Trans humanity,” as it deals with understanding individuals as human beings, albeit human beings that can only be seen as such within the language of social institutions and practices as we know them.

What I hope to have achieved here, is to show that elements of queer and trans studies are not mutually exclusive. They work off of one another, in a complex relationship of checks and balances, each keeping the other theoretical frame in check, as

it were. Since “queer studies sometimes perpetuates what might be called ‘homonormativity’ . . . and an antipathy . . . toward other modes of queer difference” engagement with transgender studies is necessary since it is “in many ways more attuned to questions of embodiment and identity than to those of desire and sexuality” (Stryker and Whittle 7). The use of such theoretical frames also does not exclude the use of feminism or critical race theory, but rather works in conjunction with many of these frames to build a more complete understanding of all the components which make up gender as we understand it, and we must therefore refrain from utilizing one theoretical approach at the expense of another: “grappling with transgender issues requires that some feminist re-examine, or perhaps examine for the first time, some of the exclusionary assumptions they embed within the fundamental conceptual underpinnings of feminism” (7).

Transgender studies are a necessary offspring of queer and feminist studies (not excluding them) in order to call into question the anatomical in relation to the social through gender roles and identities. Within children’s and young adult literature, it is often a protagonist’s interaction with the anatomical that complicates the reconciliation of their own gender identity with the perceived identity placed upon them via social expectations or assumptions which are based off of specific behaviours and gendered practices: “Transgender people who problematize the assumed correlation of a particular biological sex with a particular social gender are often considered to make false representations of an underlying material truth, through the willful distortion of surface appearance. Their gender presentation is seen as a lie rather than as an expression of a deep, essential truth....” (9). This is incredibly troubling and troublesome for children and teens trying to navigate transgendered existence, while around them social institutions, friends, family members, and medical and psychological professionals are, at the same time, implying a misrepresentation of identity or a sense of confusion that may or may not actually exist within the mind of the individual in question. What is needed, then, is a change from examining genital status and physical attributes to a more personally developed identity. Stryker and Whittle warn that “[s]tate and society do . . . violence to transgender people by using genital status, rather than public gender or subjective gender

identity, as the fundamental criterion for determining how they will place individuals in prisons, residential substance abuse treatment program, rape crisis centers, or homeless shelters” (10). Transgender studies are useful as a tool in society, acknowledging the complexities of gendered existence, but such a theoretical approach is also incredibly useful and necessary for understanding visibility and representation of constructed fictional identities within children’s and young adult literature. The construction of these identities is most often dictated by outside observations from the public eye through acts of staring.

Much of the literary analysis in Chapter Three works to unravel the act of staring and related consequences within *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (2012). Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s *Staring: How We Look* (2009), investigates human interaction and the ways in which staring affects both the instigator of the stare, as well as the target. Garland-Thomson’s analysis of staring examines intersections between psychology, biology, and history, and works to reveal the complex cultural assumptions at work in each act of staring. She asserts that staring is a response to the unexpected, including where bodies in private and public spaces are concerned, when they do not conform to expectations of male and female physical characteristics. The disparity between biological gender and gender expression/identity is one that surrounds my own interrogations of transgender and transsexual subjects—as well as trans YA fiction—on a constant basis. Although Rosemarie Garland-Thomson focuses almost entirely on the concept of staring outside of a queer/transgender context—what she defines as “an ocular response to *what we don't expect to see* [emphasis added]” (5)—by engaging with Garland-Thomson, it is possible to understand how staring and looking work on a social level within the context of non-normatively gendered bodies. My intention through Chapter Three and within the overall dissertation project, is to engage with the act of staring as it intersects with various components of queer and trans studies, especially as these intersections relate to staring and treatments of gendered bodies within literature for young readers.

1.4.3. Choosing the Novel

Throughout the dissertation I discuss one primary text in order to link together each section of my research (Table 1.1). The novel will be examined within the context of awards and gatekeeping, then analyzed critically in Chapter Three, examining trans representation. I will then utilize the novel—or excerpts from the novel if participants are unwilling to read the entire novel—within the focus groups being put together for this project. The novel chosen for use within the dissertation must have won at least one award relating to representations of the LGBT/Queer experience (e.g. Stonewall Award, Lambda Literary Award, Rainbow list, etc.), and will have been written and marketed specifically to a young adult audience. Furthermore, the novel will have been published within the last decade since the first novel marketed for youth, with a transgender character—*Luna* (2004) by Julie Anne Peters—was not published until one decade prior to the start of this project. As such, the following list has been narrowed down to one title, *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (2012) by Kirstin Cronn-Mills, which will be used throughout the following chapters:

Table 1.1 Book Selections

Author	Title	Publisher	Year	Awards/Booklists
Anders, Charlie	<i>Choir Boy</i>	Soft Skull	2005	2006 Lambda Literary Winner (Transgender Fiction)
Beam, Cris	<i>I Am J</i>	Little, Brown	2011	2012 Shortlisted Lambda Literary (Transgender Fiction / YA Fiction)
Clark, Kristin Elizabeth	<i>Freakboy</i>	FSG	2013	ALA Rainbow List
Cronn-Mills, Kirstin	<i>Beautiful Music for Ugly Children</i>	Flux	2012	2014 Stonewall Award Winner (Children’s and YA Literature); Top 10 Selection, 2013 ALA Rainbow List
Farizan, Sara	<i>If You Could Be Mine</i>	Algonquin	2013	Top 10 Selection, 2014 ALA Rainbow List
Katcher, Brian	<i>Almost Perfect</i>	Delacorte	2009	2011 Stonewall Award Winner (Children’s and YA Literature)
Levithan,	<i>Boy Meets Boy</i>	Knopf	2003	2003 Lambda Literary

David				Winner (Children's and YA Literature)
Peters, Julie Anne	<i>Luna</i>	Little, Brown	2004	2005 Lambda Literary Finalist (Transgender Fiction)
Wittlinger, Ellen	<i>Parrotfish</i>	Simon & Schuster	2007	2008 Lambda Literary Finalist (Children's and YA Literature); 2008 ALA Rainbow List

While I will be doing an overall general analysis of all the texts in the above list, Cronn-Mills' text will be the focus of a more in-depth discussion in Chapter Three, and will be used to guide the interviews which will be engaged with in Chapter Four. The texts in this chart were chosen for three main reasons. The books were first chosen because of the inclusion of trans and/or gender variant protagonists. Each book was chosen from among those books published in the last decade. This is not simply an arbitrary timeline, but is indicative of the short span of time in which such young adult novels have been published, starting in 2004 with *Luna* by Julie Anne Peters.

The second reason for the selection of these novels from among the larger list of books published in the last decade is that they have either won or been honoured by an award which focuses on books with LGBT/Queer themes (Stonewall Award, Lambda Literary Award(s)), or have been included in promotional booklists of books with LGBT/Queer themes (ALA Rainbow List). Cronn-Mills' novel was chosen to be the primary subject of closer inspection due to its recent publication (2013), as well as the fact that it not only won the 2014 Stonewall Award for Children's and Young Adult Literature, but it also received the following further honours:

- Top Ten pick for the 2013 Rainbow List
- 2013 Best Fiction for Young Adults list
- Silver Medal, ForeWord Review's Book of the Year Awards for YA fiction
- Lambda Literary Award finalist in Children's/Young Adult Literature

The novel also garnered a number of favourable reviews from large review journals, including Kirkus Reviews, and a Starred Review from Publishers Weekly. Though other novels in the list won awards and appeared in other Top 10 lists, *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* received the largest number of honours and is, in comparison to other texts, the least problematic in terms of representation of trans experiences in the real world, although it is, for various reasons that will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four, much more didactic in style.

1.4.4. Interviews

There are many similarities between storytelling and the interview process. This project seeks to understand and interpret identity categories and formation, and in doing so I acknowledge that the very process of interviewing and being interviewed is a part of identity formation. Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992) write:

How individuals recount their histories—what they emphasize and omit, their stance as protagonists or victims, the relationship the story establishes between teller and audience—all shape what individuals can claim of their own lives. Personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one’s life; they are the means by which identities may be fashioned. (1)

How participants refer to themselves, how they explain the process by which they come to that form of self-identification, and other such details, all shape their current identities.

Interviewees attempt to put order on “the flow of experience to make sense of events and actions in their lives” (Reissman 3). Every respondent’s story must be contextualized within a specific geographical, cultural, and linguistic space in order to better understand how the story being told alters interpretations of the stories being discussed in focus group interviews. A mixed methods approach is necessary here in order to better understand the intersectional nature of storytelling as a form of interpreting and understanding contemporary identity categories and self-identification processes. Due to this fact, all interviews must be treated, in some ways, as fictions, wherein participants will recall and organize information in such a way as to create a

cohesive narrative flow, rather than focusing on the often disjointed events and ways of thinking that contribute to the act of identity formation.

Throughout the interview and focus group process, I encouraged participants to elaborate on ideas and specify the use of certain terminology, such as self-identification(s) and descriptions of gender and sexual orientation. By exploring these terms and their meanings to each participant, the focus groups and interviews become sites of active meaning-making and identity formation as the act of defining identities and descriptors is an integral part of identity formation.

As Geertz (2000) notes, speaking to participants without fully understanding their meaning “opens one to the charge that one is writing out other peoples’ consciousness for them, scripting their souls” (102). By using a semi-structured, conversational interview style, I was able to help participants construct clear meanings and navigate the often nebulous realm of identity categories and terminology surrounding gender and sexuality in various social, educational, and political environments. No participant was forced to answer questions that they did not feel comfortable answering. This is in line with Seidman’s (1998) guidelines on preserving equity throughout the interview process:

Being equitable in interviewing research means...valuing the words of the participant because those words are deeply connected to that participant’s sense of worth. Being equitable in interviewing research means infusing a research methodology with respect for the dignity of those interviewed...Equity must be the goal of every in-depth interviewing researcher. Striving for equity is not only an ethical imperative; it is also a methodological one. An equitable process is the foundation for the trust necessary for participants to be willing to share their experience with an interviewer. (93)

All participants were engaged throughout the entire process, and were able to provide feedback and take part in the transcription process following the actual interviews. Participants were emailed copies of transcripts and were given the opportunity to change, omit, or expand upon previously given answers. Ensuring respect for participants and their responses was of extreme importance, especially considering the age range of teen

participants, as well as the fact that I was working with an already often oppressed population.

Youth Interviews

I interviewed trans and queer youth between the ages of 15 and 18 (secondary school students) in non-school settings, to discuss young adult literature with gender-nonconforming protagonists, and to encourage discussion of literature-seeking and reading behaviours (See Table 1.2). I did not interview straight-identified youth, nor did I focus on cisgender readers—though one participant did identify as such—since my primary concern is understanding trans/queer reading habits. Though I speculate on the possible nature of trans YA as an educational source of education for cisgender readers, this research project remains focused on a trans/queer readership, thus eliminating a need for finding and interviewing more cisgender identified teens. Parental consent was not requested for this study as participants would likely be less inclined to be involved if required to reveal information about gender and/or sexuality to parents or guardians. In order to gain access to the specific population(s) that I am researching, I contacted GAB Youth, a part of Qmunity (Vancouver), Fraser Valley Regional Libraries (Langley, Aldergrove, Delta), the BC Library Association email list, and Jen Marchbank, who has connections with Surrey Pride. Each person and organization was provided with copies of the recruitment poster (See Appendix A). Once contacted, I spoke to leaders and volunteers to schedule presentations of my research for youth audiences. Each organization helped me to develop research relationships with trans identified and gender variant youth. From this process, I was able to interview a total of five participants.

Table 1.2 Research Participant Statistics

Name*	Pronouns	Gender/Sexual Identity	Age	City	School
Tyler	He/Him/His	Trans / Male	15	Surrey	North Surrey Learning Centre
Alex	He/Him/His	Trans / Male	17	Coquitlam	Terry Fox Secondary
Candy	She/Her/Hers	Genderqueer / Rainbowsexual	18	Surrey	North Surrey Learning Centre
Kalai	She/Her/Hers	Queer / Female	17	Duncan	Cowichan High

Danny	He/Him/His	Trans / Male	15	Duncan	Chemainus Secondary

*Some names are chosen names and pseudonyms in place of legal names.

After presenting my research for each group, I asked teens if they would be interested in participating in a focus group environment. This approach allowed me to recruit more participants than simply putting up posters or notices in various institutions and organizations around communities throughout the lower mainland. By personally giving presentations on the research and talking to youth directly, I was able to give teens an idea of who I am as a researcher, and what I am attempting to do through this project, thereby creating a more open and encouraging research environment prior, even, to the focus groups.

I was able to interview three participants individually, and two participants via Skype, allowing me a population sample from the Greater Vancouver area, as well as the Vancouver Island area. Consent forms were distributed and signatures were received before participants took part in interviews. Participants were informed that if they chose to withdraw at any point throughout the study, related information would be destroyed and electronic information deleted. Refusal to participate, or withdrawal after agreeing to participate, would have no adverse effect on the individual or the institution / organization from which they were recruited. Participants were compensated with a \$10 gift card to Tim Hortons upon completion of the interviews.

Table 1.3 Research Participant Interviews

Name	Interview Location	Interview Date
Kalai	Skype Duncan Branch, Vancouver Island Regional Library	November 27, 2014
Danny	Skype Duncan Branch, Vancouver Island Regional Library	November 27, 2014
Tyler	In Person Newton Youth Resource Centre	December 1, 2014
Candy	In Person Newton Youth Resource Centre	December 1, 2014
Alex	In Person	December 10, 2014

Once participants were found, I met with respondents for semi-structured interviews at various public locations (see Table 1.3). Respondents were asked initial questions about demographic information (as seen in Table 1.2). They were able to choose—and use—pseudonyms within the discussions, due to their status as minors in the majority of cases. Only one of the research participants, Candy, ended up choosing to use a pseudonym. Further questions involved inquiries about reading strategies, information seeking processes, and other information related to gatekeeping processes (See Appendix B for interview questions). Within the interviews, I read excerpts from *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (2012), by Kirstin Cronn-Mills, and asked participants to share their opinions on the passages, focusing on representations of transness and certain elements of medicalization within the novel. The specific reasons for this lack of engagement with the text as a whole will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four, but in summary, it relates to barriers to access and the fact that a number of my research subjects have learning disabilities. I attempted to obtain answers to a number of follow-up questions via email; however, I only received a reply from Alex (see Appendix B for follow-up questions).

Due to the small sample size being used in this project, I am unable to engage in large-scale generalizations about trans reading practices among trans and queer youth. As well, my sample consists mostly of individuals in more rural environments. Considering my concentration of recruitment efforts in Vancouver proper, those who answered the call for participants were all from communities on Vancouver Island, and communities to the east of Vancouver (see Figure 2). At the same time, my sample is diverse in terms of access to materials, learning abilities, and economic prosperity based on the communities in which they live and the organizations through which they were recruited. Three respondents were male identified trans individuals, one was cisgender, queer, and female-identified, and the fifth identified as genderqueer, though preferred female pronouns. The diversity within this small sample is more impressive than I had expected when first

attempting to recruit participants. This somewhat diverse sample will also help in comparing reading abilities, habits, and access to reading materials, which will be explored in greater depth later in the dissertation.

Librarian Interviews

Conversations with librarian participants were conducted through one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Through this process, participants had the opportunity to relate their experiences working in collections development, as well as experiences working with literature about and for trans and gender variant youth. The purpose of these particular interviews is to better understand the ways in which librarians understand the needs of trans and gender variant readers and how they work to build collections and promote literature, if at all, to underrepresented audiences such as those discussed in the previous section on teen focus groups. I am also interested in the ways that librarians often become the embodiment of written reviews, in that they read reviews, digest the information, and then eventually use the information to make decisions about what should or should not be included in teen collections. Gatekeeping becomes part of the process of meaning making since what is made available in collections is what teens are able to access and subsequently use in the process of identity formation as they read.

The interviews covered set research questions, but also allowed for more fluid dialogue about relevant topics that the participant(s) deemed necessary. In-depth interviews were conducted for the purpose of this specific phenomenological research since, as Irving Seidman notes in *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*, “At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (3).

These particular participants include two librarians working in the Fraser Valley Regional Library and one from the Vancouver Public Library system. These participants were chosen out of those who work in collections development and teen services and are adults who do not require any consent beyond their own. These participants were interviewed in mutually agreed upon settings (See Table 1.4).

Table 1.4 Librarian Interview Statistics

Librarian	Library System	Job Title	Branch	Interview Location
Gillian McLeod	Fraser Valley Regional Library	Library Manager	George Mackie	Library Office
Frances Thomson	Fraser Valley Regional Library	Youth Materials Selector	George Mackie	Library Office
Jennifer Lee	Vancouver Public Library	Teen Services Librarian	Central Branch	Waves Coffee

Once a location was agreed upon, I met with participants in a face-to-face situation and conducted ½ hour interviews. Interviews were recorded digitally and stored for later transcription. Demographic information was collected via questionnaire and Informed Consent forms were discussed, signed, and collected. Following this, the interview followed guiding questions, though all interviews were semi-structured, allowing for numerous tangential discussions on related topics.

The following general questions guided the interviews, but allowed for more open discussion throughout the process (See Appendices B through E for a complete list of questions):

- How are books chosen for inclusion in teen collections?
- Do you pay attention to book awards or particular sources for LGBT/Queer specific selections?
- What procedures must you go through to find and collect LGBT/Queer literature for your library system?
- Are you able to find and provide circulation information regarding the specific texts I have considered in this research project?

Once I completed an initial analysis of my findings from the youth interviews, I followed up with the three librarians in order to gauge their reactions to my findings, and two—Thomson and Lee—responded. I was also curious about whether or not any of them would change how they acquire and promote YA novels with trans themes. The following questions were submitted to my participants via email in the Spring of 2016,

along with a summary of my own research findings which will be discussed at length in Chapter Four:

- Knowing that trans YA fiction is of less interest to trans readers, at least in this smaller sample, would you change anything about how you promote trans YA or how you promote literature to a trans youth audience.
- Hearing the assertion that trans YA is predominantly used for purposes of educating cisgender individuals, would you concur based on your own experiences with teen patrons or gender experience within your own library?
- How you thought about trans YA texts in this way before? If not, how do these results change your thoughts on promoting literature with trans themes within various library settings?

1.4.5. Strengths and Weaknesses

This research allows me to assess the relationship between perceptions of young adult reading and literature choosing behaviours and actual reading habits and literature choosing behaviours. This also gives me the ability to better understand the purpose and usefulness of textual analysis on an academic level in light of the reading practices that participants actually undertake in their own daily lives. As my research on a broader scale looks to the relationship between theory and practice, interacting with young people gives me the opportunity to better compare theoretical assumptions of teen reading practices with the practical side of such reading habits.

Face-to-Face Interviews

Face-to-face interviews are a common practice in qualitative research, and one which I utilized to gather information from youth and librarians throughout the research process. Though used in many cases, the face-to-face interview is by no means a perfect means of collecting information; however, the benefits are considerable when looking for in-depth knowledge about a few main points of inquiry. As Ted Palys notes in *Research Decisions* (2003),

The interaction of interviewer and respondent ... offers benefits that can enhance the quality of the data gathered. The interviewer can ensure that the appropriate person completes the interview, immediately clarify any confusion about particular questions, and encourage verbally stingy respondents to embellish further. Also, since the interviewer asks questions and writes down responses, the respondent needn't be literate. (159)

This last point is particularly important as a number of the participants in my study are students at a learning centre that specializes in educating youth with learning difficulties. I was also able to clarify questions throughout the interviews, and follow-up when answers were vague or when interviewees were more reluctant to answer with longer explanations. That being said, certain limitations were to be expected in relation to face-to-face interviews. For instance, interviewers “must be more careful about *reactive* bias. Interviewees can be very attentive to cues that the interviewer emits, since they want to know whether they are ‘doing well’ as participants” (160). As well, face-to-face interviews are less confidential by their very nature, which means that interviewees possibly felt less comfortable answering questions when their personal lives came into play. It was my responsibility, therefore, to develop a rapport and develop a safe environment where interviewees could feel safe and comfortable answering more personal questions. For young people, maintaining a certain image is a large part of daily life, and a face-to-face interview does not necessarily allow respondents to maintain such an image within a more public setting. The semi-structured interview with a smaller population of respondents does not allow for larger generalizations across entire populations; however, it allows for a deeper understanding of how some youth interact with the specific novels in my study.

Internet Mediated Interviews

While the interviewing and recruitment processes themselves were very similar to the in-person interviews from the previous section, internet mediated interviews also embodied their own challenges. The most obvious benefit of this type of interviewing was that I was able to access a larger research population, including youth from outside of the immediate geographical region and those who reside in more remote rural locations (Whitehead, 2007; Deakin and Wakefield, 2014). Synchronous online

interviewing is, in many ways, similar to on-site interviewing, and allows for a more personal approach than other online research options such as surveys (Janghorban, Roudsari, and Taghipour, 2014). By utilizing this style of online research, I was able to access youth on Vancouver Island, which would not have otherwise occurred due to transportation and financial obstacles.

Engaging with individuals online does, however, present various challenges and differences in comparison to interviews that take place on-site. As Maczewski, Storey, and Hoskins (2004) note, “Researchers need to expand their own traditional on-site knowledge of research ethics to include the understanding of technologies used and an awareness of their impact on human interactions” (63). Keeping this in mind, I took the time to consider differences between on-site and online interviews in an effort to ensure that similar analyses of raw data could take place from the same common ground.

When conducting interviews on-site, I was better able to control discussion, and the overshadowing possibility of technical dysfunction remained in the background. In online spaces, the interaction not only became less relational, but I, as the researcher, was forced to focus part of my attention on ensuring that technical issues did not arise, or were dealt with quickly, thus dividing my concentration somewhat from the actual interview process. There was also an additional level of interaction occurring with participants since there is the added layer of a youth leader on the other end to ensure that the documentation was handled properly and submitted back to me in a confidential manner.

Like the on-site interviews, I recorded the interactions, audio only, for later transcription. This added an additional layer of security necessary for myself, as researcher, in order to help participants maintain anonymity in the larger research project. The visual component of the Skype interview, however, also ensured that the interview environment was as similar as possible to an on-site interviews. While many studies (Whitehead, 2004; Hesse-Biber & Johnson, 2013; Hewson, 2003; Maczewski, Storey, & Hoskins, 2004) related to internet mediated research show concern for website security,

multiple responses from single individuals, and other related issues, the visual aspect of this particular style of research allowed me to ensure as much consistency as possible between the online and on-site interviews. Additionally, participants were reminded of the minor reduction in confidentiality due to the inclusion of additional layers of interaction between them and myself (Hewson, 2003). The overall impact of the research did not differ to a large degree, mostly due to the fact that I used the same recruitment process, but adding one additional layer of research participants, in this case a youth worker.

Chapter Four focuses on laying out participant responses, pointing out similarities and differences across the interviewed population(s). Once I have explained the generalities of the responses, I will move to a more in-depth analysis of the responses in relation to the critical analyses of the YA novels from Chapter Three of the dissertation, looking for ways in which the responses serve to corroborate my earlier criticisms or contradict them.

It is my hope that the interviews and participant responses to my inquiries will allow me to not only look at how youth see the books that I am working with, but also to understand what trans and queer youth look for in reading materials. In addition, I hope to get a better understanding of how the discussions of gatekeeping earlier in the dissertation apply to the choices my sample population make when looking for fiction about trans and queer novels, if at all. By examining the responses of these teens in relation to gatekeeping practices, I will have a greater ability to decipher the impact that librarians, educators, and award selection committees have on the reading habits of trans and queer youth, at least in these limited case studies.

1.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have so far laid out the framework that I use throughout the later portions of my dissertation in order to provide readers with an analysis of textual representations of trans and gender variant characters, to give a better understanding of

the purpose of awards and gatekeeping practices, and to give voice to youth as regards reading practices and information seeking behaviours. The next chapter involves a thorough analysis of the history of queer, trans, and gay and lesbian studies within the field of children's and YA literature studies. The mapping of this evolution allows me to fully comprehend the gaps in existing studies in order to more accurately situate my own research within the field. I also provide a brief outline of the existing body of queer children's and YA literature and the increasing output of such texts within the mainstream publishing industry, which allows me to note ways in which critical studies and changes in the socio-political sphere in North America has influenced the themes and content of contemporary published works.

Chapter 2. A History of LGBT/Queer Studies in Children’s and Young Adult Literature Criticism

2.1. Introduction and Overview

Children’s and young adult (YA) literature is described by librarians Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins as the “quintessential literature of the outsider who is too often rendered invisible by society,” and they note that “there is . . . the need to see one’s face reflected in the pages of a book” (1). Although lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBT/Queer) rights activists have been working since the early to mid-twentieth century, LGBT/Queer young people are still living on the margins in children’s and young adult literature (specifically, literature specifically marketed to children and young adults). According to Malinda Lo’s research on LGBT/Queer literature for young adults, only around 47 such titles—those books with multiple queer characters or at least one primary queer character—were published in 2014 in North America, and only 24 of these were published by mainstream publishers.³ Even though LGBT/Queer individuals are now being represented in children’s and YA literature to a greater degree than even a decade ago, those who identify as non-normatively gendered (no matter the sexual orientation)—transgender, (gender)queer, non-gendered—are given much less representation within children’s and YA fiction than those who identify as cisgender, gay,

³ Mainstream publishers noted by Lo are as follows: “[T]he Big 5 publishers (Hachette, HarperCollins, Macmillan, Penguin Random House, and Simon and Schuster), as well as general interest publishers that do not focus on LGBTQ books. These general interest publishers include: Akashic Books, Algonquin Young Readers, Amulet, Big Bang Press, Bloomsbury, Booktrope Editions, Candlewick, Carolrhoda Lab, Flux, Harlequin Teen, K-Teen, Merit, Ooligan Press, Pulp, Red Deer Press, Scholastic, Sky Pony Press, Sourcebooks Fire, Spencer Hill Press, and Strange Chemistry” (“2014 LGBTQ YA Titles by the Numbers”)

lesbian, and even bisexual. The following review of academic studies of children’s and YA literature that use gay/lesbian and queer theory perspectives is intended to cover a wide range of studies from the last four decades. This previous research will be used to map the field of LGBT/Queer studies in relation to children’s and YA literature. To begin I provide a context for my review of the literature and provide a brief overview of LGBT/Queer literature for children and young adults in both a contemporary and historical context.

Cart and Jenkins (2006) have assembled a comprehensive list of LGBT/Queer literature for teens, updated each year with new releases and newly discovered historical texts (a full annotated version, current up to 2004, is provided in their book, *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004*). Young adult literature author Malinda Lo (*Ash, Huntress, Adaptation, Inheritance*) took it upon herself to analyze Cart and Jenkins’ list (2011) in order to give an idea of the current state of publishing of LGBT/Queer YA literature (Figure 2.1), and subsequently created a chart of LGBT/Queer YA books published from 2003 to 2014 (Figure 2.2). The figures show a steady increase over the years, from 1969 to 2014, though there are a few years of notable exception, including 2010, in which published titles were subject to the effects of the 2008 economic downturn in the United States.

