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Reading queer subtexts in children's literature

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Reading Queer Subtexts in Children's Literature
by

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Thesis

Submitted to the Department of English Language and Literature
Eastern Michigan University
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for the degree of
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in
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Thesis Committee:
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Dedication

For LGBT children everywhere searching for themselves in literature.

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Abstract

The purpose of this project is to explore and to challenge heteronormative assumptions regarding childhood and adolescence. I will show how these assumptions affect the literature published and made available to young readers, and how, often, overtly queer texts are not available for young readers. Such omissions leave young readers, especially those with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgendered (LGBT) identities, to find depictions of queerness in subtexts underlying seemingly “straight” texts. While these queer subtexts can be recognizable to readers through the use of culturally and historically significant markers that are understood to represent queerness, even a text with a widely recognized queer subtext does not preclude straight readings. Similarly, a queer subtext can exist solely for a reader with no intentional work done on the part of the creators. Queer subtexts, ultimately, work in subtle ways to subvert heteronormative assumptions and, in the process, create recognizable representations of queerness.

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Introduction—Queer Theory and Children’s Literature: Finding LGBT Voices in Literature for Children and Young Adults

Queer theory is a relatively new discourse with a delicate and nuanced history. Within the field of children’s literature, however, the use of queer theory is only just in its infancy. Few scholars are applying queer theory to the study of texts for children and young adults. Indeed, the field of children’s literature—from the authors, to the publishers, to the bookstores, libraries, and schools—seems eager to ignore queerness as a reality that needs to be addressed in literature for children and young adults. Many libraries and bookstores refuse to shelve or even to stock texts that possess obvious queer content and that are intended for young readers. Despite this, the existence of queer youth persists. So the question becomes, if there are very few texts available that explicitly reflect positive depictions of queerness for the youth in our culture, then where can, and do, queer youth find representations of themselves in the literature that is made available to them?

They often must find depictions of the queer child in subtexts—undercurrents, subtle hints that are not always evident in the surface reading of a work of literature, but that speak to a queer reader looking to see him/herself in the pages of a book. In this thesis I will explore the use of subtextual queerness in children’s literature. I will look specifically at the use of homoerotic,¹ homosocial,² and gender queering in five children’s texts: *Ferdinand*, *Elmer*, *Ivy and Bean*, *Speak*, and *Harry Potter*. These examples are being used to illustrate

¹ I use “homoerotic” instead of “homosexual” in light of Michel Foucault’s discussions surrounding the negative medical connotations ascribed to the later term in *History of Sexuality*. The term “homoerotic” is used here to denote relationships as same-sex affiliations based on love and physical desire.

² The term “homosocial” is used here to denote relationships of same-sex affiliations that are not predicated on the presence of sexual desire.

how queer subtextual readings function at various levels of children's literature written for different age groups.

Queer theory is a field of critical theory that emerged in the 1990s as a direct result of Feminist and LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered) studies, and which is grounded in the social and political movements that founded these fields. Queer theory, like feminism, works to upend the pervading notion, in our contemporary culture, that gender is a natural part of one's identity. It does so by questioning the culture/nature dichotomy in a way that deconstructs ideological assumptions that cultural prescriptions stem from a natural, preexisting order. This paradigm renegotiates identity through arguments that contest conformity and unity. The focus of much queer theory is centered on the socially constructed nature of sexual identity and the ways in which gender plays a role in said constructions. These socially constructed identities create a sense of expected normality that, in turn, creates binaries in our culture between what is deemed normative (the expected norm) and identities that are labeled as deviant (in opposition to the constructed norms). As Judith Butler notes in *Bodies That Matter*:

Performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed by a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that 'performance' is not a singular 'act' or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of

ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance. (95)

Much of Queer theory, as a field, insists that identities (i.e. gender or sexual identities) are not fixed. That is, they are not easily categorized or labeled because an identity is, necessarily, individual, and consists of so many varied, fluctuating, factors that there is virtually no way to organize people into neat categories. Or, as Tigger might say, “The most wonderful thing about you is you’re the only one.” In fact, Queer theory is used less to categorize identity than to critique the existing expectations, within our culture, of what particular identities should appear.