Figure 2.1 LGBT YA Novels Published, 1969-2011

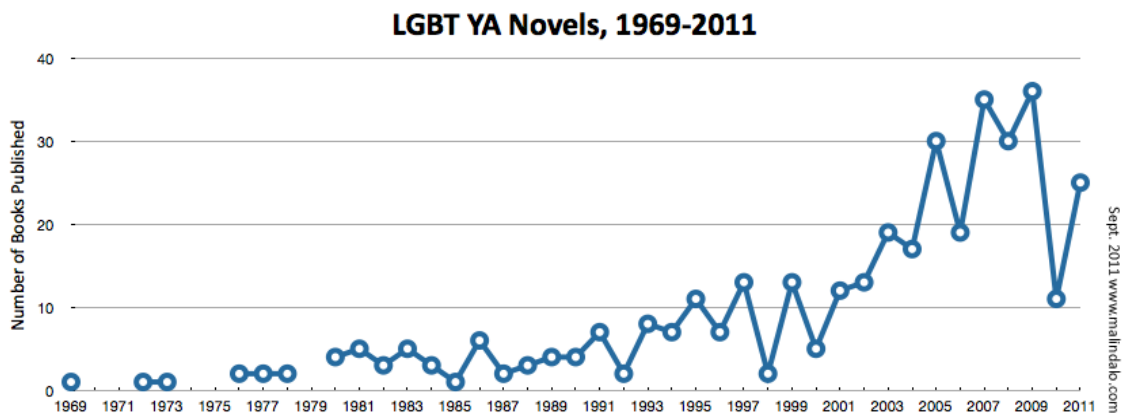


Figure 2.2 LGBT YA Novels Published, 2003-2014

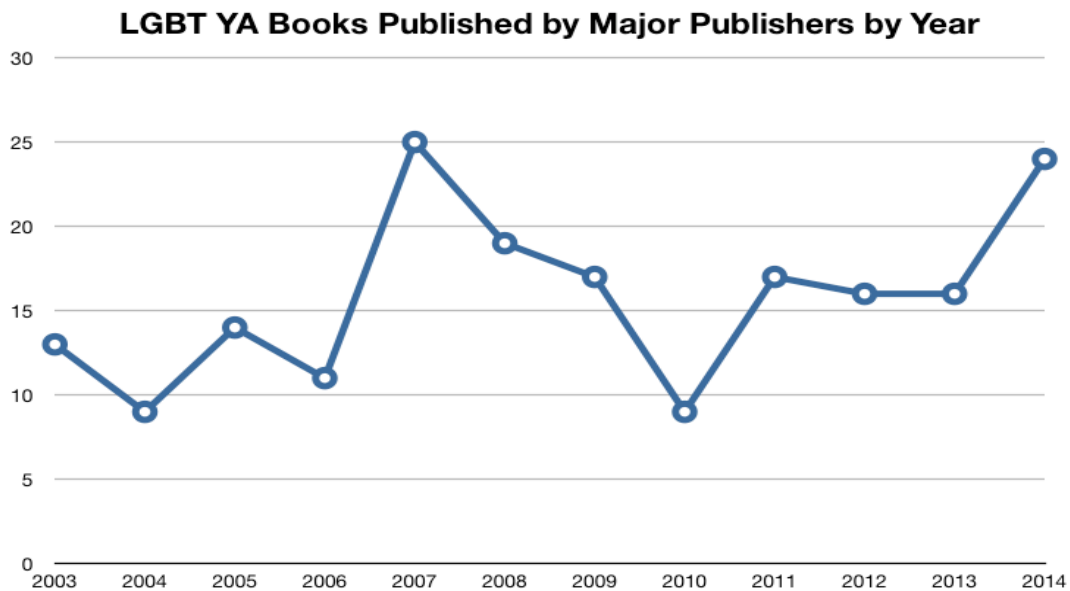


Figure 2.1 shows the publication of all known texts each year from a larger number of publishers. With the steady increase in self-published titles and smaller niche publishing houses, it is incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to chart all titles with queer content each year. The reason that Figure 2.2 has overlapping years with Figure 2.1, but smaller numbers, is that Lo reduced the criteria to only include larger publishers. Without the availability of traditional or online catalogues listing self-published and niche publications, it is nearly impossible to accurately chart new releases outside of the big five publishing houses. Though this does not provide an entirely accurate map of the landscape of YA publishing overall, this information does provide a relatively detailed account of the publishing landscape where traditional publishing and more popular or well marketed titles are concerned. Though the trends noted above are specific to the content of YA literature, the critical lenses through which the content of these novels will be examined derive from a history of critical studies of sexuality and gender in literature for children.

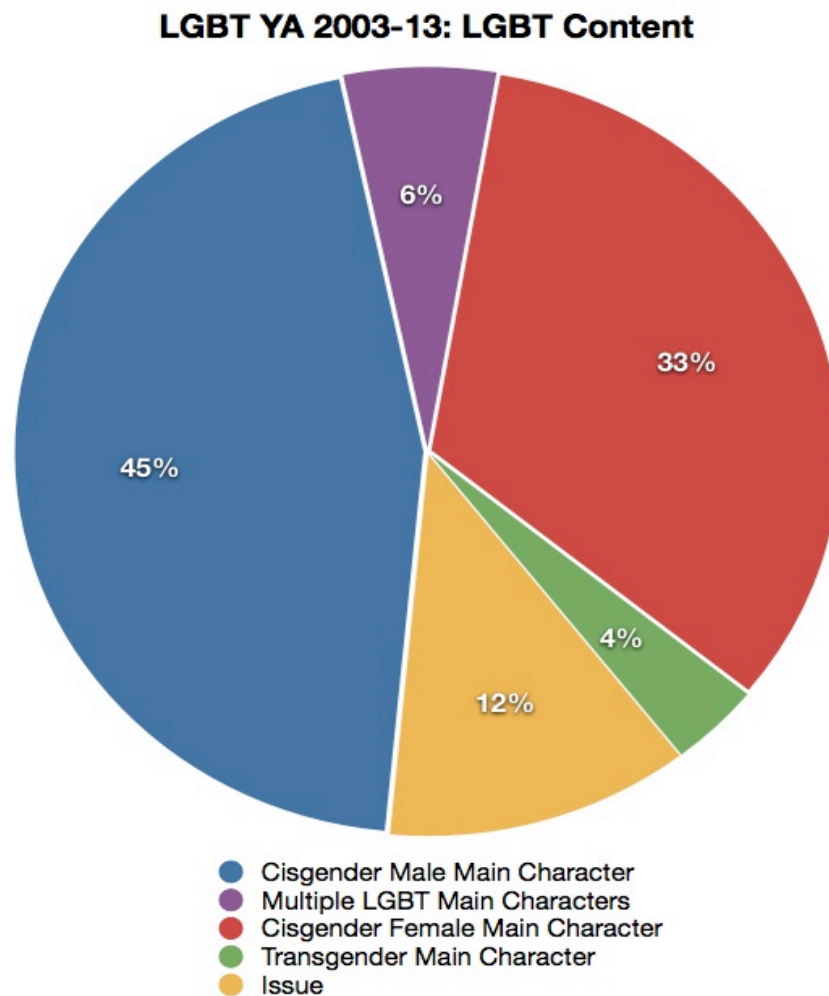
Noted librarian and scholar Jamie Campbell Naidoo, in his book *Rainbow Family Collections: Selecting and Using Children's Books with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Content* (2012), states: “[t]he avoidance of homosexuality in children’s literature is a plight that the field has suffered for quite some time and that still continues today” (36). He also notes that “the children’s books that do present LGBT/Queer characters are either self-published or published by small or independent presses that have a feminist or queer focus” (36). As with books for teens, “relatively few children’s picture books and early chapter books present transgender characters and even fewer depict bisexual characters” (36). Michelle Abate and Kenneth Kidd, in the introduction to their collection of essays entitled *Over the Rainbow: Queer Children’s and Young Adult Literature* (2011) write, “The children’s picture book has been more resistant to LGBT/Queer theming, in large measure because of the prohibition against the representation of any sexuality, much less queer sexuality, especially in childhood...” (6). The total output of books for children with LGBT/Queer themes is much lower than that of YA literature, and it is much more difficult to find the same concrete statistics due to the multitudinous possibilities of reading queerness into children and childhood behaviours and actions. According to Laurel Clyde and Marjorie Lobban, in “A Door Half Open: Young People’s Access to Fiction Related to Homosexuality” (2001), as of 1999, there were only 32 published picturebooks with queer themes (20), with the numbers increasing only slightly over the last decade (Naidoo). The majority of analyses on publishing facts and figures tends to favour books for adolescents and young adults, which will be the focus of the following sections.

The following graphs⁴ indicate that cisgender individuals—those whose self-identified gender matches their assigned sex at birth—are very much privileged within literature for adolescents (See Figures 2.3 and 2.4) and that bisexual and lesbian characters are marginalized within the queer YA literature canon. What is perhaps not immediately obvious in this graph, which complicates the discussions slightly, is that

⁴ See Malinda Lo’s blog posts (malindalo.com) on the subject of publishing statistics for a more thorough breakdown of the state of LGBT subjects in YA literature publishing and for more graphs and charts.

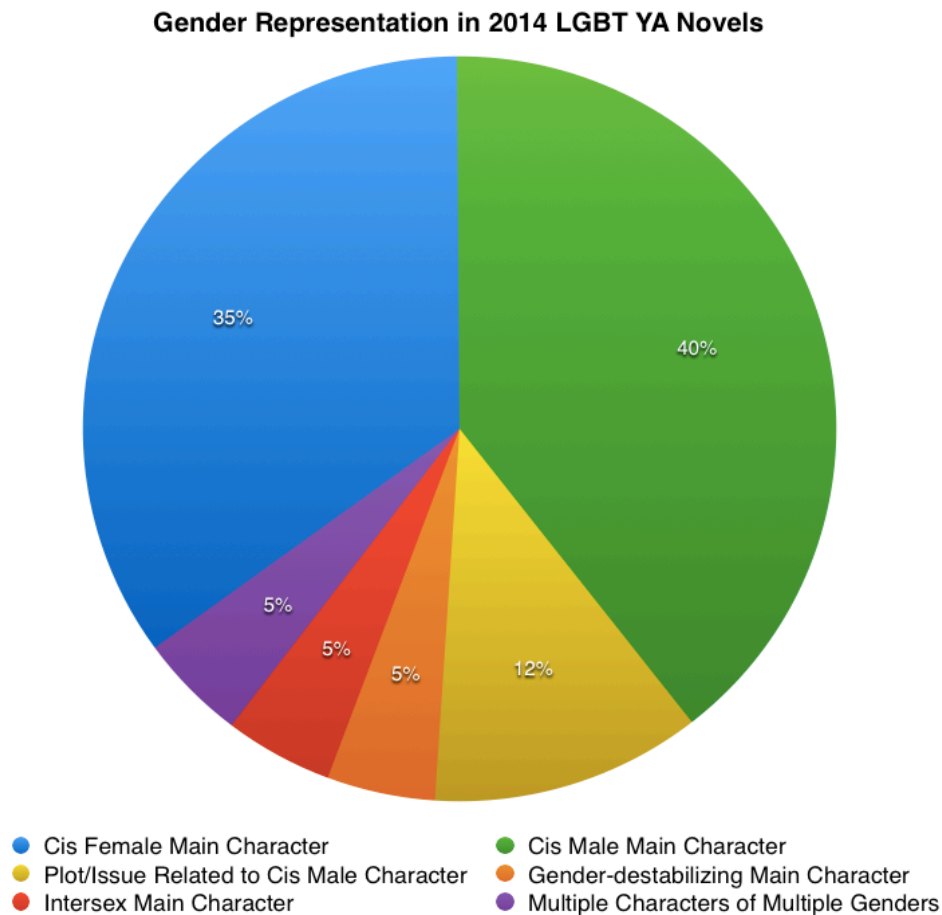
while the statistics explicitly explore cisgender versus transgender individuals, there is also an implicit examination of the division of sexual orientation within the cisgender spectrum. It is also important to note that Lo updated the 2014 analysis to include literature with intersex characters, and changed the transgender category to include any gender-nonconforming characters, such as those who identify as genderqueer, two-spirit, or even those who are not explicitly gendered by the author of the text. Since the sexual orientation of these young people is based upon an attraction to someone of the same gender, it is implied within these statistics that the boys identify as gay (or possibly bisexual) and that the girls identify as lesbian (or bisexual).

Figure 2.3 LGBT YA 2003-13: LGBT Content



As the decided gender of trans individuals is not explicitly stated within this analysis, it is impossible to assume any particular sexual orientation, and the same goes for the adults represented in the graph. The point of these statistics is to highlight disparities within YA publishing, which not only privileges male characters, but also privileges gay individuals over lesbians, bisexuals, or undecided/asexual and self-defined others.

Figure 2.4 Gender Representation in 2014 LGBT YA Novels



In what follows I build on the context of exclusion to draw attention to gaps in the research on LGBT/Queer texts, and argue for a greater inclusion of trans-specific theoretical frameworks within academic studies of children's and YA literature. Reading trans characters through more traditional theoretical lenses of gay and lesbian studies and even various queer theoretical lenses can only take analysis so far without fully realizing

what all is at play within the representations of trans young people and their place within the fictional worlds they inhabit. Often within a larger social context, gendered behaviours are read as being indicative of a non-normative sexual orientation (i.e. an effeminate male is read as gay, or a butch female is read as lesbian). There are dangers of oversimplification and problematic analyses which can cause confusion and (mis)interpretation of child/teen protagonists who are not gay/lesbian/bisexual, but who are instead transgender/genderqueer. These factors reveal themselves repeatedly in academic studies of LGBT/Queer children's and YA literature. And the disparity between cisgender and transgender representations reveals the overarching assumptions in place throughout the academic literature in this review.

2.2. Review of LGBT/Queer Studies of Children's and YA Literature

2.2.1. Defining Theoretical Terms

While gay/lesbian studies and queer theoretical lenses are both helpful and useful, trans approaches to literature studies can complicate and read much more intricately into issues of gendered difference. In "Transgender Studies: Queer Theory's Evil Twin" (2004), Stryker writes,

The field of transgender studies has taken shape over the past decade in the shadow of queer theory. Sometimes it has claimed its place in the queer family and offered an in-house critique, and sometimes it has angrily spurned its lineage and set out to make a home of its own. Either way, transgender studies is following its own trajectory and has the potential to address emerging problems in the critical study of gender and sexuality, identity, embodiment, and desire in ways that gay, lesbian, and queer studies have not always successfully managed. (214)

Transgender theory has deep roots in queer and feminist theories, but many practitioners of critical trans analyses also seek to disentangle gender and sexuality so as to explore multiple aspects of human existence in a way that does not conflate one with the other. There are challenges to this, just as there are challenges within certain arenas of queer

theory—queer often being seen as synonymous with the term gay or lesbian. The struggles that take place within some approaches to transgender subjects allows for a much more rigorous understanding of the development of homosexual and heterosexual identities as well as identities found all throughout a gender spectrum. Stryker notes that “transgender studies is following its own trajectory and has the potential to address emerging problems in the critical study of gender and sexuality, identity, embodiment, and desire in ways that gay, lesbian, and queer studies have not always successfully managed.” Furthermore, she continues, “[t]his seems particularly true of the ways that transgender studies resonate with disability studies and intersex studies, two other critical enterprises that investigate atypical forms of embodiment and subjectivity that do not readily reduce to heteronormativity, yet that largely fall outside the analytic framework of sexual identity that so dominates queer theory” (214). Within Stryker’s explanation of transgender theory lies my own overlying assumption for what is currently missing in children’s and YA literature studies, for ways in which gender, identity, embodiment, and intelligibility often fall outside of a sexual identity framework, through a space where queer studies and gay/lesbian studies so often focus.

2.2.2. Review of Critical Gender and Sexuality Studies in Children’s and YA Literature

As children’s and YA literature are interdisciplinary fields, it is necessary to include within this review studies from the following fields: English, Education, Psychology, Library Studies, Gender and Sexuality Studies, and Children’s/YA Literature. I consulted the following international and interdisciplinary academic journals for academic articles, relying on a range of related keywords (queer, transgender, intersex, gay and lesbian, bisexual, children, children’s literature, etc.) to find textual/theoretic research and empirical research on representations of childhood and gender/sexuality: *The Journal of LGBT Youth* (Gender and sexuality studies, and Education); *Papers: Explorations into Children’s Literature*, *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* and *Children’s Literature*, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, *Jeunesse* (Children’s/YA literature studies, and English); *The English Journal*, *Children’s*

Literature Journal, *The ALAN Review*, *Children's Literature in Education*, *The Journal of Children's Literature* (Education and teaching, and Literacy), and the *Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults* (Library studies, and children and youth). While searching for articles related to children's literature in other expressly LGBT/Queer journals such as *Gay and Lesbian Studies Quarterly (GLQ)*, *Transgender Studies Quarterly (TSQ)*, and the *Journal of Homosexuality*, these articles mostly concerned more theoretical notions of queer and trans studies rather than focusing on specifics of children's and young adult literature, though other pieces on trans and queer studies from these journals are used later in this dissertation regarding broader trans and queer themes. In order to fully map the contributions of gay/lesbian and queer studies to children's and YA literary studies, four research questions guide my analysis:

- In what ways have studies of gender and sexuality in English, Education, Child Psychology, and Library Studies defined critical discussions of children's and young adult literature?
- Are there particular sexual or gender identities that have been privileged or ignored within scholarship on representations of gender and sexuality in children's and YA literature studies?
- How are trans theoretical lenses being used within critical discussions of children's and YA literature?
- What gaps exist in current uses of transgender theory to analyze children's and YA literature, and how can an explicit transgender theory benefit the future study of such literatures?

LGBT/Queer literature is often examined using gay/lesbian studies as a foundation, and to some extent the work of queer theorists, but the vast majority of studies currently avoid critical use of transgender theorists in order to engage in explorations of gender as a state of transition, as opposed to focusing on more fixed notions of gender in relation to sexual orientation. Through an initial analysis of articles within the academic journals listed and discussed above, essay collections, and monographs, it is possible to see that the majority of articles that focus on queer topics

are limited to a concentration on gay and lesbian sexuality, binary gender expression, and gender/sexual identity formation.

The remainder of this literature review follows a linear pattern (as much as is possible) through published academic work on children's and YA literature, incorporating LGBT/Queer studies and related themes:

1. The 1970s: Justifying Sexual Difference and Happiness
2. The 1980s: Incorporating Education, Psychology, and Sociology
3. The 1990s: Toward a Literature of Gender Nonconformity
4. The 2000s: Acknowledging Gender and Sexual Intersectionality

These broader themes are derived from the existing literature in each decade, and are also linked with, and across, various temporal periods, as the themes of books evolve along with changes in socio-political ideology on gender, sexuality, and childhood studies. These themes can be noted especially in different special issues on gender and sexuality in various journals, such as *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* (Fall 1998; Summer 2012) and *English Journal* (Spring 2009), where the content of the articles reveal changes in opinion and theoretical focus within children's literature scholarship.

2.2.3. Existing Studies

Perhaps one of the most important and overwhelmingly common notions regarding YA and children's literature, which works to great effect in analyses of LGBT/Queer themes, is that this literature acts as a mirror/reflection of the self and society, and also as windows into alternative outcomes of difficult situations relevant to young readers. This idea of mirrors and windows is reiterated time and again within many of the publications noted and examined within this literature review, from Frances Hanckel and John Cunningham in 1976 to more current scholarship—such as Caroline Jones's 2013 article, "From Homoplot to Progressive Novel"—coming out of various fields relating to children's and young adult literature—psychology, education, library

studies, gender and sexuality studies, feminism, and of course children's literature studies. This is not always without issue, however; it is sometimes contested in current scholarship as problematic when literature consistently reflects already troubling aspects of current society. For example, in Thomas Crisp's 2008 article on Alex Sanchez's *Rainbow Boys* series (2004, 2006, 2008), he argues that reflections of a society built on problematic notions of gender and sexuality are prone to stereotype, and reify problematic behaviours such as homophobia and bullying, reinforcing the idea that this sort of harassment is just part of being queer in the world as we know it. Starting with *I'll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip* (1969) by John Donovan, and moving up to work by Aidan Chambers, Jack Gantos, Andrew Smith, Julie Anne Peters, and many others from the 60s and beyond utilize the "kill your gays" trope in order to teach lessons about tolerance and acceptance.

The 1970s: Justifying Sexual Difference

One of the earliest pieces of children's and YA scholarship mentioning LGBT/Queer themes is Frances Henckel and John Cunningham's library studies article, "Can Young Gays Find Happiness in YA Books?" In this piece, Henckel and Cunningham note, "A large portion of YA fiction is devoted to the broad topic of social-sexual identity, with the complacent assumption of heterosexual orientation. But what about adolescents who are gay?" (528). Among the few early depictions of homosexual characters—four novels were published with explicitly gay characters—there was still an overwhelming assumption of homosexuality as a phase or something to be changed in order to be truly happy. As the authors note, "This may be fine reassurance for insecure straight youths, but it cheats the ones who want to be gay by presenting such experiences as 'phases' instead of the first step toward a valid choice" (533). However, even though this is only the first of many, many articles and monographs to note the disturbingly bleak early days of homosexual representations in YA, the authors have at the very least made the first move to note what was published and what was needed, and to start putting pressure on the book industry to provide LGBT/Queer books that are honest, hopeful, and

life-affirming, encouraging readers “to consider and develop a workable moral philosophy” (528).

Similarly, Norma Klein’s (1977) article, “Growing Up Human: The Case for Sexuality in Children’s Books,” began to question the place of queer sexualities within literature for young readers. She notes that “[s]exuality begins at birth, not with the first period or the first love affair. Yet where are the books for our children which openly acknowledge this fact?” (82). Furthermore, referring to young adult literature, Klein writes, “I hope . . . that in books about homosexuality we can get past the ‘I did it once, but I’ll never do it again’ kind of censorious morality and into a broader and more complex understanding” (83). Within these two articles, there is an emphasis on a desire to see more representation of non-heterosexual youth, and there is a focus on psychology and the relationship between children/teens and literature written for a child/teen audience. While these articles are more anecdotal in nature, and are not particularly rigorous in terms of theoretical frameworks, there are references to feminism as relates to gender and sexuality—how women as a gender are constructed, and how lesbianism is constructed within a patriarchal environment—which is then used as a way of breaking apart expected and assumed gender roles, at least in a more general context.

The 1980s: Incorporating Education, Psychology, and Sociology

The early 80s continued the trend of looking for more and better representations of LGBT/Queer young people in literature for young audiences. Whereas the 70s was focused mainly in the study of the literature itself and the implications of using books with LGBT/Queer themes in libraries, the focus spread to other disciplines throughout the 80s, with greater emphasis on education and learning, as well as much more in the way of psychology and childhood development. In 1983 Sanford Berman’s “Out of the Closet and Into the Catalog: Access to Gay/Lesbian Library Materials” was published—an extension, in many ways of the work of Henckels and Cunningham—along with Jan Goodman’s “Out of the Closet, But Paying the Price: Lesbian and Gay Characters in Children’s Literature.” Goodman’s piece also works off of the idea that more LGBT/Queer visibility is needed in children’s and YA literature, but notes that too much

of the literature being published until that point relies on stereotypes and homophobic slurs, a point which is still relevant today, and which I discuss in Chapter Four in relation to young people's reception(s) of homophobic language in books.

Along with hope for greater visibility, however, some such as David E. Wilson—author of “The Open Library: YA Books for Gay Teens” (1984)—worry about the implications of overtly “homosexual” books on library circulation and purchasing habits of young people. Wilson believes that “Some covers, like those published by Alyson, are too clearly labeled ‘homosexual’ to be carted around by the average teen” (60), a valid concern for many young people, even today. And yet the refrain is still repeated: “Still more books with healthy, happy homosexual characters need to be written, published, and made available to young adults” (62). And while there is definitely a need for greater visibility of LGBT/Queer young people, one has to wonder where the gay and lesbian parents are hiding? Virginia L. Wolf, in “The Gay Family in Literature for Young People” (1989), asserts that the presence of gay families in books for young people may, in fact, be a way of increasing tolerance within heteronormative society. Wolf argues that “books can provide readers with the experience of gay families and thereby extend their understanding, they can be one way to combat homophobia” (52). These articles are only the beginning of a plethora of arguments in scholarship through the decades, which call for greater visibility of one identity or another—gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, asexual, intersex, and so on.

In line with this refrain, the 80s also introduced many more theoretical works on concepts of homosexuality and gender performance, such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (*Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, 1985), and Teresa de Lauretis (*Technologies of Gender*, 1987) both of whom have become integral components of critical work on children's and YA literature. While neither of these theorists work specifically with children's and young adult literature, their approaches to literature in general have influenced the study of gender and sexuality within children's and YA literature studies to a large degree, especially in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Kidd, 1998; Nel and Paul, 2011; Mallan and Bradford, 2011;

Nodelman 2008; Tribunella, 2002; Trites, 2011). Sedgwick's exploration of homosocial desire was foundational to the study of social constructions of gender within fiction and her work has been taken up by many children's literature scholars over the last few decades. Her work also incorporated much of Foucault's theories of sexuality, which have become used to a much greater extent in literature studies to this day. A complementary source of theoretical research on femininity and feminism in history is *Technologies of Gender*. In this text, de Lauretis examines gender construction in relation to women and the ways in which meaning is attributed to certain ways of existing, which is then translated to have a feminine meaning. Much of this type of theorizing is present in explorations of children's and young adult literature in the 90s as scholars pay particular attention to the effects of gender and behaviour on assumptions regarding sexual orientation (both within literature, and without). While other works of psychology and gender and sexuality studies did influence literary criticism in the 80s, these two scholars have been particularly influential.

The 1990s: Toward a Literature of Gender Nonconformity

In the beginning of the 90s, librarian Kirk Fuoss undertakes a survey of published LGBT/Queer literature for young people—"A Portrait of the Adolescent as a Young Gay: The Politics of Male Homosexuality in Young Adult Fiction" (1994)—mapping out how (and if) much has changed in terms of visibility and representations of children and teens. One might wonder if yet another survey is necessary, but for the library sciences, Fuoss argues, it is essential: "Given the importance of books in the lives of gays and lesbians and given that issues of gender preference emerge during adolescence, we would be well advised to study the resources libraries offer young readers concerning homosexuality" (160). While Fuoss acknowledges the increase in visibility of LGBT/Queer young people in literature, he also notes the extent to which these literary depictions seem to rely on stereotypes and homophobic content (170). Fuoss also points out that, "[w]hile it appears obvious that there are signifying presences in a text, it is perhaps less obvious that there are signifying absences as well. What a text means depends not only on what the text says, but also on what the text does not say" (162-3).

Fuoss's notions about the significance of absences are not only a part of the texts themselves, but how they are taught, or more likely perhaps, how they are *not* taught. In her article, "Literature Out of the Closet: Bringing Gay and Lesbian Texts and Subtexts Out in High School English" (1994), Vicky Greenbaum notes that, "current teachings of literature in American classrooms tends to assume that lesbian and gay content is not there, that lesbian and gay students don't exist, that lesbian and gay experience is invisible. Due to conventions of morality, due to homophobia, the pervading assumption remains which upset my lesbian student: every text, and everyone, is assumed straight" (71). Unfortunately, this is still often the case in more conservative states in the US and more conservative rural areas in Canada. What Greenbaum did, however, was bring the issue more out into the open so as to give educators a glimpse of what they are doing by *not* teaching texts with LGBT/Queer content to their own students; by failing to teach books that mirror their own experiences, educators reinforce the idea that they should stay hidden. In "Outside Looking In: Representations of Gay and Lesbian Experiences in the Young Adult Novel" (1995), Nancy St. Clair writes: "In our culture, one out of ten adolescents struggles with what it means to be homosexual. If we as teachers truly believe that literature helps students understand themselves and the issues they face, then we have an obligation to provide our gay students with the same resources as we do other minority students" (n.p.). The transition of LGBT/Queer literature into classrooms and spaces of education has been slow, but has been noted by librarians and educators as a positive step forward.

Perhaps two of the most well-known contributors to the study of YA literature with queer themes are Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins, who have been working for years to provide educators and librarians with resources by which to better understand and evaluate literature for students and younger patrons. Jenkins's first large-scale project, "From Queer to Gay and Back Again: Young Adult Novels with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-1997" (1998), was one of the most comprehensive overviews of existing LGBT/Queer literature to date. Building on the frameworks of Gerda Lerner (women's historiography), Rudine Sims Bishop (representations of minority populations), and George Chauncey (queer studies), Jenkins manages to not

only catalogue an extensive list of fiction titles for young people, but she also undertakes a thorough examination of these existing representations, moving beyond whether or not certain characters exist, to noting who exists and how they are viewed—through what lens?—and how they reflect “mainstream social attitudes and beliefs about gay/lesbian people” (306). This particular article led to a collaborative project with Michael Cart, which brought forth one of the most exhaustive studies of existing fiction for young people: *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004* (2006). I will return to this book later, but it is worth mentioning the impact that Jenkins’s work has had on literature studies across multiple fields.

Along with library studies and education, the 90s saw an upsurge in children’s literature scholarship and children’s literature courses in the world of academia. In 1998, Kenneth Kidd edited a special issue of the *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* on Lesbian/Gay Literature for Children and Young Adults. In the “Introduction” to this volume, Kidd notes the shifting and fluid nature of literature with gay/lesbian themes since the 1970s, reiterating the commonly noted shift in YA over the years, from homosexuality being the issue, to homophobia being the larger problem (114). As the scholarship to this point has focused on introducing more and more categories of gender and sexuality into literature for children and teens, Kidd takes a slightly different approach, arguing that “Our challenge is to acknowledge that while bodies and attractions are real and should not be trivialized, representations transform as well as profile those realities, and are at once stable and shifting. What is often most interesting about literary texts, after all, is not how they fit certain categories, but how they complicate and/or evade them” (115).

While this special issue contains a number of important articles on gay/lesbian literature, one is particularly noteworthy as its later transition from article to book brings forward a potent exploration of power relations in adolescent literature. Roberta Seelinger Trites, in “Queer Discourse and the Young Adult Novel: Repression and Power in Gay Male Adolescent Literature” (1998) argues:

One problem with defining an orientation discursively is that it may imply that individuals can choose a different set of discourses and become straight. Denying the corporality of homosexuality divorces it from pleasure, thus disempowering gay sexuality.... As a genre, then, gay YA literature necessitates the study of discourse because it is frequently predicated on the notion that human sexuality is determined by discourse and that discourse is power. (149)

Trites makes the case for a much more in-depth interrogation of the discursive nature of YA novels with queer content, which she later does in *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*. The examination of discourse as related to power dynamics is one that has influenced much of the work of children's literature scholars in the 2000s and works to great effect in relation to gender and queer studies in the context of literary criticism. Within much of this dissertation and my larger research interests, power relations are an important area of analysis as trans teens routinely navigate fluctuating power dynamics as they come out, transition, and engage with those in power who regulate the medical constructs that many trans youth must interact with in the transition process. Also of note in Kidd and Abate's collection is Vanessa Wayne Lee's article, "'Unshelter Me': The Emerging Fictional Adolescent Lesbian" (originally published in 1998), which discusses themes of homophobia and violence in literature for adolescents, except that in opposition to the majority of publications at this time which focus on gay males, Lee focuses on lesbians. She also discusses different ways of reading, and gives examples of various ways of framing the reading experience in lesbian contexts.

Previous scholarship discussed here contextualizes and builds from scholarship on representations of transgender children, leading to new work on representation and children's fiction. Two other integral publications from the 90s are Jody Norton's article on gender and literature, "Transchildren and the Discipline of Children's Literature" (1999), and Matthew Rottnek's edited collection, *Sissies and Tomboys: Gender Nonconformity and Homosexual Childhood*. While Rottnek's collection approaches childhood from a psychological perspective, much of this examination is evident within the existing body of LGBT/Queer children's and YA fiction. Rottnek's book is a response to the depathologization of homosexuality in the DSM. However, as

homosexuality disappeared, Gender Identity Disorder of Childhood (GID) appeared, causing a shift in interpretation of gender roles and behaviours, allowing cross-gender activities and identification into a psychiatric illness. Cross-gender play and behaviour is a part of many children's books, currently and historically; however, in contemporary children's and YA literature, as scholars attempt to analyze and understand gender non-conformity, Rottnek notes: "The very concepts of gender 'nonconformity' [sic] and gender dysphoria assume a normal or acceptable range of gender expression. . . . If our conception of gender were more fluid, would not the very notion of gender 'nonconformity' be nonsensical?" (3) This assertion is similar to that of Kidd and other gender studies scholars and theorists, in that there is a desire to break down categories and identities, allowing for more freedom and fluidity. However, to do so is to complicate the very terminology that allows scholars to explore gender and sexual identity in many respects. This fluidity and emphasis on queerness as opposed to the more rigid lines of gay and lesbian studies,⁵ will be a feature of scholarship in the 2000s when queer theory becomes a staple of literary criticism.

Just as Rottnek's book was a response to changes in the DSM, so Jody Norton's article is a response to a similar issue. Her article approaches children's literature from multiple perspectives, including literary criticism, psychology, and gender studies, responding to the DSM's guidelines on gender dysphoria and children in relation to transgender identities. "My concern in this essay," she notes, is to "analyze the multiple relations between children's literature and a particular gender minority, transchildren; that is, children whose experience and sense of their gender does not allow them to fit their sexed bodies into seamless accord with a congruent, conventional gender identity" (415-6). This is, as far as I could find, the first scholarly work to fully acknowledge the possibility of transgendered children, beyond cross-dressing or more simplistic cross-

⁵ In his introduction to the *Handbook of New Sexuality Studies* (2006), Steven Seidman writes that "gay/lesbian studies proposes a deeply social view of homosexuality" which "helped to give rise to so-called 'Queer studies'" (9). The difference between these two fields is quite nuanced, but unlike gay/lesbian studies which focus primarily on the concept of the homosexual, queer studies "shifts the focus from homosexuality to sexuality and broadens our view of sexuality to see it also as a type of social control" (10).

gendered behaviours. Her concern for both the development of children—their education, treatment, psychological development, etc.—and the creation of quality children’s literature is evident in her work, thus this particular text has become a foundational text in children’s literature studies for those exploring transgender themes and issues. Norton argues for the use of children’s literature in a pedagogical sense, writing,

I want to illuminate the liberatory role that children's literature, conceived as a matrix of creative texts and critical inquiries, can play in creating interpretive strategies, curricular revisions, and pedagogical interventions that will contribute substantially to the amelioration of the condition of cultural, institutional, and political neglect through which transchildren have been denied their reality, and their worth. (416)

Of course, it should be noted that in 1999 there were almost no transgender characters in children’s or young adult literature, leading Norton to assert, “Pending the creation of a substantial body of specifically trans-children's literature, we can intervene in the reproductive cycle of transphobia through strategies of transreading: intuiting/interpreting the gender of child characters as not necessarily perfectly aligned with their anatomies” (421). Norton’s research is by far the most impressive contribution to the study of transgender bodies within children’s literature as a genre and an academic field of inquiry.

The articles I have so far discussed have each defined and contributed in a major way to the field of children’s and YA literature studies related to LGBT/Queer themes and content. These studies emphasize the necessity for a study of nonconformity and queerness in children’s and YA literature as well as the encouragement of more representation of such identities in forthcoming LGBT/Queer publishing. As my own work focuses on nonconforming gender identities and youth in literature, a number of these academic works from the 90s, especially works by Kidd, Cart, and Jenkins, will be used throughout the remainder of this project.

The 2000s: Acknowledging Gender and Sexual Intersectionality

This particular time span, the beginning of the 21st-century, has seen a considerable increase in gender studies research and LGBT/Queer children's and YA literature studies; a number of collections have been published in the last few years, bringing together many prominent children's literature scholars and gender/sexuality theorists, enhancing and bringing much more complexity and nuance to the field of literature studies. There have also been numerous monographs published on topics of youth and children's sexualities and gender identities, changing the course of queer literature studies from examinations of books using feminist and gay/lesbian theoretical frameworks, to the much more elaborate framework of queer theory. A number of articles also focus on explorations of discourse and rhetoric, outlining ways in which languages of sexuality and gender have changed over time (Owen, 2010; Wickens, 2011; Abate, 2012). These studies acknowledge the fluidity of gender and the problematic nature of sexual identity (especially where social and academic labeling occurs) beyond earlier binary thinking, which privileged cisgender male/female identities while ignoring more complex notions in between, ignoring those who identify at other points along the gender spectrum.

Many in-depth interrogations of children's literature began arriving on bookstore shelves in the form of collections and theoretical monographs, showcasing new insights into queer theory and gender studies. Increased references to Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Undoing Gender* (2004), Rich Savin-Williams's *The New Gay Teenager*, and particularly Kathryn Bond Stockton's *The Queer Child; Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (2009) were common in these collections. At the same time, there was an increased emphasis on psychology, with many scholars referring to books on childhood development in relation to gender and sexuality, such as John Stephens's *Ways of Being Male* (2002), Emma Renold's *Girls, Boys, and Junior Sexualities* (2005), Victoria Flanagan's *Into the Closet* (2008), and Stephanie Brill's *The Transgender Child* (2008), among others. These collections and monographs, though not

all related to children's literature, have influenced the ways in which children and teens have come to be presented in fiction, more realistically, in some ways, than ever.

Library studies continues to examine collections development and access to LGBT/Queer literature for young people. Publications such as Clyde and Lobban's "A Door Half Open: Young People's Access to Fiction Related to Homosexuality," (2001) and Michael Cart's *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism* (2010), along with his collaboration with Jenkins, *The Heart Has Its Reasons* (2006), explore the existing literature and suggest ways of fighting censorship and restricted access to literature with themes of non-normative sexuality and non-normative gender. Library studies continues to be a field of progressive and useful research which benefits youth and allows for greater access to materials that will aid in gender/sexuality identity construction. Since fiction, as seen from the previous research, is understood to be a reflection of society, but also a place for unregulated exploration and interrogation of such social expectations, it logically follows that young people will benefit from access to such literature. Of course, there is also comfort to be found within literature. As Cart and Jenkins note, "In this quintessential literature of the outsider [queer young adult literature], who is too often rendered invisibly by society, there is also the need to see one's face reflected in the pages of a book and thus to find the corollary comfort that derives from the knowledge that one is not alone in a vast universe, that there are others 'like me' (1). Social reception is also a preoccupation with many library and education professionals. Lian Beveridge, in her article "'Advocating and Celebrating the Abomination of Sodomy': The Cultural Reception of Lesbian and Gay Picture Books" (2006), brings us back to questions about the figure of the child:

Controversies about [queer children's] texts are really about much bigger social questions, such as childhood 'innocence', constructions of sexuality, paedophilia, conversion and the dissolution of the family. These simmering anxieties erupt into moral panics when the culturally sacred and/or unspeakable categories of childhood and non-normative sexualities come into contact. (150)

These panics and social responses to sexuality and talk of queerness in children reveal the dominant tensions at play within current social discourses on children, a topic explored in

detail by Roberta Seelinger Trites. Trans youth are constantly pushing back against sociopolitical fears and assumptions around what is acceptable and unacceptable for young people to know and *be*.

The publication of Trites's *Disturbing the Universe* (2000) heralded the beginning of more intense examinations of power relations within literature as defined by discourse from institutions and social structures: "Adults create these books as a cultural site in which adolescents can be depicted engaging with the fluid, market-driven forces that characterize the power relationships that define adolescence" (7). While many fictional works published in the 90s for children and teens began to push certain boundaries, the vast majority still feel prey to prominent social assumptions. Trites notes: "Most YA novels about teenage sexuality have at best a conflicting ideology and at worst a repressive ideology that both reflects and perpetuates Western culture's confused sexual mores" (95). As noted in many of the previously explored scholarship on children's and YA literature, many academic voices acknowledge the need for young people's books to explore sexuality and gender in a more open, honest, and progressive way, but due to social pressures, this is often a difficult goal to achieve. "Because adults are quite conscious of sexuality as a source of power," notes Trites, "they frequently subject adolescent readers to very consistent ideologies that attempt to regulate teen sexuality by repressing it" (116).

Analyses of specific queer texts for children and youth are being published more often, as are examinations of emerging gender and sexual identities—such as that of transgender and intersex individuals. While investigations of trans individuals in fiction are not entirely new to the field of children's and young adult literature research, many contributors to the field within the 21st century do take the time to expand on earlier works about representation and queerness in a more general context. Thomas Crisp, for example, published three articles on gay YA texts and emerging identities: "The Trouble With Rainbow Boys" (2008), "From Romance to Magical Realism: Limits and Possibilities in Gay Adolescent Fiction" (2009), and "'I Just Don't See Myself Here': Conversations about LGBTQ Adolescent Literature" (2010). In these articles, Crisp

explores the role of Alex Sanchez's *Rainbow Boys* trilogy, noting the prevalence of gay and lesbian stereotypes to explore gay existence, as well as the success of David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy*, and the emergence and need for more visibility of intersecting queer identities, such as racial diversity in LGBT/Queer literature for young people, and the appearance of disability and non-normative genders. Crisp also warns: "It may feel rewarding to look at the range of ways in which gay males have started to 'appear' in literature, but it is important to remain cognizant of the ways in which authors and publishers work to create—and readers attempt to confront, embrace, or reject—depictions that feel 'affirmatively' queer" ("Romance" 346). Again, the exploration of what is *queer* will be explored in more detail below.

Melynda Huskey began looking into picturebooks in "Queering the Picture Book" (2002), in which she analyzes children's texts regarding homosexuality and adulthood versus childhood. She emphasizes that lack of sexualization of children in children's texts, noting that adults are more the focus of sexual nonconformity: "Picture books compulsively exhibit gay or lesbian adults connected by family ties to nonsexual, presumptively latently heterosexual child/ children. There are no gay or protogay children in these texts—that would open too clear a route to the forbidden realm of desire. What these books must avoid at all costs is any affect that might activate the pernicious myth of recruitment" (68). While her arguments are effective in many ways, the article is also somewhat problematic in that Huskey seems to be encouraging a queer reading of texts that are not necessarily queer. If one is not gay, for instance, one would not read any queer sexuality into a text, perhaps, but the opposite may also be true (hence the trouble with this particular train of thought.) This works, in some ways, though I hesitate to say this is necessarily a good idea as the queering of children's books can fall prey, then, to social readings of difference that imply and assume that which is not actually there.

Following in the discussion of queerness and children/children's literature, Rebecca Rabinowitz, in "Messy New Freedoms: Queer Theory and Children's Literature" (2004), continues the steady development of sexuality and gender studies in the world of literature criticism. Rabinowitz, speaking on queer studies and the difficulty

of studying fictional children, writes, “In literature studies, biological sexuality is rarely examined, because despite compelling theories about sex being at least partially socially constructed within the institutions of sciences and culture, there are no physical bodies to study, so actual analysis cannot really take place” (20). In attempting to further the use of queer theory in children’s literature studies, she argues that “[q]ueer theory can help open up ways of looking at sexuality in children’s literature without panicking, and also without treating children as adults” (24). Since so much earlier children’s literature scholarship treats children as either innocent or, in many respects, as adults (at least where the discussion of sexuality and gendered bodies is concerned.) Rabinowitz emphasizes the ways in which queer theory can open up and stretch the ways that children’s and YA literature are examined and critiqued, while also expanding the uses of such literature in larger queer discourse pertaining to children and queer childhood studies.

In 2009, Ricky Herzog published “Sissies, Dolls, and Dancing: Children’s Literature and Gender Deviance in the Seventies,” which took advantage of many important theoretical works, such as Sedgwick’s “How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay” (1991), Norton’s “Transchildren and the Discipline of Children’s Literature” (1999), and Bruhm and Hurley’s *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* (2004). Herzog looks back at two texts published in the 70s—Charlotte Zlotow’s *William’s Doll* (1972) and Tomie de Paola’s *Oliver Button is a Sissy* (1979)—and notes not only the influence of radical gay and feminist movements, but also explores the possibilities of understanding gender and sexuality in historically situated texts. He notes the anxiety associated with gender exploration among children and children’s texts, writing that “gender deviance can be especially terrifying not simply because it is frightening to see a boy dressed as a girl, but because seeing such a boy actually forces us to look at ourselves and question our own identities. In other words, gender non-conformity destabilizes the very categories upon which society and personal identity is built” (62). Herzog’s article is a valuable and intriguing example of the ways in which gender exploration can influence readings of children’s literature and understandings of childhoods.

A number of other influential monographs and essay collections have come out since the early 2000s, such as *Homoplot: The Coming-Out Story and Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Identity* (2008) in which Esther Saxey examines the history of the coming-out tale, showing the value of this type of story. Saxey writes:

Rather than simply reflecting pre-existing sexual identities, these stories work to construct identities. They are not a by-product of the process of becoming lesbian, gay or bisexual, but a contribution to the work of creating such identities. Not only do gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals tell coming out stories, but the coming out story 'tells' us. It supplies a vocabulary with which one can speak of same-sex desire (including popularizing terms such as 'the closet' and 'coming out'). (2-3)

Librarian Carlisle Webber, at the same time, published *Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning Teen Literature* (2010), which provides over 300 suggestions of literature with LGBT/Queer content.

A timely and in-depth text that explores gender and children—in some ways similar to Herzog, and using corresponding frameworks of gender exploration as Laura Robinson's "Girlness and Guyness: Gender Trouble in Young Adult Literature" (2009)—is Kerry Mallan's *Gender Dilemmas in Children's Fiction* (2009). Mallan notes that her "interest lies in teasing out and understanding . . . key dilemmas arising from the contradictions and tensions between traditional gendered subject positions and new gender relations, and the dilemmas that emerge with respect to sexual difference" (1). She utilizes the theoretical frames of performativity (Butler, 1990), as well as feminism, post-structuralism, and queerness. Her book also addresses queer approaches to children's texts and notes, much like Kidd, Trites, and many others in the early years of the 21st-century, that "children's literature criticism is still only at an early stage of interrogating the norms of identity. . ." (21). The book, however, is mainly concerned with gender behaviours and cisgender children who exhibit non-normative gender behaviours, but does not explicitly engage in explorations of experiences of transgender people. It is also not an exploration of explicit trans childhoods, though the discussion of

gender performance and the relationship between gendered behaviours and gender identities is important.

In 2011 two other books were published, each examining relevant and timely themes in children's literature studies, sexuality and innocence, and psychoanalysis. Tison Pugh's *Innocence, Heterosexuality, and the Queerness of Children's Literature* (2011) explores the paradox of innocence in relation to sexuality, normative or otherwise: "Children cannot retain their innocence of sexuality while learning about normative heterosexuality, yet this inherent paradox runs throughout many classic narratives of children's literature" (1). Pugh also notes that "heterosexuality's ubiquity is counterbalanced by its occlusion when authors shield their young readers from forthright considerations of one of humanity's most basic and primal instincts" (1). Kenneth Kidd's *Freud in Oz: At the Intersections of Psychoanalysis and Children's Literature* (2011) investigates important connections between the history of children's literature and psychoanalytic theory since the early works of Freud: "Children's literature . . . is now often understood as creative psychological work undertaken on behalf of the young subject" (viii). This work manages to show, to great effect, how deeply entrenched psychoanalysis and psychological theory is within children's and young adult literature.

Many articles published through the late 90s and early 2000s have been collected into anthologies which, in their own ways, map and categorize much of the children's literature and childhood studies scholarship (including intersections) written in recent years.⁶ The publication of Michelle Abate and Kenneth Kidd's anthology *Over the Rainbow: Queer Children's and Young Adult Literature* (2011), for example, is a volume that highlights some of the most engaging and contemporary studies on queer texts for young people. Scholars in this text, theorize on topics from *The Wizard of Oz* to the

⁶ Some anthologies include, but are not limited to, the following: Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley, eds., *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* (2004); Janet Alsup, ed., *Young Adult Literature and Adolescent Identity Across Cultures and Classrooms: Contexts for the Literary Lives of Teens* (2010); Michelle Abate and Kenneth Kidd, eds., *Over the Rainbow: Queer Children's and Young Adult Literature* (2011); Jamie Naidoo and Sarah Park Dahlen, eds., *Diversity in Youth Literature* (2013)

biblical story of David and Jonathan. Abate and Kidd point out that much of the work in this volume has been “published in the wake of [...] progressive social politics as well as developments in literary-theoretical studies of the last several decades” (1). An important perspective to gain from this work is the understanding that queer YA literature is something that will be always changing and therefore the lenses through which we read the texts must change as well.

2.2.4. Theorizing Queer Youth

Although queer theoretical approaches to YA literature have been in use for some time it was not until more recently that scholars began applying such approaches to children’s and YA literary studies. The tension between queerness and children/youth is brought forward in Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley’s collection, *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* (2004), Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), Kathryn Bond Stockton’s *The Queer Child: Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (2009), and in Kenneth Kidd’s thorough exploration of queer theory and children’s literature, “Queer Theory’s Child and Children’s Literature Studies” (2011). When queerness and sexuality studies are brought into conversation with the concept of the child, often scandal and/or confusion follow, as noted by Bruhm and Hurley: “People panic when sexuality takes on a life outside the sanctioned scripts of child’s play. And nowhere is this panic more explosive than in the field of the *queer* child, the child whose play confirms neither the comfortable stories of child (a)sexuality nor the supposedly blissful promises of adult heteronormativity” (ix: emphasis in the original). Queerness is sometimes contentious as an academic discipline, as the very attempt to normalize or turn queer studies into a regular part of academia in some ways revokes the very queerness that queer studies wishes to explore. Hurley, in her article “The Perversions of Children’s Literature,” notes the difficulties in applying notions of queerness to the study of identity in children’s and YA literature:

As important as I think the work on queer characters is in the history of queering children’s literature, it would be a mistake to see the usefulness of queer theory solely as a way of understanding same-sex desire among children or of

considering one more kind of identity formation, now among children. I may not fully agree with Edelman's polemical assertion that queerness only ever names those not on the side of the child, but I do agree with another claim that he makes: *that queerness does not name an identity but can only ever disturb one.* (123; emphasis added)

Up until the 21st-century, many authors using queer theory to analyze children's literature used the term queer (as I have done in past publications) as an identity apart from gay, lesbian, or bisexual orientations. While this is helpful at times when individuals do not wish to identify with a rigid label, the use of queer as another identity category ends up removing the notion of queer as an indefinable idea. It is good to see, however, that queer studies within children's and YA literature studies are being used in much more nuanced ways in current scholarship in order to upset and trouble the idea of stable categories of gender and sexuality. More specifically, the focus on trans and nonconforming gender performance relates, later in my literary analysis, to the focus in trans theoretical work on medicalization and embodiment.

Teenagers and sexual identity are treated much differently in the early twenty-first century than even in the mid- to late-twentieth century. In *The New Gay Teenager* (2005), Rich Savin-Williams discusses the fluidity of postmodern sexuality and the difficulties in keeping up with such constantly evolving discourse and rhetoric related to self-identities and politically correct references to sexuality and gender. He claims "[young adult] sexuality is not something that can be easily described, categorized, or understood apart from being part of [their] life in general" (1). He goes on to say, however, that "[t]he new gay teenager is in many respects the *non-gay* teenager [...]. They have same-sex desires and attractions but [... they] have much less interest in naming these feelings or behaviors as gay" (1). The new gay teenager, then, is part of a movement regarding queer sexuality that desires to simply *be*, at least similar to the ways in which heterosexuals are allowed to exist as the norm. While sexuality in youth, then, is not quite as panic-inducing as the discussion of queerness and sexuality in relation to children, it is still a complex and troublesome exploration that requires constant re-imaginings and examination as social attitudes change and queer theory evolves.

2.2.5. Under-Represented Identities

As this literature review demonstrates, while there has been a significant expansion of gender and sexuality studies within the field of children's and young adult literature criticism, the vast majority of scholarship privileges the study of gay and lesbian identities, as well as polarized gender identities—either male or female, but not much treatment of those who identify as *other*. In the 90s articles began to address topics of cross-dressing and responses to cross-gender behaviour—in response to changes in the field of psychology, namely the removal of homosexuality and the addition of GID in the Diagnostic and Statistics Manual of the American Psychological Association. Even Jody Norton, in her article on “Transchildren and the Discipline of Children's Literature” (1999), though mentioning transgenderism and reconceptualizations of gender, focuses more on reading trans-ness into children and children's literature in a broad sense—reading transgenderism into cross-dressing and cross-gender behaviour, which still privileges binary gender thinking—until trans-specific literature is published. Explicitly transgender-identified characters did not begin to show up until 2004, in the wake of Julie Ann Peters's *Luna*. Instead of employing a specifically transgender theoretical approach—a concept I will address in more depth in the next section—Norton, instead, argues that scholars, in the absence of explicitly transgendered fictional characters, need to work at opening up the possibilities of gender identities within current readings (i.e. reading a male character as female or non-gendered, in order to see how the story changes.) She writes: “Let us hold the speculative space of gender open until we know more, and let us open, in the meanwhile, the socio-political and aesthetic question of the representation of (trans)gender in children's literature” (430).

Within children's literature scholarship in the 21st-century, apart from the initial work by Norton, some authors (Battis, 2006; Rockefeller, 2007; Butler, 2009) have begun to see the value of incorporating trans analytical perspectives into literature analyses. In “The Genre of Gender: The Emerging Canon of Transgender-Inclusive YA Literature” (2007), Elsworth Rockefeller notes that “[t]here's a lot of room for interpretation with transgender characters: the personal nature of gender expression, transition choices, and

feelings of disconnect with one's birth gender all differ greatly for each individual who identifies as transgender" (519). In "Transgendered Magic: The Radical Performance of the Young Wizard in YA Literature" (2006), Jes Batts writes, in relation to magic and fantasy, that "like gender, magic is a power that confuses children, a power that they are supposed to ascertain clearly but often don't, and a power that they would often like to be rid of" (n.p.). Batts's work is perhaps not the most relevant to the actual field of transgender studies within literature, but the exploration of magic in the literature is remarkably similar to the concept of gender, in that it is incredibly unintelligible and very difficult to truly understand. One piece of scholarship that makes a call for the use of explicitly transgender theory is Charles Butler's "Experimental Girls: Feminist and Transgender Discourses in *Bill's New Frock* and *Marvin Redpost: Is He a Girl?*" (2009). Butler argues that while "[q]ueer theory itself has broadened beyond questions of sexuality and sexual identity . . . transgender theory has emerged as an independent area of academic study" (17). Transgender theory, I also argue, is a necessary inclusion within the field of literary criticism in the context of young people's literature.

Other current scholarship in the field of Education—some of which is practitioner studies that work within the qualitative realm of youth studies I engage with later in this project—seems more inclusive of gender-variance or gender-nonconforming children, at least in a theoretical sense. Melissa Tempel's piece entitled "It's OK to be Neither: Teaching that Supports Gender-Variant Children," and "When Gender Boxes Don't Fit," by Jody Sokolower and Ericka Sokolower-Shain, each speak to the desire for a more inclusive school environment that does not rely on a binary perspective of gender. Sokolower and Sokolower-Shain write: "What gender-variant youth need are teachers who don't make assumptions, who ask lots of questions" (n.p.). This sentiment is often present in fictional texts in relation to young people's attempts to navigate home and school life. Tempel, speaking to the ease with which we default to binary gender expectations, writes: "we often use gender to divide students into groups or teams. It seems obvious. Many of us do this when we line students up By dividing the children into two lines by assigned gender, [we] have unintentionally made the children whose labels aren't so clear feel uncomfortable in more ways than one" (n.p.). While

recent scholarship in the 21st-century looks to advocate for the visibility of more and more gender and sexual identities in literature—intersexuals, asexuals, genderqueers, genderfuckers, etc.—what is needed is a more nuanced and complex way of looking at gender and sexuality that does not necessarily rely on simply creating more and more labels. All one needs to do is look at the current state of the initialism LGBTQ, which, almost yearly, is expanding to an almost absurd degree (LGBTQTQQ2GAIUA⁷ and so on.)

What is important to note, here, is the expansion of explorations in children’s and YA literature from earlier scholarship that focuses mainly on gay and lesbian identities that still rely on normative assumptions of male and female gender identities. In order to work toward this queerer and nuanced theoretical frame within children’s and YA literature scholarship, however, it is necessary to create and define what it means to bring transgender theory into conversation with existing queer theory and gay/lesbian studies. Truly queer identities—those identities that are not necessarily able to be defined or fully explained—need a queer(er) gender theory to come into play within the more established tradition of children’s and YA literature studies. I will be incorporating work on embodiment, staring, and theoretical knowledge on nonconforming bodies into and already established tradition of examining children as fluid and “queer” in that they are not yet set into any stable definition of gender.

2.3. Conclusion

Transgender studies is a necessary inclusion in children’s and young adult literature criticism and analysis because, while queer theory looks to the in-betweens and attempts to trouble binaries of gender and sexuality, transgender studies often address the role of the medical—specifically in relation to transsexuality—and the complexities of existing in a state of transition, for those not willing or not desiring to undergo bodily

⁷ Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, queer, questioning, two-spirited, genderqueer, asexual, intersex, undecided, allies.

modifications. Transgender studies in children's and YA literature also allows for an exploration of physicality and sexual fulfillment in queer sexual acts that differ from socially normative understandings of heterosexual/homosexual sex. If indeed a young person wishes to live at one end of a spectrum, as opposed to somewhere in the middle, instead desiring to "pass" as a boy or girl, this runs in opposition to the idea of a binary gender system, which "do[es] not truly exist in a queer paradigm" (Rabinowitz 22). This is not to say that queer theory is entirely about instability and transgender theory is necessarily about stability, but rather that the two theoretical frames cause a tension which allows literature critics to negotiate the nuances of gay and lesbian versus transgender subjects, especially when the issues of transitioning or existing between opposite ends of the gender spectrum are present within a text.

Queer theory also tends to concentrate on theoretical, political, and social meanings as opposed to looking with more rigorous focus at the physical body and the tensions which exist between physical embodiment and meaning that is read in/on/through the body and the skin. Perhaps, then, it is less about an attempt to replace a queer analysis of bodies within literature for young readers, but rather to use queer and transgender studies as complementary positions for examining bodies—their physical and social makeup and meaning(s).