This concept of identity (that there are not categorical identities) can be directly connected to Constructivist theories that argue there is no natural identity (biological identity). Rather, the Constructivists argue, identity is the product of societal constructions of what is perceived as normal and abnormal. The Constructivists work to counteract assumptions that gender and sexuality have essential natures that can be pinpointed and categorized. Strategic Essentialists understand that identity is fluid and individual (as discussed above); however, they feel it is necessary to create some common language regarding identity to allow discourses surrounding these identities. The only way to explore gender and sexuality in a codified fashion is to develop essentialist concepts, or commonly held definitions, regarding the terms in question (i.e. queer, woman, man etc...). Annamarie Jagose seems to straddle these two notions by defining queer theory through a large frame: “Broadly speaking, queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatize incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire. Resisting that model of stability—which claims heterosexuality as its origin, when it

is more properly its effect—queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire” (3). Certainly, this thesis will draw on both understandings of sexual identity—Constructivist and Essentialist—as Jagose does, because fictional narratives can support ideological frameworks that both support the construction of gender and sexuality and question the premise of this claim.

The discourse surrounding gender and sexual identities is slippery. In “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” Judith Butler, a key figure in the field of gender and sexuality studies, suggests that naming (or categorizing) an identity can take it out of the realm of personal and make it political. Butler writes, “Discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power” (“Imitation” 575). She continues, “A Foucaultian perspective might argue that the affirmation of ‘homosexuality’ is itself an extension of homophobia” (575). Butler points out the double-edged sword queer theory is both faced with and creates. To make an identity something that can be used politically shrouds it in language. To name homosexuality, we must also acknowledge homophobia and even heterocentrism. Without this strategic use of essentialist language regarding identity, it would be impossible to move beyond individual experience, just as using the terms “gay,” “straight,” “lesbian,” “bisexual,” “transgendered” and/or “questioning” makes truly describing an individual impossible. In many respects, developing a codified discourse necessitates a certain amount of colonizing of individual subjects.

Having risen out of LGBT and Feminist theories, Queer theory is primarily interested in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered peoples and social issues. However, the focus on binaries creates a slippery slope because some theorists suggest Queer theory ought to include any and all identities that are at odds with normative

constructions. Thus, Queer theory could include sex-workers and individuals who engage in S&M, and the list could go on. However, by including everything within the classification of Queer, we run the risk of failing to develop meaningful understandings of developing positions of power for people who are, in their everyday experiences, discriminated against. For the purposes of this thesis I will use the term Queer to denote five categories of sexual orientation; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Questioning individuals.

Many people, however, refuse to see the child as belonging to any of these categories. In essence, they refuse to acknowledge the possibility of an LGBTQ identified child. Children's literature, as a field of study, has a long history of exploring the relations between the actual child reader and the imagined or implied child reader, and the adults ever present from the inception to the reception of a text. Just as queer theory challenges the constructed nature of sexual acts and sexual identities, children's literature theorists have similarly challenged the social construction of the child. In her 1984 text, *The Case of Peter Pan, or, the Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, Jacqueline Rose outlines the culturally constructed nature of childhood through the ascription of innocence. She explains that such innocence involves the assumption that children are without sexuality. This seems like an adult attempt to delineate childhood from adulthood and thus to distinguish our adult selves from children, perhaps even to remove the potential of adult experiences from children's lives. Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley in their 2004 text, *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, posit that this dominant understanding of childhood expects that children "are (and should stay) innocent of sexual desires and intentions. At the same time, however, children are also officially, tacitly, assumed to be heterosexual" (ix). If this adult construction of childhood negates the sexual child, it does so doubly to the queer child.