Chapter 3. Critical Transactions and Reading Kirstin Cronn-Mills' *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children*

When you think about it, I'm like a 45. Liz is my A side, the song everybody knows, and Gabe is my B side—not played as often but just as good.... I'm analog, Wall of Sound, old school to the core, and it's time to let my B side play. (Cronn-Mills 10)

3.1. A (Brief) History of Queer/Trans YA Fiction

The body of work dedicated to queer content has been on the rise over the last two decades, though until late in the twentieth century, it was often characterized by poor treatment of characters and issues (Cart 128). Many queer protagonists suffered misfortune of some kind due, in part or whole, to their sexual orientation. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, authors finally began to address the sexual identity of main and secondary characters with an increasing sensitivity, providing role models for young people to aid in their own identity development, but these texts still remain limited in number. Smaller still than this subgenre of queer young adult literature is that of trans young adult narratives. Homosexuality in YA literature has been, and at times, continues to be presented as “a passing phase, and the affected characters are vastly relieved to realize, at book’s end, that they are ‘normal’ and just like everyone else” (Cart 48), or else the very idea of sexual identity triggers “convulsions of weeping, wailing, and noisy gnashing of teeth” (50). This is particularly evident in what many consider to be the first queer YA novel, *I’ll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* (1969), by John Donovan. More consideration for the idea of a positive journey to find sexual identity, or at least an outcome in which the character is in some way able to survive in the world with his or her identity intact, has been a product of YA novels from

the first decade of 21st-century. Even among these novels, however, the genre still turns to “endless variations on questioning one’s sexual identity and the agonies of coming out” (50). Melinda Kanner agrees that “homosexuality is too often simply a plot device or ‘problem’ to be overcome; only rarely does it occasion penetrating social criticism” (par. 5). As Cart and Jenkins (2006) argue, queer teen protagonists in young adult (YA) literature often suffer due to their sexual orientation. Recently, these limited representations of queer youth sexuality have begun to transform, in part because of the increased positive publicity of queer celebrities/role models and also because of an increase in the number of authors willing to write such texts and publishers willing to publish them. It is now becoming more common to pick up a YA novel depicting queer young people that include a few passages about sex, masturbation, or erotic descriptions of human physique, which I argue are necessary developments in fiction for younger readers.

Here, I map out a brief evolution of YA literature with queer content, highlighting moments of larger ideological shifts within the field. The first novel for teens with an explicitly homosexual protagonist was *I’ll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*, by John Donovan, published in 1969. While there are earlier works of literature for adults and teens in which queerness can be read through various behavioural and social cues, Donovan’s novel was the first written for a specifically teen audience and featuring an explicitly queer storyline. Even though homosexuality isn’t really labeled, the two male characters engage in sexual acts. Unfortunately, though it is one of the first queer books for teens, it follows the trajectory of Cart’s assertions regarding suffering and misfortune as a consequence of existing as a queer individual.⁸ Following on the heels of Donovan’s book, Isabelle Holland’s book, *The Man Without a Face* was published in 1972 and Sandra Scoppettone’s *Trying Hard to Hear You* was published in 1974. Both of these

⁸ “Indeed, in the eight young adult novels that would appear in the next decade, death figures in three [...] and a violent rape, in a fourth.... In the others homosexuality is presented as a passing phase, and the affected characters are vastly relieved to realize, at book’s end, that they are “normal” and just like everyone else.” (Cart, “Wonderful World” n.p.)

novels have stood the test of time in many ways, and continue to circulate in many libraries throughout North America. Holland's book eventually became a movie, and was in many ways an introduction to queer YA novels dealing with intergenerational relationships and the uneven power structures related to such relationships. At the time of its publication, the novel did not cause much in the way of controversy; however, in a contemporary context, many have come to question the makeup of the central relationship. One contemporary author, Nora Olsen, notes that after reading the novel a second time in adulthood, *The Man Without a Face* "is very much a story of its time," and that the adult character, MacLeod, engages in behaviours that would now read "like a blueprint for being a child molester." She goes on to note that "In 1972 it was groundbreaking even to admit that gay people existed and to portray gay and questioning people in a positive light. And Isabelle Holland's writing and [...] characters really stand the test of time" (Olsen, par. 4). In total, the 1970s saw a total of nine novels with queer content published by mainstream publishing houses.⁹

In the 1980s, over 40 novels with queer content were published by mainstream publishers. Many of these novels continued the tradition of suffering and self-loathing, though the realistic portrayals improved over time. One important and revolutionary text is Edmund White's *A Boy's Own Story* (1982), which was praised for its depiction of a nameless homosexual youth who struggles with the guilt and shame of accepting himself for who he is. Though the novel was not specifically marketed as YA, the age and experiences of the protagonist have made it an accessible title for young readers. The real "problem" with this novel, in terms of the treatment of homosexuality—at least where normative social understandings of homosexuality are concerned—is that the narrator never comes to a stable personal reconciliation with his sexual identity. The narrator ends up attempting to reconcile his love for men with a non-homosexual identity, a much more complex ending than similar novels published in that timeframe. In coming to this

⁹ This and subsequent statistics on publishing within this section can be found in greater detail within *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004* by Christine Jenkins and Michael Cart, as well as a series of blog posts on publishing numbers by YA author Malinda Lo.

realization, the narrator experiences guilt and shame throughout the novel. These two feelings are, unfortunately, often associated with religious institutions since they often rely on guilt and shame in order to dictate “proper” behaviour and adherence to doctrine. White’s narrator is unable to come to terms with himself and his sexuality in a normative way, and only fully crosses the barrier from young adulthood to adulthood through a sexual encounter with a teacher at his school. One notable exception to this formula, however, is Nancy Garden’s *Annie on my Mind* (1982), and though there are consequences to the revelation of sexual orientation, the main characters are actually able to exist without violence being used against them or without tragic consequences befalling them as a result. Not until later in the 90s, however, do more books break free from the cycle of suffering and destruction.

In line with the steady increase in publications of LGBT/Queer, the 1990s saw over 75 such novels appear on the market and from 2000 to 2010, over 162 novels appeared. These time periods, however, saw the introduction of new gender and sexual identities within YA literature. In 1997, with M. E. Kerr’s “*Hello, I Lied*,” the first treatment of more explicitly self-defined bisexuality¹⁰ emerges onto the scene. Since then, however, bisexuality has been remarkably underrepresented within YA literature even now. And even within these novels, bisexuality, much like early novels with homosexual protagonists who were assumed to eventually become heterosexual, bisexual individuals are treated as if they are simply in a phase and are likely to choose a concrete gay, lesbian, or heterosexual identity by novel’s end. The trans young adult novel came into being with the publication of Julie Anne Peters’s *Luna* in 2004. But even since then there have been very few novels published for young adults on the topic of trans characters, even when compared with gay or lesbian texts in general. Novels with trans characters are becoming a larger part of the body of YA literature, but books with trans

¹⁰ Bisexuality can be difficult to define in many cases (Garber, 2000 and Hemmings, 2002), however while speaking of bisexuality within the context of YA literature, I am referring to instances in which characters self-define as bisexual or authors make it explicit that a character is a cisgender individual attracted to others who identify as both male and female. While I realize that this is a simplistic way of defining bisexuality, for the purposes of this study, bisexual individuals are rarely defined using much complexity or nuance that might be considered necessary in more theoretical contexts.

content still only account for less than 1% of all books for teens published each year. Many trans novels for YA readers focus on characters transitioning from one gender to another without allowing for the possibility of existing between genders or at other points along a gender spectrum, nor do they allow for such an existence without considerations of medical intervention.

Transgender characters are becoming easier to find; however, such characters found in literature with a different primary focus are often stereotyped as “the bitchy drag queen” or the “confused teenager” who can’t decide between liking boys or girls. There are definite links here between bisexual and transgender representations as, in both cases, characters are seen as confused but ultimately able to heal by simply choosing one way of living, whether that be straight, gay/lesbian, boy, girl, etc. This could be due in part to the general structure of transgender and transsexual narratives as compared to other queer novels. Trans literature tends to conform to a more structured narrative pattern than other queer literature, which allows for a nuanced examination of gender, identity, and overall development of character.

Aside from *Luna*, other novels with transgender protagonists include *Parrotfish* (2007) by Ellen Wittlinger, *Almost Perfect* (2009) by Brian Katcher, *Jumpstart the World* (2010) by Catherine Ryan Hyde, *I Am J* (2011) by Cris Beam, *Alex As Well* (2013) by Alyssa Brugman, and *Freakboy* (2013) by Kristin Elizabeth Clark. This is merely a small sample of what has been published; however, many of these still conform to a similar narrative arc, very much focusing on characters who wish for eventual gender reassignment surgery. And while this is not problematic in itself, there is an empty space within publishing for more literature with genderqueer, intersex, and gender variant content in which characters, like so many real youth, do not necessarily identify with a specific binary gender. A few novels with such content do exist, including *Every Day* (2012) by David Levithan, *Brooklyn, Burning* (2011) by Steve Brezenoff, and *None of the Above* (2015) by I. W. Gregorio. The body of young adult literature that has been published over the last decade has seen a significant increase in books with trans and

gender-nonconforming characters, which is what allows me to engage in this project to begin with.

A few more nuanced and complex trans characters have appeared in recent novels, including *If You Could Be Mine* (2013), by Sara Farizan, in which a lesbian couple realizes they may only be able to exist in public in Iran if one of them undergoes a transition to become a male. The very premise is one that has incited much debate and controversy in reality, even being compared to a type of genocide of homosexual populations. The novel itself did not invite the same level of controversy, but that is likely due to the fact that the intended audience—young readers—do not have the background or level of theoretical insight necessary to make such connections. While sexual orientation in this novel, then, is considered abhorrent, transgenderism is actually seen as a correctable mistake of nature. This book deals with gender and sexuality in complex ways that work outside of many social expectations adhered to in earlier publications. The Stonewall Award Winning book, *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (2012), by Kristin Cronn-Mills, is also very interesting in that although the protagonist identifies as transgender, he is not set on the idea of body modification or any sort of surgical intervention. And in *Gracefully Grayson* (2014) by Ami Polonsky, Grayson feels much more comfortable when dressing and acting in a more feminine manner, and while this may at first sound rather normative in terms of adhering to social expectations of being a girl, the novel manages to avoid being stereotypical.

While there is a growing body of transgender literature for teens, I will use one text—*Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (2012)—in order to give an example of the numerous possibilities of reading a text with trans themes and characters. While engaging with multiple texts would allow for an examination of trends across a wider range of trans youth representations in young adult fiction, a more in-depth critical analysis of a single text allows for greater understanding of intended audience and purpose. This type of analysis also reflects multiple perspectives on reading a single text, such as in the context of the interviews which I conducted, and which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four. A close reading of this single text will also allow for more engagement

with particular literary techniques and content within the context of this award-winning and critically-acclaimed novel. Although the emphasis within this chapter is an engagement with literary techniques and I am more concerned with a close reading of the novel, I will be using a number of theoretical perspectives to read portions of the text. For example, I will be analyzing Cronn-Mills' text using Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's notions of staring and (mis)recognition. Recognition is a somewhat paradoxical notion, but one that is important to use as a critical lens when reading books with gender-nonconforming characters:

To be recognized is to become familiar, no longer strange, to be seen and accorded the status of fellow human. Recognition, then, relies on a combination of identification and differentiation. The trajectory of recognition is this: I recognize you by seeing your similarity and your difference to me, and then I make your strangeness familiar. (158)

I am curious about the relationship between being recognized and therefore accepted, in a way, into mainstream visibility, and being unintelligible and therefore queer, which can be seen as empowering since such a move problematizes and disrupts socially acceptable notions of gender and gender expression. Yet for many, the need to hide visible difference in relation to gender is not only a desire, but a necessity.

3.1.1. Recognizing the *Other*

To be recognized as *other* outside of the binary gender spectrum often leads to instances of injustice, while recognition within the binary system is an inherent misrecognition of the internalized identity of the young person in question. As far as recognition is concerned, then, it is less about recognition allowing for a sense of peace and hopefulness, and more about the destruction and reconceptualizing of gendered recognition. Richard Juan, in his article "Transgendering the Politics of Recognition," explores physical, psychological, and social repercussions of presenting in a non-normative sense, leading to non-recognition by the wider public:

Non-recognition [...] leads to a dismissive attitude by the criminal justice system, the media, and the public toward the consequences of hatred for its victims and to victims being blamed for 'bringing it on themselves.' [...] [T]he consequence is that hate crimes then go unreported and unaddressed, thus creating a cycle of suppression and silence. (714)

Non-recognition, leading to invisibility or hyper-visibility, creates a number of issues for transgender and queer theorists to unravel—whether or not recognition positively and negatively affects trans individuals is only one of these issues, and it is nearly impossible to fully answer, though it manages to disrupt rigid gender boundaries and assumptions/expectations related to such categories as male/female, man/woman.

The struggle for recognition's key components—value, dignity, and self-expression—is a cornerstone of modern [North American] political, social, and cultural activity. Despite its unquantifiability, recognition's importance can be measured by the consequences of its absence.... (Juan 706)

When individuals are *not* recognized, they become marginalized, unintelligible, “an unvalued person readily becomes a target or a scapegoat for the hatred of others and begins to see him or herself only through the lens of such hatred” (706). This is an incredibly large component of studying transgender literature as well, as recognition is an integral element of literature for young people: “There is... the need to see one’s face reflected in the pages of a book” Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins write, “and thus to find the corollary comfort that derives from the knowledge that one is not alone...” (1).

While I will continue to engage with these and other similar theories in relation to *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (2012) throughout the rest of the chapter, it is important to note that such a reading is not intended to provide any formal hypothesis as to how young readers will engage with the text. Reading is most often an isolated act that relies on specific individual experiences and ways of thinking to create meanings from the written text. What a close reading such as the one I am engaging with here provides, is a glimpse at the fullest potential of what can be found and understood in the text through various theoretical tools and by approaching various aspects of the text from specific ways of reading. This analysis also allows for an examination of

aesthetic/informational readings, which will then be applied to practical reading strategies undertaken by the youth interviewed for Chapter Four. For example, the analysis of only a few components of chapter one from a perspective that relies on an analysis of behavioral cues provides only one possible way of reading the opening lines. Throughout this close reading, I will be paying specific attention to these cues, however, as they are often indicative of ways in which individuals are taught to make assessments of gender and sexuality based on stereotypes and hegemonic assumptions of what makes an individual male or female. While these dominant views are an essential part of my analysis of the text, I will also be engaging with other theoretical perspectives in order to break these views down and hopefully show the possible ways of reading Gabe—and the rest of the novel—outside of a two gender system.

3.2. Critical Literary Analysis

Though I do work with theoretical components that emphasize sexuality and gender, I also work to understand and critique formalist components of the text, such as structure and language. However, while I will be looking to formalist components of the text throughout this chapter, I will also be engaging with reader response criticism, a way of reading that was previously looked down on by New Critics, but which is once again being accepted as a way of engaging with the connection between text and reader in North American educational systems.¹¹ While New Critics emphasized a focus on the literature as an object, Reader Response emphasized the impact of personal knowledge and experience on the act of reading and the making of meaning through reading. When reading a work of fiction about an experience that is not one's own, understanding of the text will change depending on past education on the subject and personal experience with the situation that exists in the text. By engaging in a detailed reading of Cronn-Mills' book, I can then examine particular ways in which queer and transgender youth who took

¹¹ For a more thorough and qualitative discussion, see Ghaith and Madi's study, "Reader Response versus New Criticism: Effects on Orientations to Literary Reading" (2008).

part in my qualitative interviews relate to texts with similar themes. In order to explore this connection, I will be utilizing a framework of transactional literary theory—as put forward by Louise Rosenblatt in *The Reader, The Text, The Poem* (1994)—so as to assess aesthetic and informational components of the text. Rosenblatt writes that reading can take two forms, efferent and aesthetic. Efferent reading is a way of reading for information, the reader focusing on acquiring some form of knowledge from the text. Aesthetic reading, on the other hand, looks to the text directly, focusing on the experience of reading: “the reader’s attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text” (Rosenblatt 25). Efferent reading is sometimes criticized for encouraging a greater emphasis on educational value within fiction rather than allowing stories to unfold and exist as forms of entertainment. Literary studies currently straddle the line between aesthetic formalist analyses and content analyses, as noted in the literature review in Chapter Two—pointing out problematic content related to authenticity of portrayals as well as political correctness and educational accuracy relating to trans representation. These ways of reading are not mutually exclusive, however, and a single text can be read using a combination of efferent and aesthetic reading. The following analysis of Cronn-Mills’ text will rely on just such a combination of reading behaviours.

Though the reality of literary criticism is much more complex, much critique of literature for children and youth relies on either an analysis of quality and format *or* an analysis of the content itself, and how—if at all—the novel successfully mirrors reality, which of course means traversing the very contentious landscape of authenticity. However, in attempting to respond to sociopolitical shifts and in order to avoid accusations of inauthentic representation of various people groups, queer YA publishing

is often caught in a system of attempted edutainment,¹² vacillating between telling an engrossing story for the purposes of entertainment, and providing accurate information about particular ways of developing and existing in certain social systems as a form of education. This tension can be seen in the existence of the Diversity in YA movement and the various approaches to analysis that such groups engage in. For example, as critics ask for more inclusion of racial diversity in YA, some authors end up including token diversity in an attempt to satisfy more critical reviewers. There is a fine line between providing accurate information that flows within a cohesive plot and simply including information for the sake of accuracy or authenticity. Edutainment often ends up sacrificing nuance and complexity for a much more obviously didactic approach, which, while satisfying the desires of those who look at content, often fails to hold up to those critics who look at the formalist structures of fiction.

In books with transgender and gender-nonconforming characters, for instance, there is a fine line that authors walk in order to provide a story that is compelling, while also making sure to provide accurate information about the process of transition and coming out, but also without allowing the narrative to read like a textbook or non-fiction text. This, of course, leaves much of the growing body of queer YA open to a double-standard style of critique, often appearing in a rather formulaic style itself: “On the one hand... And on the other hand...” More specifically, reviewer Ana, of *The Book Smugglers* blog, says of *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children*, “on the one hand, at the surface level, *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* is a really, really cool story” and going so far as to say that “[it] is an empowering story.” But as noted, Ana goes on to write, “But the other hand says: things seemed to have happened by rote, plot-wise. Almost as if

¹² In *The Entertainment Industry: An Introduction*, Stuart Moss defines edutainment as follows: “Edutainment promotes recreational learning and knowledge transfer in non-traditional informal settings.... Edutainment typically involves an entertaining method of educational delivery in that it can hold the attention of an audience, very often with an emotional response among audience members, and can potentially draw in people who may have otherwise been ‘turned-off’ by targeting it solely towards those of school age” (248). In the case of my own research, edutainment involves the reading of YA fiction as a source of informal education, especially due to the fact that many LGBT/Queer novels provide young readers with a first glimpse into the lived experience of others with which they may not be familiar.

there was a list of THINGS that had to happen in the transition process—with the uncomfortable implication that the process is the same for everybody” (n.p.). The implication here, is that the book is being held up not only as a story that is empowering, hopeful, and entertaining, but also “*informative* in portraying the Trials and Tribulations of a trans teen” (Ana, n.p. [emphasis in original]). And while it is true that fiction *can* be a source of informal educational information, the expectations of authenticity and accuracy do, to some degree, limit the amount of freedom an author has to create a story that flows and is aesthetically pleasing.

One of the many difficulties of attempting to disentangle aesthetic and efferent qualities of a text when engaging in a process of analyzing or reviewing is the tendency to ignore or separate the reader’s own lived experience and what that brings to a reading of the novel in question. For instance, the reviewer above makes note of a number of issues regarding the informational components of the text, namely the process of transitioning and coming out, and felt that it was too narrow, forgetting, it would seem, that any portrayal of a single individual’s process of identity development is just that: individual. As commenter Inconceivable noted, regarding the above review of Cronn-Mills’ text: “Speaking as a ftm transgendered person [sic], I think that the author did a wonderful job at portraying the thoughts/struggles of being trans” (The Book Smugglers). There are many ways of reading a text, and many areas on which to place emphasis. The reviewer noted issues about what was thought to be a lack of universal appeal and a formulaic plot, but while she felt this to be true, other readers—as evidenced by the one commenter, at least—found the book compelling and true to life in many ways. These and many other interpretations of the text are what make it necessary for me to engage in a close reading of Cronn-Mills’ book, to examine the multiple ways of reading a single text, both through an aesthetic and efferent model¹³ emphasizing the artistic and

¹³ “[I]t seems to me that many good and great poems, and certainly the good and great stories, novels, and plays, possess a strong cognitive or intellectual or ideational element. The mark of the reader’s aesthetic activity is precisely that he does not respond to either of these elements separately but, rather, fuses the cognitive and the emotive, or perhaps more accurately, apprehends them as facets of the same lived-

entertainment-related qualities as well as the more complex informational components and the ways in which it can be read through a more critical theoretical lens.

3.2.1. Reality, Complexity, and the (Im)possibility of Authenticity

Beautiful Music for Ugly Children is the story of Gabe's journey to live as a guy and be accepted by his family and friends. Having been assigned a female gender at birth and starting out life as Elizabeth, Gabe's parents are having a hard time coming to terms with Gabe's new identity. On top of this, his best friend Paige seems oblivious to his affections toward her. John, Gabe's mentor in music has been a DJ for over forty years, and his enthusiasm helps Gabe become a much more confident radio personality. When his show becomes an underground hit, Gabe even develops a group of fans who call themselves the Ugly Children's Brigade. Through a series of unfortunate circumstances in which John accidentally uses Gabe's birth name on a form for a contest to get a larger radio show spot, Gabe's trans identity becomes more public. The forced outing causes Gabe to move much more into the spotlight than he ever intended, leaving him open to instances of bullying and physical violence from ignorant and abusive peers. With the help of the Ugly Children's Brigade, though, Gabe manages to take greater ownership of his identity and become a much stronger and more confident individual, both on air and in the real world.

Cronn-Mills' novel starts out without any mention of Gabe's transness, allowing readers who may be initially hesitant to read a novel about a transgender/transsexual individual to become emotionally invested in the protagonist first, seeing the lived experience before any trans content is revealed. As Georgie, a reviewer for the website *GayYA* notes about the novel: "When [...] we're presented with a protagonist who we admire and feel a connection to [...] we keep reading, and when Gabe does tell us about the hurdle in his life, we just keep going because we care about what happens to him" (Georgie). While a trans storyline is at the heart of the book, I find that what stands out through experience, thus giving it its special meaning and quality" (Rosenblatt 46).

the most are the relationships. Gabe and his relationship with John is different from many presented in YA literature, especially where intergenerational friendships are concerned. I also find Gabe's relationship with Paige to be dynamic and richly developed; as much as she was at times scared or worried for him, she loved him fiercely in the way(s) he deserves. There is a complex vulnerability that exists between the two characters that brings out a brilliant fragility. Cronn-Mills does an excellent job of portraying all the complexities of their relationship—how confusing it was for both of them to have everything change after Gabe comes out as trans. Paige is a truly supportive friend who struggles to know what to do with the newly outed Gabe. He, as well, is also incredibly patient with Paige, even when she's pushing him away or having the occasional moment of confusion and anxiety. Romantic or not, their relationship is one that is built upon a firm foundation. As well as the solid plot, I feel that the first person narrative lens works effectively to allow readers a glimpse into Gabe's head, seeing others through his perspective. And the musical component of the storyline is rather unique, too, the A-side/B-side metaphor weaving an unexpected nuance into the overall novel around the subject of gender (even though it technically still plays into a binary conception.) What allows the novel to succeed without becoming exceedingly didactic, however, is the humour and bluntness that keeps tough topics from becoming maudlin: "I bought a dick today. Holy shit" (51).

The text begins with an important statement about disconnect: "If radio is the medium of the ugly person, then I can live my life as a voice and the world will be perfect" (Cronn-Mills 1). This opening line of *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (2012) is immediately indicative of differences between visual and aural/textual interactions with others. While we are able to take many cues and make various judgments about individuals based on modes of dress and behaviour through a visual medium and through direct and indirect interaction within social settings, a voice contains fewer cues that we are able to use to make judgments about individuals, especially in terms of gender and sexuality. What the opening chapter of the novel does do, however, is use certain textual clues to give the reader a sense of difference about Gabe. Cronn-Mills writes in specific moments that jar the reader, giving clues about Gabe's transness without explicitly

labeling him. There are no gender pronouns used initially either, so a reader coming to the text with no previous exposure to the content of the novel would make certain assumptions upon first hearing Gabe's name used. However such assumptions are likely to be queered through later, initially innocuous statements: "...the phone rings. I stuff my voice deep in my chest and race to grab it" (2). At first glance one might not consider this to be anything more than Gabe attempting to deepen his voice for the benefit of his radio audience. However, only two pages later, he notes, "My voice is high, because I react instead of think. I clear my voice to cover.... She doesn't notice my slip. I clear my throat again and pull my voice lower" (4). This time, the narrator's emphasis on regulating his voice at a lower register when on the phone becomes something more conscious than simply an attempt to create a deeper radio voice. These statements are, in fact, the reader's first introduction to Gabe's efforts to present himself as a male to the world, if only through vocal cues.

The first instance of explicit discord between what has been presented to readers through Gabe's point of view and how others in the world currently see him, or in this particular case, her, is presented as follows: "[John] waves at me before he picks up the crate. 'Good night, Elizabeth'" (7). John's farewell to Elizabeth provides context and explanation for the earlier moments during which Gabe attempts to sound more masculine for his listeners in an attempt to present as the person he wishes to become. The lack of visual elements for people to judge through the medium of radio allows Gabe to begin a gradual transition and gauge initial reactions from a visually removed audience. As with many components of identity development, experimentation is an essential component that allows individuals to note reactions and develop certain ways of being and acting in order to avoid breaking too many social mores. Of course this is not always the case, as no form of development can ever be truly generalized over an entire population; however, many people do engage in certain identity experimentations in order to gauge familial and peer reactions and ease slowly into a new way of being. After this moment of revelation, Gabe provides an explanation for the conflicting names given in the first part of the chapter:

My birth name is Elizabeth, but I'm a guy. Gabe. My parents think I've gone crazy, and the rest of the world is happy to agree with them, but I know I'm right. I've been a boy my whole life. I wish I'd been born a vampire or a werewolf instead, or with a big red clown nose permanently stuck to my face, because that stuff would be easy. Having a brain that doesn't agree with your body is a much bigger pain in the ass.

This explanatory monologue gives the reader a look inside of Gabe's thought process, and into his way of processing his own transness. What is interesting about this description, however, is the reliance on a "born in the wrong body" narrative. It is, perhaps, an easy way of explaining what it means to be trans to someone who is cisgender or who has had no exposure to the subject.

This explanation leads to more complex questions around the idea of intended audience, but that is something that will come up in greater detail in the following dissertation chapter. Immediately after the passage above, Gabe enters into exposition about another common theme in trans YA novels, namely that of medical intervention: "I know there are ways to match things up, though I have no access to any of those ways right now, plus everything costs a ton of money, which sucks" (8). Medical interventions and body modification are common themes, often giving the impression that undergoing such treatment is one of the only ways to be trans in contemporary social settings, which is exactly how Gabe seems to feel in this opening chapter. The next paragraph speaks to social assumptions and misunderstandings, however, as Gabe notes,

I also know people think I'm an ISSUE, and that gets really old. Any time THOSE SCARY TRANS PEOPLE come up, everybody flips out. It was even a talk show issue a while ago, the pregnant trans man and all that stuff. I get it, it's the craziest thing in the world, but it's not gross and wrong, it just is, so why do people lose their minds over it? Honestly, world, I don't care what you think. Stick your issue up your ass. (emphasis in original, 8)

Within these three paragraphs, Cronn-Mills invites readers to confront their own assumptions about what it means to be trans and what social expectations do to those who identify as such.

Apart from simply inviting readers to confront assumptions, however, Cronn-Mills also provides more concrete examples of certain aspects of trans experience, at least one possible way of experiencing a life as a trans individual. This works in conjunction with the assumptions I have already mentioned, namely what non-trans individuals might assume are aspects of existing as trans. For example, it is often assumed that trans individuals go through a form of transition that is accompanied by surgery or body modification of some kind, and possibly hormone treatments leading to the development of different secondary sex characteristics. This assumption is evident in nearly all of the primary texts that I have mentioned so far within my research, and *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* is no exception: “Maybe I’ll get hormones by Christmas. Maybe I’ll get to officially change my name by February. Maybe Paige and I can get married once I’m legally a guy. Maybe, maybe, maybe. Sometimes I make a list of wedding dance music, music to celebrate hormones by, music to recover from surgery with” (151). Surgeries, as Gabe vaguely mentions in the above quote, can include minor modifications such as changing hair length and nail length, or more extreme surgical procedures such as mastectomies, and even a phalloplasty. Some of these modifications cannot be seen immediately in public contexts as clothing and other coverings hide specific parts of the body; however, other changes are more publicly open to scrutiny—for example, facial hair, chest size, muscle definition, etc. Moments of (mis)recognition, however, often culminate in scenes of violence and panic. In *Beautiful Music*, for example, Cronn-Mills writes: “Then she’s staring at me. Like staring.... ‘The snack bar. You’d always get a Pepsi from the machine.’ The puzzle pieces have clicked into place. ‘I told myself it wasn’t you!’ Now she’s crying.... ‘You’re just...messed up’” (126). And later, after Gabe’s assigned gender at birth is revealed to a larger group of people, the threats become more serious: “We’re coming to get you, IT. Be ready. You’ll never know when, you’ll never know how, but we’re watching. Dead. Bam. Over” (152). To be recognized as *other* outside of the binary gender spectrum often leads to threats and violence, while recognition within the binary system is most often an inherent misrecognition of the internalized identity of the young person in question, especially for those whose transness is a desired component of their identity, as in Gabe’s case. Moments such as these are

written to invoke an emotional response to Gabe's situation. Cronn-Mills writes moments of violence and conflict into the text in order to give readers higher stakes with which to engage while reading.

While medical interventions are not a part of Gabe's particular narrative in this novel, it would be irresponsible of me to ignore the ways in which this issue impacts possible readings of such practices in other YA novels. According to T. Benjamin Singer, by dehumanizing non-normative bodies, those in the medical field create "specimens of physical pathology rather than images of people with uncommon bodies" (603). It becomes nearly impossible to re-humanize the monstrous and see it as anything other than bad, wrong, or ethically questionable, which is exactly why trans practices are so often currently seen to be grotesque and treated with disdain. But Singer also notes that body image is always subject to shifting representational politics of sex and gender (604), meaning that it may yet be possible to reinvent the monstrous as something to celebrate, something plausible and acceptable within mainstream culture. But this is a discourse that must be entered into on a social level and within the medical establishment, for without the participation of medical practitioners, the discourse cannot move forward. Within trans YA fiction, such discourses are not often discussed or engaged with, either by authors or by characters within the texts. What is more often than not the case is that a character, upon realizing that there is a disconnect between mind and body (an indication of monstrosity), becomes enraged, depressed, frustrated, or confused, which often leads to moments of irrationality:

"What happened at the Wow Zone?" [asks Paige.] "You played laser tag, you bowled, you played video games. So what? You..." Her voice trails off. Then she screams, "You got your period. So what?"

"Ugly, huge blood spots, all over the crotch of my jeans."

She's so confused. "It's just your period! Nobody saw but me!"

"What did they tell us in fifth grade health class—what does it mean to have your period?" I look down again as I ask the question. Those cars are really fast. There's no ice on the roads.

“You dumbass, it means you’re a woman. What are you DOING?”

“Do you like being a woman?”

“I DON’T KNOW WHAT YOU’RE TALKING ABOUT!” Paige’s voice tells me how high her panic level is.

I turn to look behind me. I can see she wants to come near me again, but she doesn’t know how I’ll take it. I turn back and look under my feet. Still lots of fast cars. “My body is lying, and it’s so fucking gross.” I keep staring down. “I’m not a woman.” It wouldn’t hurt, once I hit. I don’t think. (Cronn-Mills 206)

In Gabe’s case, early on in life when he first experiences his period, his disidentification with his physical body leads to a traumatic and almost entirely self-destructive act. When a transgender body is seen as somehow showing, externally, a gender that is at odds with the internal self-identified gender, the body is read as queer by others. A transgender body does not necessarily queer the gender/sex relationship, but in the context of the transsexual body, there is a desire to modify the exterior to fit with the interior.

These expectations can be harmful, as Gabe notes when he talks about how people freak out over things that aren’t *normal* but which are not gross or wrong. In many ways, all of these issues—medical interventions, feelings of monstrosity, and social assumptions of transness—are all linked through staring and the meanings placed on bodies in society, concepts which are covered in greater detail in Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s *Staring: How We Look* (2009). Specifically here I wish to address the feeling of deformity, the feeling of being monstrous—a vampire, a werewolf, a clown, in Gabe’s own mind—and how this translates to the process of revealing one’s transness, specifically as constructed in Cronn-Mills’s text.

3.2.2. Staring and Otherness

Staring is, on the surface, a rather simple sounding concept; however, when brought up against troublesome notions such as biological sex/gender expression, and recognition/cultural intelligibility, the act of staring turns out to be much more problematic. The disparity between biological gender and gender expression/identity is

one that surrounds my own interrogations of transgender and transsexual subjects—as well as trans YA fiction—on a constant basis. Although Rosemarie Garland-Thomson focuses almost entirely on the concept of staring outside of a queer/transgender context—what she defines as “an ocular response to *what we don't expect to see* [emphasis added]” (5)—by engaging with Garland-Thomson, it is possible to understand how staring and looking work on a social level within the context of non-normatively gendered bodies. My intention within this chapter section is to develop an understanding of the physical body in relation to staring and various treatments of gendered bodies.

According to Garland-Thomson, “[w]e stare when ordinary seeing fails, when we want to know more. So staring is an interrogative gesture that asks what's going on and demands the story. The eyes hang on, working to recognize what seems *illegible*, order what seems *unruly*, know what seems *strange*” ([emphasis added] 3). I emphasize these three terms in order to highlight language that is often applied to unintelligible or unrecognizable bodies, such as those who present as androgynous, genderqueer, or transgender—basically, those who do not present their gender obviously to others within a binary spectrum. While this may seem to be an initially negative reaction, the inability to recognize or *read* a person's gender is actually, in some ways, a helpful exercise:

Triggered by the sight of someone who seems unlike us, staring can begin an exploratory expedition into ourselves and outward into new worlds. Because we come to expect one another to have certain kinds of bodies and behaviors, stares flare up when we glimpse people who look or act in ways that contradict our expectations. (6)

This disruption of expectations harkens back to what was discussed earlier with respect to the opening chapter of the novel, wherein Gabe's gender is assumed by radio listeners as male, and this is taken at face value as there are no visual cues to counter the assumption.

Individuals necessarily have their assumptions challenged through the interruption of “business-as-usual” visuals. By examining (transgender) bodies that are *other* than our own, it is possible to recognize not only the bodies themselves, but to recognize gender as something much larger than our society tries to convince us that it is: “The sight of an

unexpected body—that is to say, a body that does not conform to our expectations for an ordinary body—is compelling because it disorders expectations” (37). In her book, *Transgender History* (2008), Susan Stryker makes the point of including gender expression and gendered behaviours in her analysis of *othered* bodies:

[T]he reality of gender for *everybody* is the “doing of it.” Rather than being an objective quality of the body (defined by sex), gender is constituted by all the innumerable acts of performing it: how we dress, move, speak, touch, look. Gender is like a language we use to communicate ourselves to others and to understand ourselves. (131)

We can see through Garland-Thomson and Stryker that staring occurs when we see a person who displays gender in unexpected ways, and that gender is read by others through both gender expression and embodiment of certain physical characteristics.

Since gendered behaviour/embodiment and recognition are so intrinsically linked, it is difficult to pull apart many of the previously mentioned concepts in such a way as to explore them in a linear or, dare I say, intelligible, fashion. As such, I shall discuss here first the roles of the starrer and the staree—as Garland-Thomson terms these reciprocating roles. From there I shall move on to examinations of the monstrous and the nature of recognition and intelligibility involved therein, using Cronn-Mills’s *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* as a textual example of these principles. In many moments throughout Cronn-Mills’s text, the protagonist is often subjected to acts of staring from discriminatory individuals. As Garland-Thomson notes about such acts of staring,

Never far from voyeurism, it can be an inappropriate and mutually embarrassing act. Starers must defend against accusations of vulgar overinvolvement, and starees must defend against intrusive overexposure. Consequentially, staring can roil up common unease on both sides of those ogling eyes. (5)

As individuals move through various social settings and institutions, eyes wander, looking for cues to interpret life and other individuals. We are, however, more easily drawn toward “what is visually unusual”—for example, those who are non-normative or who display gendered attributes that are unexpected within a binary gender system—“toward novelty as a form of psychological stimulation and an antidote to visual

boredom” (32). Since men are expected to perform in certain ways and women in others, when specific behaviours do not match physical attributes, or when some physical attributes do not match with others, the novelty or monstrosity leads us to stare in an attempt to decipher or unearth some form of normativity within the “abnormal” individual. Expectations of gender roles and social norms are evident in trans YA novels, reflecting contemporary perspectives on gendered behaviours.

Evidence of this reflection can be found in *Beautiful Music*, particularly during flashbacks to Gabe’s early childhood “when that social thing started kicking in and the packs got defined” (13). Early on in life children are segregated along gender lines: “In kindergarten I remember wondering why I had to line up with the girls when I knew I was a boy” (37). Based on looks, and not internalized identity, Gabe is assessed as female and placed into the corresponding category. In third grade, he notes, “it’s not like they knew the truth—they just knew I was a butchy girl who’d rather climb the jungle gym and play football than stand around and whisper” (13). Even Gabe’s own understanding of gender, though not in line with the socially assumed roles being placed on him, is based on a gender dichotomy and binary gender representations. His own presentation, since it is not in line with assumed feminine characteristics, finds Gabe being labeled as butch, and therefore a lesbian later on. Upon getting a job at a record store, Gabe’s new boss performs an act of staring: “Chris checks me out again, which I expected. He’s been doing it since I came in. I know sometimes people read me as a girl, but I really want him to believe my name is Gabe” (88). But even though Chris does accept Gabe and gives him work, Gabe is concerned about public perception: “If people stare at me instead of buying Radiohead CDs, there’s no way I can do it” (87). Though these are rather surface level moments within the text, they are reflective of the surface level ways that people *read* each other and make judgments about gender and gender roles.

There is a large degree of reliance by authors of trans-themed novels on what is often referred to as a “wrong-body narrative.” This narrative assumes that transgender individuals were/are born into a body that exhibits sex characteristics which do not adhere to the gender identity that the individual adheres to psychologically. This narrative

arc whether fictional or real, assumes that medical intervention is required in order ensure that the mind and body become aligned (i.e. primary and secondary sex characteristics match the gender identity of the individual in question.) Of course, this assumption about gender and sexual alignment works from social assumptions of gender and expression, which I have discussed in previous sections of this chapter. This wrong-body narrative is evident in *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children*. Gabe specifically notes that he has “a brain that doesn’t agree with [his] body...” (8), and he goes on to say, “In my heart, I have a penis. In my pants, I have a vagina. I want my heart and my pants to match” (48). While Cronn-Mills’ novel does not fully examine the process of undergoing surgical procedures, Gabe does discuss the divergence between his body and his mind and he also goes so far as to order himself a prosthetic to aid in changing his body, even in minor ways. These types of non-surgical body modification are actually a change from earlier depictions of trans teens in books such as *Luna*, in which the trans character desires a full surgical change or nothing, a way of thinking that reflects early conceptualizations of the transsexual experience:

What underlies these claims is the belief that transgenderism as its currently understood and experienced, is significantly different from transsexualism as it seems to have been conceptualized and lived prior to the rise of postmodernism, queer theory, transgender theory and activism, and so on. Here ‘trans’ practices and procedures are not a means by which one moves from one sex/gender to the ‘opposite’ sex/gender. Rather, they are a (rather explicit or literal) example of the many ambiguous and complex ways in which bodies are continually changed and changing. (Sullivan 553)

The brief mapping of trans YA fiction in the introduction to this chapter shows the ways in which YA follows the transition from transsexualism to a much more subtle understanding of embodiment and gender in relation to lived experience and the act of transitioning.

As noted earlier, while Gabe does not engage with any forms of surgical intervention, he does attempt to modify his body on a more surface level, using a binder and purchasing a prosthetic, even though he finds the term a bit to... “medical”—“I bought a dick today. Holy shit” (51). At other times, he goes so far as to reveal the

involuntary reactions of body parts that are not physically connected to him. At numerous points throughout the novel, Gabe points out, “My imaginary dick is hard...” (175). In one particularly emotional and profound moment while in the DJ booth, Gabe imagines what a future sex life might be like:

The song growls onto the air, and I start thinking about body parts smashing together in the dark. I can’t contemplate having sex, imaginary dick or not. A guy with breasts can’t have sex. Can he? Maybe sex is fine between two people who love each other. Maybe love’s enough. No matter what body parts you have, or don’t have, or wish you had. (182)

The unfortunate part of this whole monologue is the fact that Gabe cannot imagine a sex life. His dick is only imaginary or available in the form of a prosthetic with only two uses: it fills out his underwear and provides an indication of his maleness, and it fits over his female genitalia, allowing him to urinate. Gabe’s understanding of his disconnected dick is indicative of the way that sex and sexual excitements are treated as imagined and relatively unattainable. Within the above cited quotation, I have to give credit to the author for at least giving Gabe the understanding that it is not only transgender individuals who can have significant non-normative approaches to sex and arousal.

Young adult novels, as evidenced here, are open to many and multidimensional readings, including multiple levels of aesthetic and theoretical reading. Cronn-Mills examines the body, and relationships on numerous levels—from friendship to romance, and even relationships with antagonists. *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* is not only a well-written book with impressive stylistic qualities, but it is also a novel that readers can approach on multiple levels. One can simply read from a surface level or engage with the many possible interpretations of trans experience in the process of coming out, creating relationships, and dealing with (mis)recognition and violence due to disruptions of social expectations.

3.3. Conclusions

Although recognition and intelligibility are terms that are fraught with complexity, going unrecognized in many ways allows for a better and more worthwhile examination of strict societal gender expectations. This is not a stable or concrete way of deconstructing gender binaries, however; transsexual monstrosity, in the words of Susan Stryker, can never claim a secure means of resistance because of the inability of language to “represent the transgendered subject's movement over time between stably gendered positions in a linguistic structure.” (Stryker, “My Words” 247). Understanding this, it must also be understood that to be unrecognized leads to an incredibly intense vulnerability, especially as relates to different institutions and social services. Children in schools are more vulnerable to harassment, as are those adults in the workplace, especially in certain states where there is no legal protection. Bathrooms to this day are politically charged spaces, regulated by recognition and strict gender codes, and are all too often spaces in which violence against non-normatively gendered individuals takes place.¹⁴

Both in real life experience and in other academic areas of study, such as literary criticism (as discussed earlier), recognition plays a key role in accepting or disrupting socially determined gender attributes and normative bodies. The monstrous people in Stryker’s writing exist as created beings, not necessarily opposite or entirely removed from the experiences of *normal* individuals, and the works of Garland-Thomson, Stone, and Prosser all interrogate this idea, examining the paradoxes and complexities inherent in recognition and intelligibility. In *Transgender History*, Stryker sums up the problem of being unrecognized/misrecognized, even though recognition itself is not necessarily positive: “Because most people have great difficulty recognizing the humanity of another person if they cannot recognize that person's gender, the gender-changing person can

¹⁴ In just the last month, while writing this dissertation (March 2016), legislation regarding who is allowed to use which bathrooms has been passed in North Carolina, and protections for transgender individuals have been removed from workplace regulations. The legislation dictates that individuals must use the washroom which matches their gender assigned at birth.

evoke in others a primordial fear of monstrosity, or loss of humanness” (6). This is evident in Cronn-Mills’s novel. Gabe sees himself as monstrous and the notion is confirmed for him as he experiences physical and psychological violence, or at least threats of violence, when people start to find out that he is trans. He therefore finds comfort in the anonymity in his radio work: “If radio is the medium of the ugly person, then I can live my life as a voice and the world will be perfect” (1). Gabe finds himself the subject of scrutiny and (mis)recognition throughout the novel, and as such can evoke feelings of recognition within a trans readership.

Beautiful Music for Ugly Children, as I have engaged with it in this chapter, can be read in diverse ways, through an aesthetic and/or efferent lens. Aesthetically, the book allows readers, whether trans or cisgender, to experience Gabe’s life, how he navigates school, friendships, family, and a radio show. Readers engaging aesthetically with the narrative can relate to it in numerous ways depending on their own lived experience and their own ways of seeing the world. Through an efferent reading, however, readers can pick up practical information about certain aspects of trans-male experiences, such as learning to speak more deeply, buying a packer, or how one goes about receiving hormone therapy. Throughout this chapter I have engaged with both aesthetic and information components of the text, examining numerous possibilities for reading the text and responding emotionally and critically to the informal educational components and the more formalist components. Though many young readers would likely not engage in such a detailed reading, the next chapter explores specific responses to trans YA literature in general, and specific quotations from *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children*, and reflects back on the detailed analysis from this chapter.

Chapter 4. Reading, Representing, Recognizing

While I do hold fast to the belief that young people wish to see themselves—to recognize their own experiences or at least the essence of their existence—within the fictional texts that they read and interact with, my understanding of this idea is consistently complicated by different theories of textual interaction, the most recent of which has been Patchen Markell’s exploration of recognition in the introduction to *Bound by Recognition* (2009). When a young person reads a text in the hope of recognizing their own experiences and/or personhood within the prose, they are hoping, in a sense, to see themselves recognized “both as human beings in general and also bearers of particular social identities” (Markell 3). The problem inherent in this form of recognition, however, in Markell’s understanding, is that to become associated with a particular social identity, whether in real life or mirrored in a fictional text, is to become recognized and identified as someone who may or may not be subject to identity-based inequality. The hope that recognition of oneself within the pages of a novel will somehow free one from the bonds of social repression—that one might gain agency through this recognition of personhood and citizenship—is an overly simplistic way of framing the reading process. There are possibilities for seeing recognition of oneself within a text as a form of relief and peace, knowing that one is not alone, but at the same time recognition can be a detriment in terms of the conceptualization of the self in relation to characters within fiction. When characters within a fictional narrative struggle with access to government or healthcare institutions and agencies because of a non-recognizable identity, in a political sense, the book can be read in such a way as to cause feelings of frustration at one’s own disrupted, lived experience in reality, from living outside of the binary gender system.

In *Undoing Gender* (2004), Judith Butler argues that complexity within recognition is not necessarily a disadvantage, but is actually a way of better

understanding one's place within social paradigms. She writes, "[t]here are advantages to remaining less than intelligible, if intelligibility is understood as that which is produced as a consequence of recognition according to prevailing social norms" (3). She continues: "[i]ndeed, if my options are loathsome, if I have no desire to be recognized within a certain set of norms, then it follows that my sense of survival depends upon escaping the clutch of those norms by which recognition is conferred" (3). In a sense then, to exist unintelligibly is to be compelled to fight against, and ultimately more consciously deconstruct, the systems of recognition in place within a specific social setting/situation. As many non-normatively identified individuals can understand, without recognizability, existence may seem impossible, but the way one is identified may also cause life to be or become unliveable (Butler 4). "Difficult knowledge"—a term coined by Deborah Britzman (1995)—partially embodies that acknowledgement, that the paradox of recognizability is too complex to convey in any explicit way within a fictional text for the purposes of an efferent mode of reading (Rosenblatt). "This is the juncture from which critique emerges, where critique is understood as an interrogation of the terms by which life is constrained in order to open up the possibility of different modes of living" (Butler 4). In this chapter, I draw on Markell and Butler in an attempt to more fully understand and define recognition, which is in itself no easy task.

Recognition is, much like reader-response, a transactional relationship between the one being recognized and the one(s) recognizing. Recognition, as discussed by Markell, assumes that in order to develop an identity, one inherently depends upon reactions and responses from others, both individuals and society at large. But this definition is also troublesome in that those who do not receive adequate recognition—those who are recognized negatively, or who somehow fail to be recognized within social norms or expectations—will be unlikely to embrace their identities fully. This speaks to the difficulties experienced by trans youth in a cisnormative society such as that in North America. Trans youth who identify within a binary gender system will find themselves recognized more positively and will receive more positive forms of recognition, while those who do not identify along binary gender lines may find themselves recognized in a negative fashion, or they may find themselves misrecognized entirely, thereby hindering

a successful and healthy identity. This definition of recognition is important as it also speaks to the experiences of trans youth who participated in my research and their difficult relationships with recognition and the tensions between their own ways of identifying and ways in which they understand and read trans characters within literature. Before examining this in greater detail throughout the chapter, I wish to revisit transactional reading and the relationship between queer studies and the reading transactions I examine through the interview responses.

The following portion of this project seeks to further explore certain elements of reader-response criticism—areas not touched on in the previous chapter—and the addition/consideration of Pitt and Britzman’s theory of difficult knowledge, providing an alternative queer(er) process of transactional/interactional reading that can then be used to perform close readings of LGBT literature for young people. Simply opening up portals of recognition—allowing young people to see themselves within a text—their confusion, anxiety, or feelings of otherness will suddenly turn to feelings of peace and comfort, is complicated throughout this project. I argue that knowledge as a concept is incredibly difficult, as Pitt and Britzman argue, and that by acknowledging this, and by recognizing the complexities of recognition, a new queer(er) theory of reading will allow for more nuanced and complex transactions between reader and text that is not inherently a simplistic information exchange. In terms of queer or LGBT issues within young adult literature, the process of recognition is already complicated by a binary system of gender recognition that problematizes both gender and sexual identity, especially where trans or genderqueer individuals are concerned, since the binary gender system does not allow for a sense of recognition, and even if a recognition of otherness is achieved in reading, then one merely comes to recognize a marginal place within a society—I am speaking of North American society here—that praises the extreme poles of a gender spectrum and which is structured on a system of identity-based equality/inequality. Before I get too far into the suggestion that there needs to be a greater queering and complication of the reader-response criticism and the transactional reading process, it would be beneficial to more fully explore and question the basic theoretical components that are behind the movement.

As discussed to some degree earlier, there is a reliance by authors of trans-themed novels on what is referred to as a “wrong-body narrative.” This narrative assumes that transgender individuals were/are born into a body that exhibits sex characteristics that do not adhere to the gender identity that the individual adheres to psychologically. This narrative arc, whether fictional or real, assumes that medical intervention is required in order ensure that the mind and body become aligned (i.e. primary and secondary sex characteristics match the gender identity of the individual in question.) Of course, this assumption about gender and sexual alignment works from social assumptions of gender and expression which I have discussed in the previous section of this chapter. In his article “Where did we go wrong?” (2006), Stephen Whittle supports this idea, noting that “females do not become men or males become women: they become pastiches, surgical constructions of imaginary masculinities or femininities” (199). Any attempt to suggest that gender and sex characteristics as understood by the medical community can ever truly align is problematic:

In effect, [...] it reinscribes the trans-body as the body of a poor unfortunate victim whose suffering can (hopefully) be eliminated once-and-for-all in and through surgical intervention. Sex-reassignment surgery, like cosmetic surgery, will, according to this way of thinking, enable the displaced person to finally feel at home in his/her body, to become whole. Of course, there are all sorts of problems with this paradigm, not least of all the question of the (im)possibility of such an ideal form of embodied being. (Sullivan 555)

Sullivan is not alone in this understanding of surgical intervention and its (im)possibilities. Similar thoughts are shared by trans theorists such as Susan Stryker, Sandy Stone, and Nan Boyd. And although the majority of trans YA fiction does not engage in the nuances of embodiment, there are some which trouble any idea of simplicity around the topic of body modification and medicalization of bodies.

In the introduction to Chapter Three I noted a number of texts that attempt to move in a direction that is different from the wrong-body narrative approach to exploring transgender experiences, but even these come with their own forms of baggage relating to medical interventions. For example, in Sara Farizan’s *If You Could Be Mine* (briefly

discussed in Chapter Three), the two main characters self-identify as lesbians, which puts them in danger of execution under the law. Nasrin's family has arranged for her to marry a doctor, but Sahar wants to be able to have a relationship with Nasrin, openly and without fear. In order to achieve this, Sahar looks to the possibility of sex reassignment surgery, in which case they would be in a heterosexual relationship. Although she does not end up going through with any surgery, and Nasrin ends up marrying the man her parents chose for her, much of the novel focuses on the relational conflict between the two girls, along with Sahar's desperate attempts to keep them together, no matter the cost. According to Farizan, and within the context of the novel, homosexuality is considered to be abhorrent but a man trapped in a woman's body would be considered nature's mistake of heterosexuality.¹⁵ Whittle's own research addresses this way of thinking, commenting that subtleties around sexuality were actually lost through the evolution of thought on transgenderism: "Sexuality was lost as it was constructed for them in the form of repressed homosexuality being appeased through reassignment surgery, or heterosexuality (in their new sex-role) was imposed on them by the medical profession..." (199). In many ways, this way of thinking only serves to reinforce the notion that sexuality and gender—gender expression in particular—are somehow intrinsically linked. This is not necessarily problematic, however, as David Valentine argues in *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category*. Valentine critiques the dogmatic notion that gender and sexuality must be treated as exclusive categories and focuses instead on attempting to understand individual identities outside of the dominant discourse of transgender categorization within scholarly and theoretical circles. Within my own research project, I am not attempting to normalize a mutually exclusive understanding of gender and sexuality, but am rather interested in how readers use certain cues in terms of gender expression and gendered behaviours to make assumptions about gender and sexual identity. These types of cues are what allow scholars and readers to

¹⁵ For more information on this topic and a more thorough discussion of the problematic notions of imposing Western ideas of gender and sexuality on Iranian culture, see Afsaneh Hajmabadi's *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran* (2014).

read books in queer ways and to engage with texts in ways that resist hetero- or homonormative expectations.

Farizan's novel is one that takes place in an Iranian context where gender reassignment is sometimes considered a corrective option for homosexuality, though not officially or legally (Najmabadi, 2013). This is not to say that homosexuality is seen as correctable through surgical means, but rather that within the novel, the individual in question considers the implications of becoming certified as a transsexual in order to gain access to surgical options.¹⁶ Najmabadi (2013) in *Professing Selves*, speaks to the North American misunderstandings of the role of reassignment surgery in an Iranian context:

At their best, the readings of transsexuality in Iran as legal and on the rise *because* of the impossibility of homosexuality, or—even more severely—as a government-sanctioned project with the aim of eliminating homosexuality, work with a reductive Foucauldian concept of “the techniques of domination” in which subjectivity is constituted by governmental designs and hegemonic power. (2)

On a related note, Whittle reminds us that similar thinking about trans history exists/existed within North America: “[Trans people] have been hampered by social and legal restrictions which have made it very difficult publicly to come out as transgendered, and which further add another aspect of self interest to any work they might do on gender issues” (199). In light of this discussion, the “typical” wrong-body narrative discussed above—if a “typical” narrative can be said to exist—is the one most evident in young adult literature with transgender protagonists and related themes. Those who identify as trans, intersex, genderqueer, or as otherwise apart from socially “normative” gender identities, must struggle against social structures of recognition based on physical attributes that don't necessarily fit with an internalized gender identification. This

¹⁶ Afsaneh Najmabadi, in *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran* (2013), provides a full history of transsexuality in Iran, emphasizing the complications that exist between what is considered to be true transsexuality and what is considered deviant homosexuality. Gender reassignment surgery is considered acceptable in the case of those who are transsexual, but those who are homosexual and wish to undergo reassignment surgery, there are serious consequences if caught. This is a complex history, and one that Farizan engages with through her novel in a much more thorough way than I have been able to here.

struggle relates back to the idea of recognition as a structure for constructing and normalizing certain identities on a personal and larger social level. The assumed norms that people are expected to adhere to become oppressive, discriminatory, and alienating when opposed through non-normative identity categories.

Let us, for a moment, look to an example of a fictional account of gender fluidity that both acknowledges the extreme difficulties of recognition and also works to struggle against those social norms of a binary gender system. In *Every Day*, David Levithan's novel for young adult readers (ages 13-18, approximately), a character named simply "A" is subject to a terribly disconcerting state of affairs: A wakes up in a different body every single day—one day a girl, one day a boy, one day trans, one day gay, one day bisexual, one day a jock, and so on. "Every day I am someone else. I am myself—I know I am myself—but I am also someone else" (1). A wakes up one morning in the body of a young man, and while taking the boy's girlfriend out, A falls in love and his/her/their life becomes more complicated than ever expected. In the extreme example of A, we see this struggle against gender polarity compressed into a brief narrative explanation for the reader: "Immediately I have to figure out who I am. It's not just the body—opening my eyes and discovering whether the skin on my arm is light or dark, whether my hair is long or short, whether I'm fat or thin, boy or girl, scarred or smooth. The body is the easiest thing to adjust to.... It's the life, the context of the body, that can be hard to grasp" (1). Levithan's development of A as a character relies on social context—how A appears and relates to others on a daily basis—in order to construct a fully formed identity on any given day. The body, the physical self is understandable to A, but the context of that self—the relationships, the sexuality, the *otherness*—is based on interactions with others throughout the text. Recognition through self-analysis every morning in the mirror and through recognition in a larger social context—in the context of school, especially—allows A to both fully understand themselves and also causes anxiety and emotional trauma, depending on the day, the body, and the self-identification.