These contradicting assumptions become problematic and lead to a paradox: If children are without sexual desires and intentions, how can they already have a sexual orientation as heterosexual? Therefore, the existence of a queer child is an affront to the asexuality expected in children and to the “supposedly blissful promise of adult heteronormality” (Bruhm ix). This can be seen even in the texts marked as LGBT children’s texts such as Leslea Newman’s picture book, *Heather Has Two Mommies*, or Michael Willhoite’s *Daddy’s Roommate*. Both of these texts deal explicitly with LGBT themes. However, the LGBT themes are focused on the adult characters rather than on the child characters. It is not Heather, but her two mommies who are lesbians. This focus on the sexual identity of the adult characters rather than that of the child characters can be seen time and again in texts for young children explicitly touting LGBT themes.

While sexuality in literature for young children is not often overtly recognized, and is perhaps even erased or ignored, sexuality is an expected and accepted aspect of young adult (Y.A.) literature. However, with these expectations of sexuality come more stringent constructions of what this sexuality is and should be. In their influential text, *The Heart Has Its Reasons*, Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins outline the history of LGBTQ literature for young adults. What they expose is grim: “That homosexuality was viewed by many [...] as a social problem only exacerbated the tendency to regard literature with gay content as belonging in the ‘problem novel’ category which robbed homosexuals of individuality and perpetrated stereotypes” (18). Cart and Jenkins go on to point out that queer narrators are all but absent from mainstream YA literature, and most queer characters presented in mainstream YA literature have been equated with despair, loneliness, and death. So again,

while there are texts explicitly touting LGBT themes for young adult readers, many of those texts are highly problematic.

It is, therefore, necessary to consider alternatives for young readers looking for queer texts. It is possibly through subtextual queerness (readings of a text where queerness is visible beneath the surface) that readers can explore LGBTQ themes and issues outside what is being presented, and constructed, by mainstream media. By exploring how, where, when, and why queer subtexts exist in literature for children and young adults, I hope to explore queer readings that empower young readers to connect with texts on personal and cultural levels and to develop an understanding of how young queer readers are thinking about or are being expected to think about texts beyond transparent surface readings.

The purpose of this thesis, then, is to show educators and readers that these books contain more than just the issues visible on the surface because of the ways in which these books invite a queer reading. Eve Sedgwick once stated, “I think everyone who does gay and lesbian studies is haunted by the suicides of adolescents” (*Wild Orchids* 1). Sedgwick’s statement came as a direct response to a 1989 Health and Human Services Report on teen suicides that relayed staggering statistics showing that gay and lesbian adolescents made up nearly 30 percent of all teen suicides. This harrowing statistic is certainly one of the driving forces behind my interest in exploring queer subtexts in children’s literature. Such an exploration will allow a greater understanding of the cultural atmosphere surrounding LGBTQ youth, perhaps helping to create an understanding of why such a statistic is an unfortunate reality. In addition, this thesis will explore how subtextual queerness in children’s literature provides a safe space for LGBTQ youth while simultaneously continuing the cultural trend of negativity and denial toward the existence of LGBTQ youth.

As I have noted, authentic narratives dealing with LGBT themes are few and far between in the vast arena of children's literature, though more and more LGBT-themed books are being published each year for child readers. Further, many bookstores and libraries are consciously choosing not to shelve or stock such texts, despite their growing numbers. For example, in 1999 in Nampa, Idaho, a large number of the public library patrons demanded that *Heather Has Two Mommies* be removed from the children's section of the library (Huskey 66). This forced removal of texts leaves young readers, whatever their sexuality, without depictions of queerness in their literature. Amy Vetter, an English education scholar, links literacy practices, learning processes, and identity formation in her work. Her suggestion is that "learning [and literacy] is an identity process" (37). If this is true, what does it mean for child readers that LGBT identities and voices are absent in schools, libraries, and bookstores? As a culture, are we insinuating, intentionally or not, that LGBT identities don't matter? That LGBT perspectives and works of literature do not matter? This may be the case as social, educational, and political spheres surrounding youth and literature—from the authors to the publishers to the bookstores, schools, libraries, and leaders—seem eager to ignore homosexuality.