In this scenario, when reading a book such as *Every Day*, it is necessary to understand recognition and "difficult knowledge" (Britzman) in order to see that

transactional reading can be incredibly rich and nuanced in its approach to the reading process, but only if this complexity is acknowledged and understood to be a part of the transaction. Recognizing oneself within a text—recognizing at least a portion of one’s lived experience or one’s struggles with identity categorization—is all well and good, but understanding that this recognition is not a be-all and end-all to the difficulties in social recognition of non-binary gender identities is a crucial component of participating in a difficult knowledge transaction. Markell writes:

the distinctive injustice of misrecognition involves the failure to extend to people the respect or esteem they deserve in virtue of who they really are. This conception of injustice lends itself especially well to analogies to the maldistribution of wealth; hence, recognition theorists sometimes, though not always, write as though misrecognition were a matter of systematically failing to give some people a good—“recognition”—to which they are entitled. (18)

What is a trans young person to think in regards to recognition, when recognition will only lead to greater discrimination from government agencies, healthcare institutions, and education institutions? Recognition can be comforting—being recognized as part of a group, knowing one is not alone, can be incredibly reassuring. That being said, recognition can also be frightening, even alienating. Being recognized as *other* outside of a male/female binary can lead to misunderstanding, discrimination, violence, and other unjust consequences. And at the same time if a persona identifies outside of that binary, as genderqueer or non-binary, this can lead to discomfort at being misrecognized, as being seen as male or female when not identifying as either, and can also lead to discrimination and violence.

There are possibilities for seeing recognition of oneself within a text as a form of relief and peace, knowing that one is not alone, but at the same time recognition can be a detriment in terms of the conceptualization of the self in relation to characters within fiction. When characters within a fictional narrative struggle with access to government or healthcare institutions and agencies because of a non-recognizable identity, in a political sense, the book can be read in such a way as to cause feelings of frustration at one’s own disrupted living experience in reality, from living outside of the binary gender

system. An example of a novel in which this occurs is Cris Beam's *I Am J* (2011), in which a character known as J discovers how difficult it is to gain access to transitional technologies and medical aid that will allow for a physical transformation from girlhood to boyhood. This is due to misrecognition and a North American culture that relies on identity for institutional recognition, which makes it incredibly difficult to be recognized equally in any formal way if birth sex does not match lived or self-identified gender.

J's sexuality is not touched on to a great extent, though it is a "normalized" sexuality in that he is attracted to a girl and wants to get married; however, the gender identity is at the heart of the story, and because of his marginalized position within the imagined—and one could argue, very realistic—society in which he lives, he is left to the mercy of those policies of recognition that are both comforting and destructive. J must still rely on his parents recognizing him in order to get consent to take testosterone, but in being recognized as trans, and in order to be recognized as desiring/needing surgery for body modification, J must also be recognized, psychologically, as suffering from gender identity disorder, meaning that recognition as trans means being recognized as suffering from a disorder of the mind. In the context of this *I Am J*, then, the politics of recognition both serve to reassure readers of the existence of others like them, but also to show the inherent paradox of being recognized as a non-gender-normative individual. The knowledge that can possibly be read in this novel is complex and difficult, and only with the understanding of difficult knowledge can we hope to be able to analyze even a small possibility of the knowledge that a reader might take from the text.

Though the previous chapter is primarily focused on possible theoretical readings of *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children*, the examples above prove that the body of trans themed books for young adults is expanding and slowly evolving. That being said, the question still remains: what are actual transgender youth reading and how can their reading habits inform the ways in which educators and researchers understand the role of trans themed YA literature? The interviews with queer and trans teens that I conducted revealed that the participants read a wide variety of literature, not much of which was the contemporary realistic trans and queer literature I had assumed. All but one of the

participants had not read *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (2012), and as a number were diagnosed with a learning disability or were unable to read particularly well or quickly, there was a general unwillingness to read an entire novel just for the purpose of the interviews. Two individuals had indicated that they would be willing to read the primary text and do a follow-up interview, but upon being contacted for such a follow-up, no response was received and so I will be working within the confines of the information gleaned after the first round of interviews.

Initially, I spent some time looking into other possibilities, such as having participants read just one chapter of the novel, but without the context of the entire narrative frame, there would likely be more confusion than anything, leading to incorrect assumptions and possibly frustration at what was being read in the single chapter. I chose, then, to read two specific passages aloud to each interviewee after giving some context, and then hearing about how the description of a singular fictional trans experience related to what the teens in my study actually experienced or knew about from peers.

4.1. What and How Are Queer/Trans Youth Reading

In Chapter Three, I examined a number of possible theoretical approaches to reading books, from a more academic and analytical perspective; however, this type of analysis of a text is one that assumes the literature will be consumed by a specific audience of readers. In this chapter, I approach the idea of reading and readership as indicative not simply of what my research participants are reading, but also as indicative of a different primary target reading audience that more scholarly textual analyses may not, in fact, take into account. If one assumes that a trans text is being written *for* trans youth, then one would read the representations of transness as being recognized by the trans reader in terms of authenticity, thus judging some of the writing style as overly didactic or pedagogical in tone. In this case, however, I believe that the novels I have been discussing throughout this project are being didactic and pedagogical for a very specific purpose, namely to educate, informally, through the medium of contemporary

realistic fiction. In order to show this, I will be examining a few theories of reading on a broad scale, as well as noting more specifically—through analysis of the interviews I conducted—how queer and trans teen reading practices can actually inform scholars of young adult literature of a more pedagogical purpose for trans YA/contemporary realism as it currently stands.

For this portion of the chapter, I analyzed the interview transcripts using the following three questions/categories:

1. What types of books are each of the interviewees normally reading, and what do they gravitate toward? How do these choices relate to my primary text(s)?
2. How do the interviewees find books and are they able to easily find books with LGBT/Queer content? Are there barriers to accessing the texts?
3. How are the interviewees reading texts, either in general or specifically books with LGBT/Queer content, and how do they see the representations of trans and genderqueer characters in terms of accuracy and authenticity? Do they recognize themselves within these examples and how do their own experiences with (mis)recognition inform their readings?
4. What are these teens wanting to see in future published queer YA novels?

4.1.1. Books and Reading

As any researcher working with qualitative interviews knows, no matter how well thought out the questions may be, the answers received rarely end up being the answers which were expected. As a researcher and academic focused primarily on young adult fiction my hope was that teen interview participants would have had more experience with a range of genres. Upon completion of the interviews, however, I noticed that in fact the primary genre being read by the interview participants was fantasy and magical realism—often in the form of online narratives, including fan fiction—followed by non-fiction, crime thrillers, sci-fi, fanfiction, and contemporary realism. Though my sample size for this study is small, my findings are corroborated by the results of a recent questionnaire that was handed out by Helen Wilding-Cook and Amanda Wilk, working in

conjunction with Library Bound.¹⁷ The findings were presented at the Ontario Library Association Superconference in Toronto, Ontario in January of 2016 (Bittner, Fry, and Wilk). The following two graphs (Figures 4.1 and 4.2) show the self-identification of the 35 respondents, as well as the favourite genres of books that they read. As with my own interviews, the most popular singular genre read by the respondents of the other survey is fantasy.

In terms of more specific responses to my first question, participants attempted to articulate the genres and books that they found to be the most appealing. Candy, for example, noted that she enjoys books “that involve magic. Ones that have mythical gods or goddesses.” Even more specifically, Candy noted a few specific titles: “I don’t know what category you’d put them in—*Rainbow High*, *Rainbow Road*, *Rainbow Boys*.... The person that wrote *Harry Potter*,” and “[a]s twelve-year-old fangirl as this sounds, I like the persona who wrote *Twilight*.” Similarly, Alex noted that he reads “a lot of magical books, like *Harry Potter*. I read a lot of ... books that have, like, police in them” and “also the *Lorien* series [by Pittacus Lore].” Daniel also noted, “I like fantasy, personally.” Kalai was not particularly set on any genre: “I’ll read anything. I’m not picky.” And Tyler, though slightly less committed to any mainstream genre, admitted “I guess [I read] fantasy,” but “[my] reading is mostly online. Online stories and stuff.” Kalai also confirmed an interest in online stories and fanfiction blogs.

¹⁷ Library Bound Inc. provides solutions to Canadian library needs. Specializing in print, video, music, audio books, and multilingual products, Library Bound has the materials to create a collection that your patrons will enjoy. They are a provider of services and shelf-ready materials, including acquisitions, cataloguing, and processing services.

Figure 4.1 Gender Identity

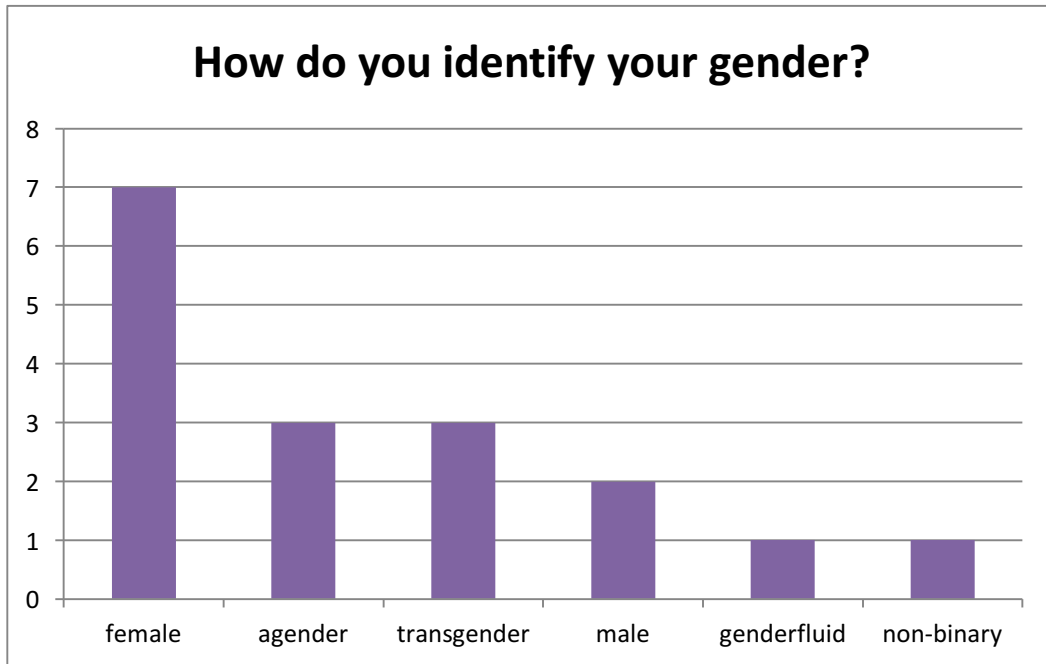
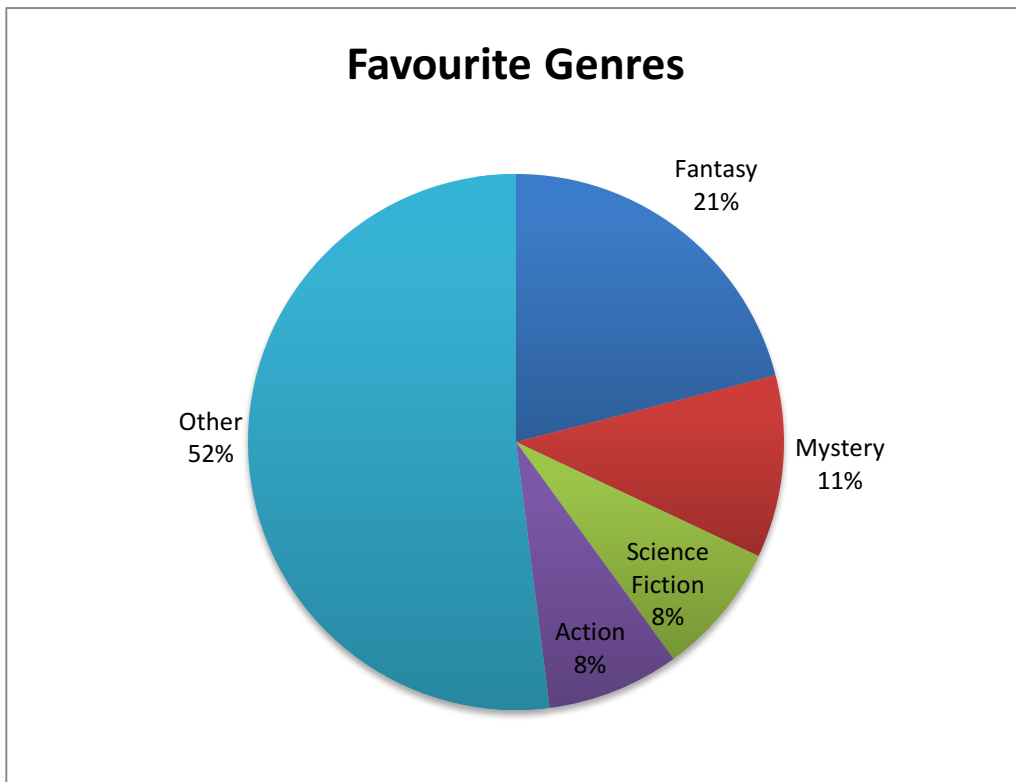


Figure 4.2 Favourite Genres



I was glad to see that although fantasy was the main attraction for the majority of my interviewees, there were a few who leaned toward LGBT/Queer themes specifically, whether in fiction or non-fiction. Both Kalai and Daniel were interested in non-fiction, though when asked for specific titles, neither could recall any off hand, with the exception of *Unbearable Lightness* (2010)—Portia de Rossi’s memoir—which Kalai had read. Daniel noted that he found a book on sale once, which contained “a bunch of LGBTQ coming out stories all mixed together.” Alex, who appears to be the most widely read of the research participants where fiction is concerned, was the only individual who had read multiple young adult novels with trans protagonists, including *Parrotfish* (2007), *I Am J* (2011), *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (2012), and *Happy Families* (2012). Alex also pointed out a number of gay and lesbian titles that he had read over the last few years. Of course, there are a number of accessibility factors that are likely involved in Alex’s reading habits and choice of books, which I will discuss in more detail in the following section.

4.1.2. Access and Gatekeeping (Librarian Interviews)

What I am trying to better understand throughout this project is how trans and queer youth—at least in a few case studies—access and read literature. In order to get a clearer idea of the processes of gatekeeping and dissemination of YA literature, I first interviewed librarians who work in various library fields. I asked them questions pertaining to the organization of books within physical library spaces, and I also inquired about cataloguing information, staff training on LGBT/Queer issues, and how trans and queer literature is promoted or made more visible within physical library spaces and within youth programming. The answers that each of the librarians provided allowed me to better understand how and why certain genres and titles were more commonly known and found by youth participants in future interviews.

Earlier on, I discussed what literature my study participants were drawn to, but in this section, I examine what these particular trans and queer teens think about books with transgender protagonists. I asked each of the research participants questions regarding

what they think about representations of transness in general within literature. I later read them specific quotations from *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children*, asking for responses to Gabe's internalized fears and thoughts on being transgender, including the related transphobia and fear from cisgender individuals in his life. Finally, I asked each of the participants what their thoughts are on the amount of attention paid to medicalization of the transgender experience within the majority of books about trans youth. As noted earlier, I came to a place of realization that many of these answers, while indicative of a lack of engagement with trans YA for the most part by the research participants, also revealed a core purpose of trans YA texts as sites of informal education for a cisgender audience.¹⁸ First, however, I begin with a discussion around issues of gatekeeping and access to literature for young adults.

Asking each teen participant about favourite genres and authors does not at first seem very complex; however, when taking reading history, reading ability, and access to materials into consideration, it is possible to see why exposure to contemporary realistic fiction with LGBT/Queer content may be an issue for trans youth. There is, first of all, the subject of gatekeeping, which while not always a popular term in education and library sciences circles, is integral to understanding how and why some teens are unable to find certain literature, depending on their specific communities, educational institutions, library collections, and other related services. Teens living in lower class neighbourhoods will be less likely to have access to library collections that contain a large variety of texts, especially those with queer and trans subjects, and they are very unlikely to encounter such texts in a classroom setting. Those in more conservative communities will likely have similar difficulty in accessing well-rounded collections—whether library branch or school library—containing positive depictions of queer and trans experiences. And although it may seem obvious, access to texts in which young

¹⁸ Although cisgender readers are of some interest and are a necessary component of discussion of possibilities for using trans YA texts in various contexts, the primary purpose of this research is to examine trans/queer reading habits and the texts that are seemingly being published and marketed to them.

people can recognize themselves is essential to the notion of recognition—both of the self and the fictional other—and transactional reading practices.

Both Candy and Tyler are students at the North Surrey Learning Centre, a centre that caters to those students who are unable or unwilling to complete graduation requirements within the regular educational system. Because the Learning Centre is not affiliated with any particular school, leasing rooms from other educational institutions, students are not always able to utilize library or classroom resources available to other students who are part of the normal education system. Tyler notes: “we’re not allowed to use our school library, because we’re not part of our school. Because I’m in a special classroom.” The less progressive nature of the community in which Tyler and Candy reside is evident as well. Tyler recounted a time when he ended up leaving school for a month: “[M]y teacher told me that the only way I was going to end up being able to use the bathroom of my choice was by having a meeting with the school principal.... I still have to get a note to actually use the bathroom.” In this type of environment, it is not much of a stretch to understand that access to LGBT/Queer resources would be more difficult. Both Candy and Tyler found that they could access some sources through the Surrey Public Library system, though neither remembered seeing any specific displays or noticing LGBT/Queer books being made more visible at any point during visits. Daniel recalls, “I haven’t seen anything [LGBT/Queer books] on display before. I think they should probably have more stuff like that on display so people know it’s there. I usually just go to the computer and type in what I’m looking for and then go and look for it.” When I asked my informants specifically where they find recommendations for books and fiction, Tyler noted that he doesn’t get many suggestions “I guess I just look for my own books.” Candy, meanwhile, receives guidance from “teachers, friends, [and] random people on the street.” Neither of them utilize library catalogues, reading lists—online or otherwise—or book review sources.

Kalai and Daniel are from a smaller community, Duncan, on Vancouver Island. They have more access to resources, however, as they are part of a queer youth group that is often hosted by the local library. Since there is a connection between the library staff

and the youth group leader, the gatekeeping aspect is less stifling than the situation for Candy and Tyler. In fact, Kalai is a volunteer at the library so she says she has first dibs on a lot of the new books. Daniel is slightly less proactive in searching for resources, but still browses the shelves and sometimes receives suggestions from the youth group leader or other library staff. There was even a Pride display in the library one year, which allowed Daniel to be exposed to books he likely would not have considered previously.

Alex lives in Coquitlam, which is a more affluent community, and has access to a very well-rounded library collection both from the public library as well as his school library. His school library also links to various reading lists and hosts a summer reading club. “I was doing a reading club at [school], and they have a website, and they have all the different books, and there’s a section called ‘LGBT’ and I just ordered a bunch of books from that.” Resources, for Alex, are not only easier to access, but are made more visible through the school library and through the public library, and the very existence of these reading lists and the reading club emphasizes the proactive approach of individuals in the community to address issues of diversity and access to a variety of resources. Alex is also the only individual whose school actively makes a point of including LGBT/Queer resources online and in the library.

Alex is the only research participant living in a higher than average income community, he is also the only one with access to a wide variety of literature, and he is the only one who found that literature actually helped him through his decision to come out as trans to family and friends. The fact that Alex was able to recognize his experience to some degree within the pages of the books that he was reading, and to then identify enough that he felt comfortable coming out to others after reading books in which he was able to find his own experience, is telling of the power of positive recognition. Recognition, after all, can only occur if literature with possibly recognizable characters exists and is made available to young readers.

In order to better examine access to materials and those involved in making queer and trans literature available to younger readers, I conducted interviews with three

librarians from the Fraser Valley Regional Library system (FVRL) and the Vancouver Public Library system (VPL), involved in youth services and/or materials acquisitions: Gillian McLeod (Library Director, FVRL), Frances Thomson (Youth Services Selector, FVRL), and Jennifer Lee (Teen Services Librarian, VPL). Interviewing these librarians allowed me to see examples of how library services can benefit access to materials for queer and trans youth in various social situations. First and foremost, librarians need to understand what is at stake for marginalized groups. Gillian McLeod has taken initiative within the Fraser Valley and surrounding areas to ensure that her staff and administration are exposed to training on queer subjects:

Gillian: I organized, for all the staff, four training sessions under the guise of positive language, creating positive spaces, language based training on queer issue, and of course that gets you into everything else. And then for one specific session, I expanded it for our administrators and our facilities people, on all the conversations about facilities.

I have done workshops on queer language, on what it is to be queer in Delta in that age group. I'm on the committee because of my role as a librarian—as the library manager—here. I have a specialty in the area and that's why I'm being used that way.

McLeod works closely with Frances Thomson, the Youth Services Selector for the Fraser Valley Regional Library System. Between the two of them, the number of queer and trans themed books for teen readers has increased in the library collection over the last few years. This is, of course, not only due to diligence on their half, but also because of the increasing visibility of queer book awards and the work of queer and trans teens who take part in advisory groups and youth groups which have partnered with VPL and FVRL. Jennifer Lee works with a number of youth groups one in particular which she noted in the interview, provides her with suggestions for books to acquire: “one of the youth groups I work with is the GAB youth group,¹⁹ which is part of Qmunity, downtown

¹⁹ “Gab Youth Services at The Centre provides information, referral, advocacy, and support to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, two-spirited, intersex, queer and questioning youth, 25 years of age and under and to their friends, families and allies” (*Options for Sexual Health*).

[Vancouver]. We have monthly movie nights.” Book awards, review journals, and other outside sources are also taken into account when looking for teen resource acquisitions:

Gillian: I think that’s my role at FVRL is to pay attention to the book awards, pay attention to things in my area, in queer knowledge, and then passing those on.

Frances: [J]ournals recently have feature columns even, on LGBT material, both new and the classics. I always look through and see what we already have. I’m always ordering new stuff.

But once books are acquired, such resources still need to be made visible to young readers. In some cases, this means booklists—VPL, for instance, provides its “Presented with Pride” pamphlet each summer during Pride month—and in others it means sheer numbers, and in yet others, it means visibility through displays of various kinds, whether during Pride month or at other times throughout the year. McLeod notes that she has been an advocate for more displays of different types throughout the 26 branches of the Fraser Valley Library system:

In my three libraries ... I ask for the Pride [displays]. They came about because of me. And displays, more so now, you know, of their own accord. I mean, other than the Pride display. There was a cool one in Tsawwassen—we have some very cool, young staff, at [that] library who are always doing fairly unique ones—and they did a display on the colour pink. The one side of it was breast cancer books and the other side was queer history in Canada. It was great!

Thomson notes in a follow-up email, that she agrees with the need for more displays of queer and trans books for young readers in order “for readers to browse and/or discover by themselves.”

While it may seem initially obvious that visibility of books for teens within libraries and classrooms²⁰ is an integral part of making queer and trans texts obvious for young readers, it takes conscious effort and work on the part of educators and librarians to make these materials both accessible and available for teens. Of course, budgets and

²⁰ Unfortunately, I was not able to obtain ethics approval for work with school teachers or classroom related staff in public school settings in order to find out more about choices of books for curriculum use.

staff are necessary in order for all of these methods to culminate in a well-curated collection for teen readers, and as noted earlier, not all of my teen research participants were able to access such developed collections.

4.1.3. Trans Representation (Youth Interviews)

In interviewing teen readers for this project, I was curious to see whether or not they saw the current body of literature as representing a breadth of trans and genderqueer identities. Candy, noted, “I feel that [the books...] don’t show the wide spectrum. They tend to go, like, if you’re MTF or FTM they tend to go with the stereotypes of being feminine or masculine. They don’t actually show the wide spectrum between that, which I tend to find very depressing.” Candy’s answer is telling in that she immediately focuses on what a number of recent discussions about trans YA within library and scholarly communities have been focusing on, namely a continued reliance on binary gender, even when the subject of transness is the focus of a given narrative. With the exception of a few novels released in the last five years—*Brooklyn, Burning* (2011), *Every Day* (2012), *Lizard Radio* (2015), *Symptoms of Being Human* (2016), and a few others—the majority of trans YA novels still rely heavily on a transition *from* one specific gender (male/female) *to* another. There is little page space relegated to characters who identity at any point outside of or in between male and female. Although Candy is not familiar with a wide range of YA novels with transgender themes, the fact that the only ones she does know about rely on this transition narrative reveals a larger social misunderstanding of what it means to be trans, and how to represent that in mainstream depictions of trans youth experiences. Candy is therefore unable to recognize herself within the depictions of transness presented in the body of YA literature available at the time of the interview.

Another component of this is the often overly didactic depictions of such transitions, which can be alienating for young readers who would rather have a good story, with the trans identity being secondary. Tyler, for example, explains: “Well, every time I look for transgender books, it’s always explaining what it means. I want an actual story, not what it is. I know what it is. I want an actual story about a person doing this or

that. I already know the explanation and what everything is.” The overly explanatory nature of many of these titles alienates trans readers, explaining to them what they already know and sometimes not very well, especially considering the previously noted assumption of physical transition that dominates the sub-genre. The recognition of what is already a daily experience is at once intelligible and glaringly overstated for some trans readers. Of course, this was not the case for all of my research participants, most notably Alex:

Well, the book *I Am J*, I liked that one a lot because it really, like, it like hit the, um... The way he was living his life, a lot of things matched up for me, and like helped me understand who I was better. I read that book when I was trying to figure it out. Like, I was pretty sure I was trans, but I wasn't totally sure and that book really helped.

In other words, if an individual is unsure of their own identity, the informal educational element of some trans YA narratives may actually be of help. This is not entirely surprising as every book reaches individuals differently; however, Alex was the only research participant to conclude that one of these texts was informative and helpful in a very real way, rather than didactic and annoying, as Tyler expressed.

But while didacticism is one element noted by my interviewees, another issue with many trans YA novels is the use of stereotypes and adherence to heteronormative “rules” within societies depicted in the novels. Candy notes: “A lot of the books I’ve read, they’re pretty much just stereotypical, but there are some books that I’ve read where it’s like, it is a straight man but he acts more feminine, looks more feminine. It’s like they don’t always fit the gender [binary], but they’re still in the heterosexual world.” And of course, this world is not simply heteronormative, but often transphobic, homophobic, and unsafe. In a follow-up with Candy, about the heterosexual world that he mentions, I turned more toward the idea of realism and what role it has in contemporary realistic fiction:

Rob: In order to make the books realistic the authors tend to put in that hate crime scene or bullying scene, and I wonder, can we avoid that? Unless, do you think

it's important that there are those kinds of things in books? Does it make it more realistic?

Candy: I think that there should be books with that so it can show that people still struggle with that. But not to put it in every single one, because we also need to show that there are positives—yeah there's a lot of negatives, but we also have to make it so that people can realize that it's not *all* negative if you are trans.... [I]t's just really depressing when, every time I read about a trans person, they usually die. Or something really bad happens to them.

What Candy mentions about really bad things happening to trans characters is symptomatic of earlier YA focusing on LGBT/Queer identities. In the 1980s and 90s, the introduction of gay and lesbian characters into YA novels most often meant death, disease, or general unhappiness for the queer identified character. The same has happened with trans YA fiction.

Although more recent novels have become more nuanced and complex in their depictions of trans experiences, many of them still contain elements of violence, bullying, and traumatic experiences. In chapter three I noted this element specifically in relation to *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* in terms of the death threats that Gabe received, and the threats of physical violence while walking around town. There is also the inclusion, in almost all trans YA that I have encountered, of transphobic slurs, which are realistic of course, but are not much appreciated as a “tool” by trans youth readers.

Rob: Are there terms that you think shouldn't be used when writing books about [trans subjects]?

Candy: Tranny, he-she, it... I hate that one. Oh, and hermaphrodite as well.

Tyler: I hate the word tranny. I don't know why, I just hate that word.

Daniel: Tranny. That words makes me really anxious, when I hear people say it.

If the slurs are being used for the sake of realism, but are actually causing trauma to trans readers, then why are they so often included? Or is this a symptom of the activist language merry-go-round that Julia Serano speaks about, and the elimination of words leading to an assumption of negativity and phobia? She writes:

When activists say ‘don’t use the word tranny,’ or ‘it’s transgender, not transgendered,’ that is an explicit word-elimination campaign, one that directly states that the word in question (e.g., tranny, transgendered) is bad and should not be used. (“Regarding Trans*” n.p.)

Transition narratives containing experiences of violence are very telling of both the (stereotypical) knowledge of many cisgender authors and the likelihood of a different primary readership than may be at first assumed (i.e., likely not a trans youth readership). These novels read more as educational sources on the lived experiences of a “typical” trans teen, likely for a cisgender readership, but what they fail to take into account is the existence of trans youth who do not identify within a gender binary, or who do not explicitly transition, or who have not experienced physical and emotional violence as a part of their lived experience. In effect, at least where my own research participants are concerned, the reliance on these didactic elements leads more to an avoidance of the texts than a draw towards them. The recognition of similarities or differences between the texts and their own lives led some readers to feel uncomfortable with the stereotypical and overly recognizable components of the text, especially around feelings of alienation and discrimination from peers and educational and political institutions. Much of the critical work, at least within reviews of YA literature in various review publications, notes various stereotypical components or discriminatory language and actions as being a regular part of realism as a genre.

Beautiful Music for Ugly Children

As I discussed earlier, the expectation that I had in terms of research participants having read the primary text was quickly dismantled, and so instead of assigning them readings or asking them to do reading “homework,” I chose to read them two specific quotations from *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children*. The first of these features Gabe introducing himself to the reader and giving a quick rundown on how he sees himself and his trans identity:

My birth name is Elizabeth, but I’m a guy. Gabe. My parents think I’ve gone crazy, and the rest of the world is happy to agree with them, but I know I’m right. I’ve been a boy my whole life. I wish I’d been born a vampire or a werewolf

instead, or with a big red clown nose permanently stuck to my face, because that stuff would be easy. Having a brain that doesn't agree with your body is a much bigger pain in the ass. (Cronn-Mills 8)

The wrong-body narrative, as discussed in chapter three, is problematic and overly simplified, at least from a more scholarly perspective. But I was curious as to the reactions from trans and queer teen readers and whether or not they found any issues with such a representation.

Candy: I do think it rings true to a point. Maybe for that person's point of view it's 100% true, but for some people, having their mind say that they're brain is not 100% accurate with their body, some people don't really mind that. Like, me, I know that I should have been born a woman, but I don't struggle with being like, Oh, my body doesn't fit. I'm just like, Eh. Call me by feminine pronouns, preferably... Don't look at me as a man. And then I'm perfectly fine.

Tyler had a similar response, noting that he actually agrees with the wrong-body narrative style and also the struggle itself: "For me, personally, I would probably say something really similar to that, because it is a pain in the ass. There's so much to go through, and it's such a long process. And it takes way too long for a lot of stuff to happen. So yeah, I'd probably say something like that." Furthermore, Daniel notes, "I know [that struggle] goes through a lot of people's minds.... [B]ecause they're having a hard time, because they're not being recognized for who they really are." In this particular situation, then, it seems that the wrong-body narrative is actually less problematic to trans/queer readers—at least those I interviewed—than a more scholarly and theoretical focus might assume.

The second quote that I read to my research participants spoke more to peer reactions, or at least the reactions that Gabe fears, if it was discovered that he is trans:

I'm not sure why guys are meaner to me than girls are—they don't even know about Gabe, and it's not like I'm stealing their girlfriends. Maybe on some subconscious level they know we share a label. And if *I'm* a guy, maybe they think it makes them *less* of a guy. Honestly, there's a part of me that's sad to join them. If testosterone shots turn me into an asshole, I'm gonna be pissed. (25)

Most of the respondents agreed that guys are much more sensitive and likely to become insecure about their own masculinity in such a situation. Some also agreed about worries related to hormone therapy. Tyler, however, disagrees with this thought process:

I don't think most guys would be offended by finding that out, or anything like that. I don't really know how to explain that... I don't really think it should be in stories because it's not really true. Most of the guys I hang out with, they don't really care. I have my friends, and then I'm best friends with their girlfriends or boyfriends. They don't care.

While engaging in discussion with Daniel and Kalai, Daniel noted he could identify with the fear of coming out as trans, and so chose to come out more gradually. I asked if he went through something more like Grady's experience in *Parrotfish*:

I acted like *myself*. But everybody wanted me to fit into a category, so I let them call me a tomboy, thought I knew that only girls were tomboys, and I was not a girl. By high school I said I was a lesbian, because it seemed closer to the truth than giving everyone hope that someday I'd turn into a regular hairdo-and-high-heels female. I was just getting us all ready for the truth. I was crawling toward the truth on my hands and knees. (Wittlinger 9)

I asked Daniel if that was more similar to his own experience and he concurred, noting, "That definitely happened with me, as a sort of stepping stone, testing the water first." The responses to these quotations confirms—at least to some extent—that not only are certain depictions that I found problematic not found to be troubling to this case study of youth readers, but that the varied nature of real life trans experiences is better reflected in subtle differences between books than I had previously considered.

Trans Youth and Medicalization

As with the wrong-body narrative that I assume is problematic from my scholarly perspective, but which seems less problematic to the teens I interviewed, I was curious about the inclusion of so much medical information within trans YA fiction. Is this information too didactic as well? Is it too alienating for trans readers who are looking for more of an escape through literature? The responses were varied on this particular subject. Daniel explains: "I think there should be books that don't exactly concentrate on

that [surgery, hormones, doctors] because there are some people who don't go for the surgery or hormones, and I don't think they should be forgotten about, or be thought of as any less trans." This, of course, speaks to the similar feelings of discomfort about trans characters almost always identifying within a gender binary as transitioning from one gender (male/female) to another. Tyler on the other hand, feels that the medical aspects need to be included:

I think they should put more of that type of stuff [medical info] in books. Because people read a lot and *they learn stuff from reading the books*, and if they don't understand, they can always look it up on the internet so they do understand more. Yeah, I think it should have more of that type of stuff out there. (emphasis added).

Candy thoroughly articulated her thoughts, addressing nearly everything that I have previously noted in terms of transition narratives, overly didactic and pedagogical content on medicalization of trans experiences, and the need for other non-binary representation:

I think it's good that they do show that [...] they do show one aspect of it, like going to the doctors, getting the shots, or doing surgery or whatever. But at the same time I find it to not fit all the categories. There are people that don't want to deal with having to talk to the doctors about it and have to go through all that. And I feel they need to show more of that aspect, like the surrounding parts of being transgendered [sic] than just automatically, 'Yes, you are transgender, you are going to go through the surgery, and you're going to become the opposite sex.' They need to show more along the lines of those who are transgender who are *not* going through surgery, but who identify as either genderqueer or some other form of gender that doesn't fit a set sex. And they need to show that not every transgender person goes through surgery.

It appears, then, that what is missing in the body of trans YA literature is an awareness and representation of transgender subjects who do *not* desire to undergo surgical procedures, hormone therapy, or to transition at all. The interviewees note that there is a social assumption that transness means transitioning, and this is mirrored in trans YA fiction for the most part, ignoring genderqueer individuals, and those who identify as non-binary.

Expectations for Trans YA Literature

As a wrap-up question, I asked research participants if they would like to see anything in particular in trans YA that might make them more likely to pick up some contemporary realistic fiction. Though I did not end up with a lot of responses, the ones I did receive were interesting. The first and most obvious, as articulated by Candy, Daniel, Kalai, and Tyler, was simply that there needs to be more; there should be more variety of identities and diverse representations. They felt that publishers should put out more books with “genderqueer, gender fluid, intersex, non-gender-specific [characters], stuff like that” (Candy). Candy also noted that he was unhappy with LGBT/Queer characters being the good guys all the time: “I find it really annoying when the only transgender—or anyone that’s not heterosexual—is always the good guy. Because they need to show that not all LGBT people are always good. There is evil within all spectrums, and I like that there are evil ones, because it’s like: ‘Yay! Some spice!’” I thought this was a very interesting perspective, considering I had previously reviewed a book—*Above* (2012) by Leah Bobet—somewhat negatively because the intersex character was the bad guy. I was concerned with the first depiction of an intersex character in YA being presented as evil, but it appears that although from a scholarly stance, this is problematic, the teen reader may not be too concerned, or at least those involved in this particular research project. Lastly, Alex suggested that there be more depictions of trans individuals in books outside of America: “Well, I kind of wish there was like [...] a trans book that was Canadian, but I haven’t seen any Canadian ones where the character’s from Canada.” Though it could be said that Raziel Reid’s *When Everything Feels Like the Movies* (2014) is trans, or at least genderqueer, there are various arguments over its classification as YA, and the setting itself is not all that Canada-specific. Recognition of one’s own experiences, then, translates not only to experience but also geography and national identity.

4.2. If not Trans Teens, Then Who?

Early in the research process, I imagined that I would be able to find at least 25 trans or queer identified teen research participants, and that these participants would be

avid readers, engaging in profound discussions within group interviews. It was to my initial disappointment that I was only able to find five individuals willing to take part in my research, and to my further chagrin, realizing that only a few of them were truly avid readers who had any notion of the primary texts that I was initially considering for this project. However, after looking more at issues of access and availability, and gatekeeping and its impacts on visibility of LGBT/Queer resources in spaces where teens might actually come across them, I began to realize that the lack of engagement with the texts that I originally assumed would be in the hands of these trans and queer teens was just as intriguing and brought up just as interesting questions as those I was considering at first. While I do discuss literature to a great degree within this dissertation, the focus is not primarily on all of the possible uses for trans YA literature, but rather on trans/queer readers and reading behaviours. And although I speculate on the ways in which trans YA novels can be seen as sources of education for cisgender readers, the primary concern for me is how this literature is being read (or not) by trans/queer readers.

Having used this chapter to expand on some the content of the interviews, I am still left with some questions about just who the actual audience of these trans YA novels is. Who are they being marketed to as opposed to who is reading them? How does this change—if at all—the various ways of reading trans texts as I explored in the previous chapter? If these books are not being read as much by trans teens themselves, at least to some degree as indicated by my small sample group, then what changes in examining the construction of trans life experience laid out within these fictional narratives? If we go back to the previous chapter and consider these novels to be a more pedagogical source of information on transitioning, coming out, engaging with medical communities, and dealing with bullying and the like, it would make sense that the sub-genre of LGBT/Queer YA is struggling to find subtle and nuanced stories of genderqueer or non-binary individuals, since the educational component—for cisgender readers, at least—is of primary concern.

It should be noted that at least current publishing trends are moving away from the “acceptance” narrative, which constructs the text entirely around a cisgender

protagonist or at least emphasizes a learning experience for a cisgender character who is central to the plot. According to Vee, one of the creators of the LGBT/Queer literature resource website *GayYA*, the “acceptance” narrative follows a very specific storyline. The cisgender character meets someone who is trans, but a transphobic attitude causes them to react irrationally to the discovery. Even though the cisgender character is now uncomfortable, he or she is somehow thrown repeatedly into situations with the trans character. In these situations he or she repeatedly harms the trans character emotionally or physically, feeling somewhat bad about the things he or she has done. Then, as with so many problem novels, something terrible happens to the *other*, in this case the trans character, and the cisgender person realizes the error of his or her ways and now realizes that being mean to trans people is wrong. There is often a bittersweet ending in which the trans character has to leave, but not before forgiving the cisgender individual (Vee n.p.).

This “acceptance” narrative basically acts as a way of teaching cisgender people not to be intolerant, but sadly by using the trans character as a tool, often taking full advantage of stereotypes and excessive violence and trauma. “The ‘acceptance’ narrative [...] positions trans people as deprived, crazy, and pitiful. It says that all cis people who can find it in themselves to not be terrible to them deserve gold stars. It says they don’t need to challenge their transphobia, because of course trans men and women aren’t real men and women” (Vee n.p.). Mostly, this style of narrative was used early on (*Luna, Almost Perfect*), and newer novels tend to feature trans characters as protagonists and as strong and complex individuals. Books like *Parrotfish*, *I Am J*, and *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* challenge these earlier “acceptance” narratives by making the trans individual the focus of the novel. That being said, the novels are not entirely without challenges as the youth responses earlier in the chapter still indicate feelings of misrecognition or problematic representations related to elements present in each of these titles. “When trans people speak about trans representation in YA, they are often told (sometimes by the author themselves) that we should be grateful for this representation, that authors are ‘allowed’ to write about anyone, or that we’re stirring up an ‘interesting debate’” (Vee n.p.). Though there are often still cisgender characters who learn from the

situations in each novel, the trans individual's experiences are at the centre of the narrative:

[B]y and large if you ask someone for a recommendation of a trans YA book [though], they'll eagerly point you toward a trans YA book that has the 'acceptance' narrative in it. I think this praise comes from the fact that for so many people this is the only book they've read with a trans character in it. They're unaware of anything else existing. As a result, these books get hyper-praised, and the narrative is (almost) never questioned. (Vee n.p.)

And as many of these narratives are written by cisgender authors and focus more on the concept of transition, it appears as though medical procedures, hormone treatments, and trauma—both physical and mental—are commonplace elements of trans teen lives.

4.2.1. Informal Education and Cisgender Readers

Within the current North American cultural climate of fear and often unwillingness to celebrate diversity in gender and sexuality in mainstream society, the young adult novel is possibly one of the best complementary sources of information related to tolerance, navigating queer life, and gender and sexual diversity, both for trans/queer teens who wish to find books they can relate to, and for non-queer/trans teens who wish to see depictions of what their peers experience in life. Young trans readers are able to see elements of themselves represented within the world of YA literature, and they are also able to see, within the novels, information that can be very valuable at a time when many adults and educators are either unable or unwilling to give more information (take Alex's response, for example, where he found *I Am J* to be helpful in his own coming out process). For cisgender readers, these books can be a revealing source of information about what trans teens face in schools and at home, in public and in private, as shown through the eyes of young trans protagonists.

Perhaps this is a reason why contemporary realism ends up being the most popular type of published trans YA text, as opposed to fantasy. Perhaps this also speaks to why the trans youths I interviewed are not as interested in reading contemporary

realism, at least to some degree. These texts act more as fictionalized textbook case studies and the very mirror that scholars actively encourage, but they are mirrors that trans youth are not necessarily interested in looking at or at least looking at too closely. But that does not mean the books have failed their readers; rather, it's that the imagined reader is not who was originally assumed. While discussing these findings with librarian Jennifer Lee during a follow-up to her original interview, Lee writes,

If an author is writing a book with a trans protagonist hoping that a trans youth will pick up the title and see themselves in it (and potentially work through some issues), it is disappointing that more trans youth aren't seeking out this type of literature. However, also really interesting is that these texts may be triggering so perhaps this is one of the reasons why trans youth are not reading them and choose instead to read fantasy, using fiction as a window as opposed to a mirror.

Similarly, in another follow-up interview, Frances Thomson writes,

It makes sense now to me that many trans YA do not read trans YA fiction because they are living it. And cisgender teens may be more likely to read it to 'learn' what it means to be trans, perhaps because they know someone who is or because they can't imagine what it would be like.

In the end, then, these librarians are not entirely concerned with whether or not trans youth are actually the primary audience of trans YA fiction, but are rather more interested in whether or not the books are visible within the library and are finding at least some sort of readership.

The texts are still important and likely useful, depending on how they are applied, and in what contexts. Suzanne Reid and Sharon Stringer, in their article "Ethical Dilemmas in Teaching Problem Novels," discuss the nature of using problem novels in classroom situations and the impact of them as sources of information and informal education:

The impact of young adult novels is strong because they tend to deal with issues that are immediately relevant to adolescents and to use a style that is so accessible that it bypasses the need for translation by the intellect into emotional imagery. For both teachers and students, this strong, immediate impact is exciting and

attractive because it is so close to the intellectual excitement we crave for our students and yet find difficult to engender. (17)

While the novels I am dealing with are not necessarily relevant as mirrors, they are strong because they deal with contemporary issues and make them accessible for cisgender readers, both young and old. The trouble with this, though, is the fact that trans characters are being used as learning opportunities, rather than being treated—at least not yet—as real people engaging in real life experiences, instead of following an assumed trajectory of coming out, experiencing hardship, and then becoming a “normal” part of a peer and familial community.

4.3. Conclusion(s)

Throughout this chapter I have discussed the concept of recognition as it relates to both theoretical understandings of reading and how teen readers see aspects of themselves within books, and also as it relates to reader-response transactions. Reader-response relies on a two-way interaction between reader and text, looking to ways in which readers both create and find meaning. By incorporating concepts of recognition into reader-response transactions, the finding of meaning and the understanding of what readers see of themselves within texts is changed; recognition, in fact, queers the ability to understand reader-response transactions. Through an analysis of misrecognition, injustice, and identity, Markell argues that,

[i]n making the *fait accompli* of identity into the criterion of due or proper recognition, this approach misunderstands the nature of identity and its relation to action. Indeed, it also tends to misrecognize recognition itself: insofar as it conceives of injustice as the unequal distribution of a good called “recognition,” it obscures the relational character of acts and practices of recognition, treating recognition as a thing of which one has more or less, rather than as a social interaction that can go well or poorly in various ways. (18)

Recognition problematizes the ability to perform a simple reading of any text, as recognition itself is an entirely problematic concept, especially as it relates to queer and non-gender-normative individuals. As Cart and Jenkins report, teens desire to see

themselves represented in literature—they wish to recognize themselves and their experiences; however, this can be interpreted as a form of difficult knowledge that is, in some ways, too complex to reflect within fictional narratives, thus troubling the efferent reading component of reader-response theory, while at the same time reinforcing Markell's deconstruction of social politics of recognition.

Using literature within the context of educational institutions in which recognition politics are clearly and firmly implemented, then, is a demanding task, asking much from teachers and readers. So while education is a site of intense recognition politics that troubles and problematizes the learning process itself, it is this very complication that allows for a greater degree of critical engagement with the ideas of recognition both within and without. The state of recognition within educational institutions is an area that Markell has noted within his work on recognition, noting that:

the state itself gives shape to “the people,” not least by establishing rules of membership, and also by actively shaping patterns of affect and identification among its members. In other words, it overlooks the work of recognition that must already have been performed if the state's claim to represent society or the people is to be plausible, much less taken for granted. (26)

Since institutional education relies heavily on recognition, especially regarding gender and sexuality, attempting to teach recognition within the field of critical reading theory is paradoxical at best. But it is also a rich experience in that it allows for a critique of the institution within which it is being taught, hopefully encouraging those being taught, and those reading, to notice and recognize the need for a rebuilding of such assumptions of recognition.

In addition to the difficulties of recognition politics, representation must be noted as an extremely difficult area of study, especially as regards to the desire for authors to “realistically” represent specific identities within their work. In terms of the reading process that is used to teach young people how to critically analyze narratives, Pitt and Britzman write: “[i]f the crisis of representation is made from the logical priority of expression over experience, psychoanalytic research adds another dimension to this

crisis, making the sum of our philosophical, pedagogical, and methodological concerns into a complex (756). The authorial capability of expression is thus complicated as a desire to express authentic and recognizable realities and characters becomes less about a reflection of experience than about an effect of discourse in which the author is able to convey the emotional and psychological meaning that they intend.

Recognition and representation coexist in a meaningful and yet incredibly complex way within literature and literary criticism. For me, for instance, the desire to know what an individual will find informative within a novel is compelling, but there is no possible way for me to make a comprehensive analysis of knowledge that a reader will find within any given text. Instead, I must be willing to accept that any assertions I make regarding the reading of a text is immediately subject to scrutiny from any other reader or critical theorist. Some truths may be evident within the text, but whether or not I am able to say that a reader will find and recognize them is nearly impossible unless the text is specifically aimed at telling the reader, in an informative and non-fictional way, exactly what the author wishes to disseminate. That being said, after having interviewed one particular trans-identified teen, Alex, I am able to provide a specific example of trans YA books being used for information-seeking purposes: “[E]xcept for when I was first trying to figure out how to come out, *then I was specifically looking for these books*” (emphasis added).

Throughout this chapter, I have explored the relationship between scholarly readings of contemporary realistic fiction (see Chapter Three) and ways in which a selection of trans and queer young readers read and interpret certain tropes that are evident throughout trans YA literature since its beginnings in 2004. In comparing the reading habits and expectations of my research participants with my own assumptions and scholarly analysis of trans texts, I have discovered that the ways in which trans YA texts are being written is actually more in line with what one would expect of a pedagogical source, an informal educational tool more appropriate for a cisgender readership than a trans or queer readership. The responses of some of my interviewees regarding the emphasis often placed on medical procedures and realism in the form of

transphobic slurs reveals a feeling of discomfort around trans YA as it currently exists in the larger world of publishing. There were also concerns about the reliance of many contemporary realistic fiction novels on explaining “the trans experience” rather than allowing transgender characters to exist within a more fully developed story that does not focus entirely on the identity development of trans characters. While some of this may not be entirely surprising, I believe it does require some rethinking of just what the scholarly analysis being undertaken by academics should incorporate as a part of its goals for better understanding readers and the roles of various types and genres of books.

Chapter 5. Conclusion(s)

Throughout this research, I have worked on “troubling” an assumption that authors of YA literature, gatekeepers in various settings, as well as perhaps the general public seem to share—that YA novels (though specifically trans and queer novels, in this study) are supposed to simply be mirrors and windows of society and real life experience (Bishop). Through critical analysis of *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (2012), and a series of interviews with trans and queer teen readers, I have shown possibilities for reading YA literature outside of *only* these two lenses. My analysis of Cronn-Mills’ novel in Chapter Three shows that attempts at writing a universal trans narrative are extraordinarily problematic, leading to a reliance on cliché and stereotype instead of allowing the protagonist to experience their own individual story. Through the qualitative interviews, I determined that trans and queer teens are also not necessarily looking for mirrors of their own lives, or windows into other trans teen experiences, but are rather more interested in escapism, experiencing stories that are completely removed from their own experiences and from trans lives in general.²¹ I have shown, in effect, that it is not even the case that trans readers are looking for trans books at all, in opposition of the prevailing assumptions in library and education scholarship, wherein it is understood that trans books are written *for* trans readers.

I have performed this problematization in order to remind those who wish to engage in close readings or analyses texts, that difficult knowledge is a fundamental component of reading, causing complex and nuanced readings of literature, which I can

²¹ This observation is also closely mirrored in Holly Blackford’s work, *Out of this World: Why Literature Matters to Girls* (2004), in which she states that “they not only use aesthetic texts to escape their social identities and worlds, but also transport the text’s use of storytelling conventions to their own lives...” (43).

only hope will give researchers and literary critics a push to acknowledge the shortcomings of any close reading project where trans/queer YA literature is concerned. However if I stop there in my reading and choose not to acknowledge the troublesome recognition politics that are at work within the text, I have performed a very limited and simplistic reading that refuses to acknowledge the difficult knowledge inherent in any fictional narrative. To trouble a theoretical approach is not to negate, but to provide a framework that acknowledges methodological deficits or overly simplistic approaches.

Rosenblatt argues that transactional reading is about noticing the complexity of personal experience as it is brought into a reading transaction, but the argument can go further; I argue that the complexity goes beyond personal experience to include and incorporate social recognition politics and the incredible difficulty of assuming knowledge within a young adult narrative. When attempting to find knowledge or perform close readings of YA literature, it is not my intention to discourage, but rather to encourage an acknowledgement of the wide array of possible readings and to note the difficulties in making concrete conclusions about what sort of knowledge can be gleaned from a particular piece of YA fiction.

5.1. A Return to Terminology

In Chapter One I briefly discussed the difficulty in choosing specific terms to use throughout this research due to the rapidly changing fields in which I am conducting my studies. The publishing industry, especially where children's and young adult literature are concerned, changes very rapidly to engage with current events and to evolve with the changes in socio-political thought. When trans subjects began to become mainstream— noted in *Time* (2014) as the transgender tipping point—the YA publishing industry took notice and authors began writing trans themed books at a much more rapid pace than the previous decade. Suddenly, within a year of first proposing this project, the body of trans YA texts went up from less than 15 in total (from mainstream publishers) to almost 4 such books published per year as of 2016. I went from researching the entire body of

trans YA to constantly revising statistics and updating my own observations on the state of trans YA every few months since I began writing Chapter One. Shortly after writing in 2013 that there was little in the way of non-fiction focusing on trans youth and transgender history for a younger audience, Candlewick published *Beyond Magenta* (2014) by Susan Kuklin, and Simon & Schuster released the dual memoirs *Some Assembly Required* (2014) by Arin Andrews and *Rethinking Normal* (2014) by Katie Rain Hill. Similarly, when I began writing this dissertation, there were very few novels featuring genderqueer or gender nonconforming teen characters, and there are now one or two being published per year as of 2016. The changes in publishing are significant, and while the representations are, as noted throughout this project, not without problems, the fact is that there is a greater effort within youth publishing to recognize the existence of queer and trans teens, even if the majority of such texts are still overly didactic and pedagogical in style.

Also, as discussed in the Introduction, terminology within trans and queer studies has changed and evolved to a great degree throughout the development of this project, creating a unique challenge while writing, namely to develop my thinking while finding terminology that would be inclusive and properly describe the subjects under consideration. I began this project knowing that there would be challenges with defining terms, but I did not realize how much the language of trans and queer studies would change in the short time between starting and finishing this project. I went from using trans* to transgender to trans and realized that I had changed terminology from one chapter to the next without even noticing, due to the influence of the secondary sources I was referring to throughout my own research; as newer sources were published, terms changed, and my own writing changed along with it as I hoped to stay current and relevant within my field. But until reaching this point, I had not looked in too much depth to the reasons behind the rapid changes and shifts. In a post on her blog, Julia Serano writes on what she terms the “activist language merry-go-round”:

[T]he “activist language merry-go-round” is fueled by stigma: Trans people are stigmatized in our culture, and this stigma latches onto the words that are used to

describe us and our experiences. As a result, many activists feel compelled to focus on changing language (i.e., swapping out “bad” words with new words that feel more neutral or empowering)... I argue that there are no magical “perfect words” that will make everyone happy. And the “activist language merry-go-round” will not stop until trans people are no longer stigmatized.... (“Activist Language” n.p.)

In the end, it is integral that we, as critics and scholars, readers and writers, acknowledge the effects of words, but also work to better understand and engage with language rather than simply removing words or attempting to dispose of stigma by disposing of historically relevant terms. Those words that some find stigmatizing, hurtful, or bad may be someone else’s self-identity; the ways in which words are used is, after all, much more significant than the word itself. “When someone uses a trans-related term in a disparaging or exclusionary way, perhaps we should challenge the misappropriation of that term, rather than surrendering or undermining the word itself” (n.p.). This is the sentiment behind many attempts to re-appropriate certain words, such as queer, which is now being used to describe entire fields of study, even though it can still be used derogatorily. Instead of arguing for the removal of certain words from use in scholarship or literature, then, perhaps it is more important to emphasize education around context when it comes to reading behaviours.

5.2. Concluding Thoughts

This research project began simply enough, with a desire to understand the links between theoretical and scholarly readings of literature for young readers with queer or trans content. The underlying assumption that I embodied at the start of the project was that theoretical/scholarly readings of literature for young adults was out of touch with practical mainstream reading habits exhibited by young adults themselves. While I also understood that the results would not be simple, the nuanced differences between the reading practices of youth I interviewed and the ways in which theoretical frames informed by queer and trans scholars influenced readings of contemporary realistic fiction with trans and queer content ended up being more complex than originally

expected. The very fact that those I interviewed were not reading YA fiction with trans themes, but instead reading online fan fiction and fantasy literature undermined my initial hypothesis that trans and queer youth would be searching for themselves within contemporary realism in order to find spaces for comfort and recognition.

5.2.1. Literary Analysis

In the early stages of my dissertation, I wrote about the current state of theoretical frameworks through which children's and young adult fiction were being analyzed, at least on a more regular basis. Children's and YA literature have not, for the most part, been examined through purely trans-focused theoretical perspectives. Throughout this dissertation, and through the findings in Chapter Four, I have argued that more focus on trans studies within children's and young adult literature studies, will help scholars and researchers better understand some of the facets of trans experiences for young people, including the complexities of living in a time of transition, possibly navigating the field of medical specialists, and even, at times, having to undergo bodily modifications, all in an effort to live outside of the realm of binary understandings of gender. In addition to understanding gender in children's and YA literature in new and more complex ways through various lenses of trans theory, this project examines young people's understanding of gender identities, passing, and effects of staring on self-identification.

Although I utilize queer theory at various moments throughout this project, I acknowledge its limitations; hence my desire to incorporate components of trans theory in order to better understand trans subjects within the larger body of trans and queer literature for young readers. Trans and queer theoretical frames when used in conjunction with one another showcase a tension which allows scholars to negotiate the nuances of gay, lesbian, and transgender subjects, especially when the issues of transitioning or existing between opposite ends of a binary gender spectrum are present within a text.

Recognition as a concept of belonging and self-understanding is, in the end, what ties all of the elements of this research together. I noted in Chapter Three that Judith

Butler, in *Undoing Gender* (2004), argues that recognition is, though complex, advantageous to understanding one's place within a larger social context. Much of the third chapter in this project is based on transactional reading theory, which looks to both aesthetic and efferent ways of reading based on the work of Louise Rosenblatt in *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* (1978). Although much of literature for young people is read for aesthetic purposes (as my research participants note in terms of their gravitation towards fantasy literature), the efferent or informational component of YA contemporary realistic fiction is what I found to be the most fascinating component of this research, at least in terms of the divergence from theoretical readings. Much of the emphasis in theoretical readings of trans YA texts, at least in regards to the multiple readings I performed of Cronn-Mills' novel, is the concept of recognition, and ways in which recognition affects the motivates characters to perform in certain ways in order to become or to remain intelligible to a mainstream cisgender society.