A viable discourse regarding queer subtexts in children's literature is necessary to understand how readers, both homo- and heterosexual, are connecting with and drawing meanings from the texts that seem to, on the surface, ignore queerness. Queer theorist Alexander Doty, in his book *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*, states that queer subtexts are the product of: " (1) influences during the production of texts; (2) historically specific cultural readings and uses of texts by self-identified gays, lesbians, bisexuals, queers; and (3) adopting reception positions that can be considered 'queer' in

some way, regardless of a person's declared sexual and gender allegiances" (xi). Therefore, I submit that a text may be marked as containing the possibility of a queer subtext through the production of said text, the reception of a text by readers, or through cultural contexts relevant to contemporary readers.

This thesis will break into three distinct chapters that will highlight three segments of children's literature: picture books, texts for early readers, and texts for young adults. Chapter 1 deals with picture books and the seemingly implicit assumption that children are, and should remain, heterosexual. As picture books are used to introduce literature to children and can have lasting effects on the formation of identity, these implicit assumptions regarding sexuality are problematic. This chapter explores how readers might access queer subtextual readings in picture books through the use of encoded signs and uses Dave McKee's *Elmer* and Munro Leaf's *The Story of Ferdinand* as textual examples. Chapter 2 explores the line between homosocial bonding and queer subtext and the ways in which gender subversions can act as a beacon for queer subtextual readings. Annie Barrow's *Ivy and Bean* is used to explore how flexible characterization, androgyny in depictions of gender, and a homosocial friendship can provide queer possibilities in early reader texts. The final chapter of this thesis looks closely at adolescent literature. While sexuality, even homosexuality, is often permissible in adolescent literature, this permissibility comes at a price because sexuality in these texts is highly regulated. It is, perhaps, in queer subtexts that sexuality, most especially non-normative sexuality, can be presented in more realistic and accessible ways.

Chapter 1—Queering the Picture Book: Queer Subtexts in Picture Books

Picture books are often the formative experience a child has with literature. These texts are both shared aloud and enjoyed independently. Picture books help mediate the seemingly contradictory needs for a child to assert him or herself and to feel loved at the same time. Chava and Joseph Schwarcz posit that the picture book “attempts to entertain...and aid [the child] by offering plots, relationships, and metaphors for the various facets of [the search for identity]” (84). For children with non-heteronormative (queer) sensibilities, however, this search for self-understanding is especially difficult. Indeed, meaningful depictions of such queer sensibilities are lacking in children’s literature as a whole, as outlined in the introduction. Unfortunately, many of the explicitly queer children’s texts are “undelightful” and deal more with adult homosexuality than with childhood queerness (Huskey 66). This chapter will explore the relationship between the socially constructed and assumed heterosexuality of young readers, the existence of queer subtexts in picture books, and the purpose these subtextual readings serve within this genre. I will be using Munro Leaf’s *The Story of Ferdinand* and David McKee’s *Elmer* to illustrate that though these texts are not unique in their use of subtextual markers, they each present queer subtexts. This chapter will outline how these subtexts are created and accessed in different ways and for different purposes.