Intelligibility allows for recognition according to mainstream social norms, though Butler also notes that some have no desire to be recognized for fear of being recognized as *not* normal, and therefore unintelligible/monstrous. Those who are trans and identify as male or female—whether pre- or post-transition—and who “pass” are seen as intelligible and are recognized as “normal” and are therefore unlikely to be treated negatively or being discriminated against, while those who identify outside of a gender binary are likely to find themselves at the mercy of discriminatory legal practices, prejudiced conservative groups, and other prejudicial individuals. As discussed in the literary analysis of *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (2012), Gabe, the trans protagonist, exists with little difficulty on the radio, where his voice and performed gender is given little scrutiny, especially since his radio personality has no physical presence through which he can be judged. However, once Gabe's trans identity is made public online, his physical body is put on display for the world, and he is treated to discriminatory practices from peers, including physical and emotional violence.

But it is not simply these moments of discrimination that are the focus of literary analysis. Rather, the focus of Chapter Three is the numerous ways in which the narrative

follows certain stereotypical features considered to be indicative of a universal trans experience, including a moment of being outed, experiencing discrimination, having a cisgender individual learn a lesson after being found guilty of enacting physical or emotional trauma on the trans individual, and an ending which reifies the normality of trans difference (Vee n.p.). The majority of trans narratives, in other words, act as pedagogical sources, or as didactic learning opportunities for cisgender readers to better understand, at least in terms of individual trans experiences. These experiences, however, often rely on a seemingly universal idea that all trans individuals wish to undergo medical procedures, including hormone therapy and/or other forms of surgery to transform the physical body so as to “match” the internal male or female identity. This leads to the stereotypical wrong body narrative, which implies that all trans individuals feel trapped in the wrong body. However, as some of my teen research participants noted in Chapter Four, this is not always the case. Although it may be true in some individual cases, the wrong body narrative is not a universal for all trans-identified individuals. As testified to in my interviews, some teens identified with the feeling of being trapped in the wrong body, while others felt that such a way of thinking was too simplistic for their own particular lived experience. This, of course, brings me back to the more general findings from the analysis of my interviews and whether or not, and indeed where, trans and queer youth find books with trans themes.

5.2.2. Interview Analysis

The majority of my research participants gravitated toward fantasy fiction as opposed to contemporary realism, as I had originally theorized. This theorization was based on the long standing assumption within library sciences and educational theories (see Chapter Two) that young people wish to see themselves in the pages of the books they read and that they will search out these representations of recognizability (Cart & Jenkins). After speaking with my research participants, however, I discovered there was little motivation to seek out specifically trans and queer contemporary realistic fiction, and actually little motivation to search out books in general. In his book *Geeks, Goths, and Gangstas: Youth Culture and the Evolution of Modern Society* (2010), Marcel Danesi

discusses in greater detail, the connections between youth, technology, and digital realms. For instance,

It is interesting to note that cyberspace encourages self-styled constructions of identity. The coinage of “handles”—the names that users create for themselves in order to enter and interact in chatroom situations and in cyber communications generally—is a case in point. (Danesi 217)

As discussed earlier, identity development can be aided in numerous ways through reading narratives of various types, including fiction, non-fiction, mainstream literature and self-published online narratives. The creation of online narratives can also be seen as connected to identity construction, especially speaking of literature as mirrors of lived experience. Online narratives that examine transness, then, can be seen both as a means of identity formation through the act of writing, as well as a reflection of that formation through the act of reading, which I believe is reflected within the participant responses discussed in Chapter Four.

In the end, there was more of a draw to fantasy and online fan fiction—rather than mainstream fiction—in which worlds can be built where transness is not considered to be problematic. This finding was particularly fascinating for me as I was originally working under the assumption that books with trans characters and themes were being marketed to trans and queer youth and that those teens were the actual audience. There is a divergence, though, between the marketed audience and the actual audience, it would appear. Through a thorough analysis of *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* and a more thorough critique of the normative components of trans-themed novels published by mainstream publishers, it is more likely that the actual audience of these texts is in fact cisgender audiences who are reading the novels as sources of information. By reading books about trans characters, cisgender individuals are able to catch a glimpse of at least one particular experience of being trans, thereby learning about the difficulties of growing up trans in a cisnormative and heteronormative society. This, as discussed in Chapter Four, has its own set of problems, as trans lives are being used as educational opportunities rather than being fully realized.

One of the most unfortunate aspects of the current body of literature featuring trans protagonists, is the emphasis on being realistic. While this may not seem entirely problematic when considering the genre of contemporary realism, one of the major issues that many of my research participants had with the depictions of realistic violence and oppression was the use of derogatory terminology, such as tranny, he-she, hermaphrodite, and it. I found this to be fascinating in light of the conversation presented by Julia Serano in relation to activist language. While theoretically it is problematic to destroy or remove certain terminology due to its connection to historical moments and important shifts in thinking about marginalized groups of people, practically speaking, it is worth questioning the use of such terms in literature for young people for the sake of realism, especially if those teens are finding it troubling or triggering. If such slurs are being used to enhance realism but to such a degree that the depictions of physical or emotional violence are causing trans young readers to experience moments of trauma, then is the inclusion of such language perhaps more harmful than beneficial to readers? Of course, if the readership of these novels is primarily cisgender individuals, then the inclusion of such offensive terminology is actually not as curious, as it can be seen as reminding readers that such terms actually *are* offensive. These tensions between practical moments of reading by particular reading audiences and the theoretical ways of reading from a scholarly perspective are indeed what makes me believe that an exploration of trans reading practices is necessary, to avoid theoretical readings from being inherently and entirely removed from the realities of trans readers and trans experiences.

5.3. Further Research

This dissertation is a beginning, a starting point for further necessary research on trans youth reading practices. It is only so helpful to read texts from specific academic perspectives based on queer and trans theoretical frames, but quite another to have these readings become useful on a practical level. In this research project, through an application of efferent reading theory and work of prominent trans theorists, I have been able to note the possible readership of trans YA texts. To theorize without bringing

readers into the equation is to ignore the impact of what we assume about an implied readership on an actual readership. My research has been focused on moving beyond theoretical readings of YA texts toward a reading of texts that also incorporates the reading habits and considerations of trans young people so as to better understand who is reading trans YA books and what they are looking for in depictions of their own and similar experiences. Of course as I noted, this is a beginning. With only five respondents to my call for participants, and with many of the youth not reading trans YA novels, I was not able to fully examine reading habits and expectations. But in fact this very lack of adherence to my own expectations brought about ways of looking at trans YA texts that I would not have otherwise considered. My findings from the interviews, namely the focus on trans/queer youth reading primarily fantasy and fan fiction open up other possibilities for future study.

For future research, I would like to explore trans youth reading practices on a much larger scale, based on a larger sample size, and incorporating youth readers from across North America, utilizing a series of novels, rather than focusing only on one or two. Speaking with colleagues in the United States has been eye opening as well, as teen readers who identify as queer and trans, at least in anecdotal evidence, tend to be much stronger and more motivated readers than those I came across in my own research for this project. Recruiting a larger population of cisgender readers would also help to explore the differences (if any) in reading habits. As well, interviewing authors and publishers would aid in better understanding marketing decisions and understanding who is being targeted specifically. Though my findings are important and are indicative of a disconnect between practical reading practices and theoretical reading practices, a large scale research project would be able to better focus on and expand upon my initial findings. Why are trans and queer teens so much more interested in fantasy? What might motivate them to read more contemporary realism? Also, though my own research does show some very interesting connections between low-income and affluent communities and access to fiction and queer resources, a larger sample size for future research would allow for more concrete answers on barriers to access and the influences of various gatekeeping practices on reading habits.

Of course, it would be very interesting to also discover links between access to resources and barriers in various social, political, and geographical locations. Examining links between access to queer and trans literature and reading patterns of trans and queer youth would benefit future assertions about readership of such texts and would, I believe, help authors and artists to better understand the possible audiences for their work. Though it would be difficult, especially in an American context, to do research in classrooms, it would be fascinating to better understand ways in which trans and queer literature are or are not being used in classroom instruction, whether formally or informally, and the reasons behind educators' decisions. As of now, much research on the subject of trans and queer texts in the classroom is either anecdotal and isolated to particular cases, or is more theoretical and based on ways of reading texts—as in Chapter Three—and how such readings could possibly translate to practical classroom situations.

In the end, although the research I have undertaken for the purposes of this dissertation project is fascinating and has revealed significant gaps between theoretical and practical readings, and between scholarly assumptions and teen readers' expectations, it is still very much based on only five cases and cannot be truly generalized to a larger scale. It is my hope that this research will begin more immersive projects related to reading habits of marginalized youth readers and ways in which theoretical and critical literary studies can benefit from such knowledge in order to improve children's and YA literature field in the proceeding decades. I hope to see more books about trans youth that are likely to be read by trans youth, rather than acting primarily as informal educational resources for cisgender audiences. Transactional reading does, after all, require a transaction, and one that can only take place when both the creators and the consumers participate, with the help of accessibility, visibility, and greater education for all involved.

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Appendix A.

Call for Research Participants

Research Participants

Are you an avid reader of young adult fiction?

Do you read books with trans* or gender-variant characters?

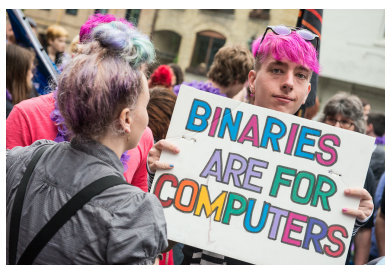
Do you want a \$10 Starbucks or Tim Hortons Gift Card?

If you are between the ages of 15 and 18 and identify as part of one of the following groups, then you're just the person I'm looking for!

- Trans* / Transgender
- Gender variant / Gender-nonconforming
- Genderqueer / Non-binary



I want to know what *you* think of trans* and gender-nonconforming characters in the books that you read, or if you even read books with characters who identify that way? And how do you look for and/or find books with trans* and gender variant characters?



For more information about this study, or to volunteer as a research participant, please email Robert Bittner at rbittner@sfu.ca.

As a participant in this study, you will be asked to take part in a 1-2 hour focus group discussion with other trans* and gender variant teens, fill out a brief questionnaire, and possibly take part in a one-on-one follow-up interview. You will be asked some specific questions, but will also be free to engage in discussion about other topics throughout the interview. Focus groups will be conducted between October 2014 and May 2015.

This research is being carried out by Robert Bittner, PhD Candidate, in the department of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies at Simon Fraser University, under the supervision of Dr. Helen Leung.

This research is supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Appendix B.

Youth Interview Questions

Initial Questions

What types/genres of books do you prefer?

Favourite author(s), if any:

Do you pay attention to any book awards:

Do you get book recommendations from anywhere?

If so, from whom, or from what resource(s)?

What do you want to see in a main character in a novel?

Have you read any books with trans characters? If so, which ones?

What did/do you think of the representation of trans-ness?

Have you read any books with gender-nonconforming characters? If so, which ones?

What did you think of the representation of gender or lack thereof?

What do you look for in a book?

Do you ever find yourself disliking certain character representations?

Questions and General Comments/Discussion:

Follow-Up Questions

Do you read other fiction in trans or queer ways (Do you read characters as anything other than straight/cisgender, if they're not identified that way in the text?)

Do you read more for pleasure or information? Do you find reading to be a chore?

If you read for information, do you tend to focus more on finding fiction or non-fiction titles?

Appendix C.

Youth Statistics Questionnaires

Name:

Pseudonym if desired:

Age:

Gender/sexual identity (optional):

Racial/ethnic background (optional):

City/Municipality (optional):

Libraries regularly used, if any:

School attended:

Book clubs attended, if any:

GSA attended, if any:

Would you be interested in reading any of the titles discussed today and filling out a follow-up questionnaire about your experience reading the novel?

Comments/Questions:

Appendix D.

Librarian Interview Questions

Do you work directly with youth in any specific capacity? If so, do you regularly engage with youth in the LGBT/Queer spectrum?

Do you understand what trans* and/or gender variant identities are?

Have you or other librarians at your library every had to undergo training focused particularly on LGBT/Queer issues?

Do you work with the acquisition or promotion of materials in your part of the library?
Do you work with collections development to promote particular books?

Do you pay attention to any book awards for youth, specifically book rewards such as the Lambda Award, the Stonewall Awards, or others that highlight literature for LGBT/Queer youth?

Do you get book recommendations from anywhere other than awards or publisher catalogs? If so, from whom, or from what resource(s)?

Do you have any plans to promote or enhance the availability of books with trans* or gender variant characters within your area of the library?

What do you think of the term “gatekeeper,” which is often used to describe the role of librarians? Do you see yourself as fitting within the category of a gatekeeper?

In what ways do you work to promote visibility of LGB and especially trans* and/or genderqueer youth?

Do you see challenges in cataloging and subject headings, leading to challenges for youth who are looking for these types of books?

Have you had any interactions with young people or advocates who have trouble finding such literature?

What procedures must you go through in order to acquire more books with LGBT/Queer content? Do you ever have challenges acquiring these books or making a case for acquiring them, in comparison to other literature?

What are your opinions on arranging books in your collections in special sections to make books more easily accessible?

Knowing that trans YA fiction is of less interest to trans readers, at least in this smaller sample, would you change anything about how you promote trans YA or how you promote literature to a trans youth audience.

Hearing the assertion that trans YA is predominantly used for purposes of educating cisgender individuals, would you concur based on your own experiences with teen patrons or gender experience within your own library?

How you thought about trans YA texts in this way before? If not, how do these results change your thoughts on promoting literature with trans themes within various library settings?

Appendix E.

Librarian Statistics Questionnaires

Pseudonym if desired:

Age (optional):

Gender/sexual identity (optional):

Racial/ethnic background (optional):

City/Municipality:

Current Place of Employment:

Job Title:

Previous work with trans*/gender variant young adult literature, if any:

Sources regularly referred to when developing or considering new collections materials:

Do you work directly with youth at all in your position?

Comments/Questions:

Appendix F. Consent Form

Application #: 2014s0166

Trans-reading Practices: Gatekeeping, Analysis, and Youth Reading Practices Relating to Young Adult Literature with Transgender Themes

Simon Fraser University and Robert Bittner, the researcher conducting this research study, subscribe to the ethical conduct of research and to the protection at all times of the interests, comfort, and safety of participants. This research is being conducted under permission of the Simon Fraser Research Ethics Board. The chief concern of the Board is for the health, safety and psychological well-being of research participants.

Should you wish to obtain information about your rights as a participant in research, or about the responsibilities of researchers, or if you have any questions, please contact Robert Bittner, Principal Investigator, by email at [REDACTED]@sfu.ca, or Helen Leung, Senior Supervisor, by email at [REDACTED]@sfu.ca. For concerns or complaints about the manner in which you were treated in this study, please contact the Director, Office of Research Ethics by email at [REDACTED]@sfu.ca or phone at [REDACTED].

Your signature on this form will signify that you have received this document which describes the procedures, that you have reviewed all three pages of this documents, considered whether there are possible risks, and benefits of this research study, that you have received an adequate opportunity to consider the information in the documents describing the study, and that you voluntarily agree to participate in the study. The organizations in which you may have heard about my research or at which I may have done a presentation of my research goals, are not an official part of this research study and have not been contacted with permission letters.

Name and Contact of Principal Investigator

Robert Bittner, Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies

Tel: 778. [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]@sfu.ca

Name and Contact of Program Director

Willeen Keough, Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies

Tel: 778. [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]@sfu.ca

Purpose and Goals:

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of how and why young trans and queer individuals choose the fiction that they do, and how they interpret and react to that literature. Do young readers pay attention to gatekeepers such as librarians, teachers, or book awards? The discussions that will take place within these focus groups will help to shed light on the literature seeking and reading behaviours of queer and trans young people. With a better understanding of how young readers find and read books with transgender protagonists, I will be in a position to evaluate current theoretical reading practices in academic settings.

What participants are required to do:

Your participation will include filling out a brief questionnaire with demographic information to aid in information analysis. Mostly, however, I will be asking you to discuss how you find books, how you read and interpret these books, and whether or not teachers, librarians, and/or awards selections play any role in those choices. The second component of these discussions will be on excerpts from specific, publicly accessible novels that I have chosen to study. You will be asked to read the excerpts and discuss with me and the rest of the focus group your reactions to the characterization of the protagonists, the writing style, and the treatment of trans characters overall. The discussion will then move to your hopes and desires for books with trans characters moving forward and what you hope to see in literature in the future. Discussions will likely take place over the course of one (1) hour, though there is a possibility of going over this time limit if discussion is lively and all participants consent to staying longer. All discussions will be recorded for the purposes of transcription, however all recordings will be deleted once transcripts have been written and approved by participants. Consent forms and other recorded information will be destroyed once I have completed the writing of my dissertation, based on the research.

Risks to the participant, third parties, or society:

In analyzing the study and the research methods, I have determined that there is minimal risk to you or society at large by taking part in this research.

Compensation:

You will be compensated with a \$10 gift card to a local bakery or café in appreciation of your participation in this research.

Benefits of the study:

It is my hope that the results of this research will give authors, publishers, educators, and other gatekeepers in the literature world a greater understanding of what trans and queer young people want to see in literature, and how they see literature as it currently is. I also hope that the results of this study will benefit award selection processes in the future by helping gatekeepers recognize the desires of a more specific reading audience.

Statement of Confidentiality:

Your name and other identifying information will be kept confidential and a pseudonym will be used within all forthcoming analysis and publications based on the research. You may provide me with a desired pseudonym if you choose. All information about sexual orientation and gender identity will also be kept confidential and will only be used in conjunction with the pseudonym provided by you or the principal researcher. We encourage participants not to discuss the content of the focus group to people outside of the group; however, we can not control what participants do with the information discussed.

Declaration of Consent

I, the research participant, understand that I may withdraw my participation from this study at any time without penalty or consequence. I also understand that I may register any complaint with the Director of the Office of Research Ethics, as follows:

Dr. Jeff Toward, Director
Office of Research Ethics
Simon Fraser University
8888 University Drive, BC, V5A 1S6
Email: [redacted]@sfu.ca

I may obtain copies of the results of this study upon its completion by contacting the principal investigator, Robert Bittner, using the information on page one of this form.

Having been asked to participate in the research study named above, I certify that I have read the procedures specified in this document (pages 1-3) describing the study and my rights as a participant. I understand the procedures to be used in this study and the personal risks to me in taking part in the study as described above. I understand that I am able to withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussions.

Name of Participant

Date (YYYY/MM/DD)

Signature

Contact Information:

Please note, email, telephone numbers, Skype, Internet, etc. are not considered to be a confidential medium for discussion.

Appendix G.

Ethics Application

Trans-reading Practices: Gatekeeping, Analysis, and Youth Reading Practices Relating to Young Adult Literature with Transgender Themes

Researcher: Robert Bittner
Faculty Adviser: Dr. Helen Leung
Department: Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies
University: Simon Fraser University, BC, Canada

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

While there appears to be an expansion of gender and sexuality studies within the field of young adult literature criticism, the vast majority of scholarship privileges the study of gay and lesbian identities, as well as binary gender identities—either male or female, but not much treatment of those who identify as *other* or *in between*. In the 1990s articles began to address topics of cross-dressing and responses to cross-gender behaviour—in response to changes in the field of psychology, namely the removal of homosexuality and the addition of Gender Identity Disorder (GID) in the Diagnostic and Statistics Manual of the American Psychological Association. Even Jody Norton, in her article on “Transchildren and the Discipline of Children’s Literature” (1999), though mentioning transgenderism and reconceptualizations of gender, focuses more on reading trans-ness into children and children’s literature in a broad sense—reading transgenderism into cross-dressing and cross-gender behaviour, which still privileges binary gender thinking—until trans-specific literature is published.

Explicitly transgender-identified characters did not begin to show up until 2004 in the wake of Julie Ann Peters’s *Luna*. Instead of employing a specifically transgender theoretical approach—a concept I will address in more depth in the next section—Norton, instead, argues that scholars, in the absence of explicitly transgendered fictional characters, need to work at opening up the possibilities of gender identities within current readings (i.e. reading a male character as female or non-gendered, in order to see how the story changes.) She writes, “Let us hold the speculative space of gender open until we know more, and let us open, in the meanwhile, the socio-political and aesthetic question of the representation of (trans)gender in children’s literature” (430). Using a queer theory approach to children’s and young adult literature focuses more on sexuality and sexual attraction, but the addition of trans studies—research that looks to bodily transition and modification—allows for a more complex exploration of transformation and the notion of gender as something fluid and transitional.

It is time to formulate a new system of analysis that does not imply or privilege discussions of sexual orientation when gender and embodiment are at stake; a system where transgendered individuals are not left out of the rhetoric of equality and safety within book and in real life. Scholars are only beginning to see the possibilities of using

transgender theory within literary criticism as is evidenced in the literature review, though queer theory has been used for some time. The groundwork is there in such a theoretical approach, but the overlaps between transgender and queer theory needs to be better acknowledged and utilized. By working to mesh queer theory and trans studies, I, along with other scholars, can begin working in a more complex way with new and emerging issues in literature, such as intersexuality, asexuality, and two-spiritedness, which require moving beyond rigid gender dichotomies and homonormative sexual orientation which are presented even within queer, gay/lesbian, and feminist studies; an exclusion which could become an inclusion with the use of transgender studies in the field of children's and young adult (YA) literature (hereafter referred to as C/YA).

This study will look to find if there are similarities or rather more disparity between what occurs in theoretical studies and what actually matters to young adult readers. In this way I will have the ability to better understand the purpose and usefulness of textual analysis and gatekeeping processes, depending on the responses from the young adult respondents to my call for participants.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How do young adults choose books to read?
- How do young people read and interpret transgender themes in YA literature?
- Do young readers pay particular attention to any particular awards or suggestions from librarians and educators?
- Are there particular sexual or gender identities that have been privileged or ignored throughout the history of gender and sexuality in C/YA literature studies?
- How has trans theory been used within critical discussions of C/YA literature, if at all?
- What gaps exist in critical uses of trans theory to discuss emerging sexualities in YA literature?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS FOR LIBRARIANS

- How are books chosen for inclusion in teen collections?
- Do you pay attention to book awards or particular sources for LGBT/Q-specific selections?
- What procedures must you go through to find and collect LGBT/Q literature for your library system?
- Are you able to find and provide circulation information regarding specific texts that I am hoping to use in my research? [Specific titles will be provided to participants.]

PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

It is my hope to interview transgender and queer youth between the ages of 15 and 18 (secondary school students) in a non-school setting, to discuss young adult literature with

transgender protagonists, and to encourage discussion of literature seeking and reading behaviours. Parental consent will not be requested for this study as participants may be less likely to be involved if required to reveal information about gender/sexuality to parents or guardians, whether due to fear of repercussions or negative parental reaction or simply because they are not comfortable revealing their stage of discovery or transition openly at home.

In addition, I will be interviewing one collections development librarian and one youth librarian from a library system in either Vancouver or one of the surrounding municipalities in order ascertain how and if trans* and gender variant teens are considered or are part of the process of acquiring new books for teen library collections. I will also be asking these librarian participants about their use of awards, reviews, and other materials to decide on which books to add to the teen library collections. Consent will only be required from the participants themselves as they will be adults in professional work environments and will not require consent from other individuals. They will not be asked to reveal any information which contradicts privacy policies regarding patrons or co-workers, nor will they be asked to speak on behalf of their employer.

DETAILED RESEARCH PROCEDURES

I will be contacting various organizations, such as GAB Youth and Qmunity (Vancouver), Fraser Valley Regional Libraries (Langley, Aldergrove, Delta), and Surrey Pride, to schedule presentations on my research for youth audiences. I have contacts in each of the previously noted organizations, and I will utilize these contacts to develop research relationships with trans-identified and queer youth who are already connected with my colleagues. I would like to visit groups of youth and present a brief introduction to my work. After talking about my research, I will ask teens if they would be interested in participating as interviewees. I believe that this approach will allow me to recruit more participants than simply putting up posters or notices in various institutions or around communities. It is my hope that personally giving presentations on the research and talking to youth directly will give teens an idea of who I am and what I am attempting to do, creating a more open and encouraging research environment.

It is not currently my intention to submit permission letters to the above mentioned organizations since the actual research will not be done within the organizations themselves. I will be conducting all research outside of these institutions once I have made initial recruitment presentations. Interviewees will be responsible for first contact with the principal researcher, and so access to contact information available to the general public will not be used. I will be providing the organizations mentioned above with all necessary contact information should individuals feel like participating in the study.

I will be aiming for approximately 20 youth respondents who must identify as trans or queer in order to participate in the study. Heterosexually identified youth will not be considered eligible for the study due to the focus in my research. By aiming for around

20 respondents, I will hopefully be able to interview 10 to 15 participants in focus groups, allowing me to have a small local sampling from the Lower Mainland of BC. Once consent forms have been distributed and signatures have been received by the PI, participants will be gathered in focus groups in order to begin the research. If a participant withdraws at any point throughout the study, related information will be destroyed and electronic information collected will be deleted. Refusal to participate or withdrawal after agreeing to participate will have no adverse effect on the individual or the institution/organization from which they were recruited. Participants will be compensated with a \$10 gift card to a local bakery or coffee shop at the end of the focus group discussions. It is my hope that such compensation will also help in the recruiting process.

Focus groups will consist of 3 to 5 individuals who will take part in semi-structured interviews and guided discussions, taking approximately 1 hour. I will describe the procedures and review the consent form with all participants, explaining the information that I am seeking as well as the ability for each individual to remain anonymous outside of the focus group. It is my intention to gather participants in semi-private locations such as a library or civic facility meeting room, to be decided on in consultation with individuals who have expressed interest in participating in the project.

Focus group discussion allows for flexibility in asking questions throughout the time spent with participants, and the study allows for more in-depth discussions about areas of interest to respondents. As the interviewer in the focus group situation, I will be able to clarify and respond to questions immediately in person, and there is a greater likelihood of individuals taking part in a group discussion as opposed to a more intimidating one-on-one interview.

Once interviews are complete, I will send transcribed interviews back to respondents for review, and also to allow for clarification of ideas and so that additional information can be provided if necessary or desired. Respondents will also be allowed to go through their answers, making sure to note particular statements that they would like to see removed or emphasize whether or not they would like to remain anonymous. All information will then be analyzed and compiled for use within my dissertation. I will be the only one with access to the audio recordings. Anonymized transcripts will be available to my committee and within the completed dissertation.

The same rigorous interview procedures will be used for the librarian interviews as well, though these particular cases will consist of one-on-one interviews instead of focus groups. Information gleaned from these interviews and the demographic information will be treated with the same rigor and confidentiality as the information collection from youth participants. I will transcribe the interviews and submit them back to each librarian participant for correction in order for them to be in control of information that will then be used for my dissertation.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS

No significant or recognizable benefits to participants will come out of this research process. This research will allow me to assess the relationship between perceptions of young adult reading and literature choosing behaviours and actual reading habits and literature choosing behaviours. I will have the ability to better understand the purpose and usefulness of textual analysis on an academic level in light of the reading practices that participants actually undertake in their own daily lives. As my research on broader scale looks to the relationship between theory and practice, interacting with young people will allow me to better compare theoretical assumptions of teen reading practices with the practical side of such reading habits.

POTENTIAL RISKS:

Risks involved in this particular study are minimal. The topics of sexuality and gender can be sensitive for some youth, but knowing that parental consent will not be required will, I hope, encourage more young people to participate. The ability for participants to remain anonymous outside of the focus group discussions will, I hope, also allow for more relaxed and open dialogue among participants.

MAINTENANCE OF CONFIDENTIALITY

Resulting transcripts and information gathered will be anonymized. Information containing names or other identifying information will be removed and pseudonyms will be provided unless otherwise requested by participants. Directly identifying information such as audio recordings and questionnaires will be available only to the PI for use in follow-up correspondence or further interview opportunities and clarification.

DATA RETENTION AND DESTRUCTION

Digital audio recordings and transcripts will only be accessed by the me, the principal investigator, and will be kept on my password protected hard drive, locked in my home office (the hard drive is external and will not be removed from my home at any time during the research process). Anonymized transcripts will be included in the appendices of my dissertation and audio recordings will be erased once transcriptions have been completed and approved by the research participants. Once the research is complete and the dissertation has been successfully defended, all Consent Forms will be shredded, along with related information such as individual questionnaires, through the Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies office at SFU.

DISSEMINATION OF RESULTS

Participants will have access to results if they so desire, by contacting the PI. Results will also be available through the completed dissertation as a result of the research.