As adults we attempt to construct a distinct line between childhood and adulthood. This distinction is intended to distance us from actual children and from the child we once were. If we are no different than children, we believe, then we are not adults. In constructing childhood we are really attempting to define adulthood. According to Rose, childhood is culturally constructed through the ascription of innocence, and childhood innocence

involves the assumption that children are without sexuality (Rose). If the adult construction of childhood expels the sexual child, it does so doubly to the queer child. The dominant understanding of childhood, Steve Bruhm and Natasha Hurley suggest, expects children “are (and should stay) innocent of sexual desires and intentions. At the same time, however, children are also officially, tacitly, assumed to be heterosexual” (Bruhm ix). These contradicting assumptions become problematic. If a child is without sexual desires or intentions, how can he have a sexual orientation? As Bruhm and Hurley point out, the “architects of the child in culture have developed elaborate means of editing out or avoiding the kinds of sexuality children aren’t supposed to have” (Bruhm x). The existence of a queer child is an affront on the asexuality expected in children and the “supposedly blissful promise of adult heteronormality” (Bruhm ix).

It is the very act of editing or avoiding sexuality or sexual identity in children’s literature that leads to subtextualization. It seems that while homosexuality in children’s literature is absent, the myth that heterosexuality is the natural sexuality will continue to persist (Fuoss 163). Kirk Fuoss suggests that as long as homosexuality, let alone sexuality, remains exterior to characters in children’s literature, “it is still manageable, controllable, reversible” (Fuoss 166). Therefore, as Kathryn Stockton states, “The queer child, whatever its conscious grasp of itself, cannot unfold itself according to the category of ‘the homosexual’...since it is sexual” (Stockton 283). It is important to note that there is a great deal of discourse around defining at what age a child becomes aware of her sexual orientation. Whether fully aware of their sexual orientation or not, the queer child deserves texts that allow for safe dialogue in regard to his or her identity and that allow all young people freedom to explore.

Unfortunately, though, much of what is available for queer children is harmful. Books like *Heather Has Two Mommies* and *Daddy's Roommate* deal exclusively with the realm of adult sexuality, ignoring the possibility of the queer child. By ignoring the possibility that the queer child exists, we are in essence suggesting that the queer child is not natural or acceptable within our construction of identity. These texts further rely on heterosexuality to assert that homosexuality is “normal,” consequently rendering it abnormal, as the very act of expressing that something is “normal” makes visible the idea that it may not be (Trites, *Disturbing the Universe* 88). Queer subtexts, on the other hand, can subvert heteronormative assumptions without explicitly challenging them, allowing for a safe space for children to gradually and subtly develop an understanding of queer identity. Perry Nodelman suggests, “Rather than leaving the disturbing strange or symbolic ideas undepicted,” (282) we should create texts that help children put meaning behind the complex issues of identity. Queer subtexts do just that. Subtexts create a safe environment for approaching the sensitive subject of homosexuality.

To locate queer subtexts it is necessary to first expose the heteronormative ideology inherent in many mainstream children's texts. A queer reading in no way precludes a straight understanding of the same text—indeed several readings of a text can exist at the same time. As we are often unable to detach identity from gender it is necessary instead to develop non-normative identities by subverting and disrupting cultural assumptions (Butler 1-4). Subtexted queerness in children's literature, most especially picture books, makes use of encoded details and culturally familiar archetypes. As outlined in the introduction, Doty points to three ways in which queer subtexts are developed: intentional inclusion on the part of an author, illustrator, or publisher; a specific reception position on the part of a reader; or

through the inclusions of culturally recognized markers of queerness (whether intentional or not) (xi).

To illustrate my points about heteronormative ideologies, I will explore Leslea Newman's *Heather Has Two Mommies*. The following close reading will look at the conflicting ideologies pervading this picture book to make visible the ways in which heterocentrist ideologies can work against a text that touts an explicitly positive LGBT message.

Heather Has Two Mommies is a picture book about a little girl, named Heather, who is being raised by her lesbian mothers, Jane and Kate. The text introduces Heather, her animals, and her mothers and then goes on to explain how Heather's mothers came to be a family and how Heather was created using artificial insemination. The story explores the things Heather and her mommies do and what they like:

On weekends Heather and her two mommies are all together. They do lots of fun things. On sunny days they go to the park. On rainy days they stay inside and bake cookies. Heather likes to eat two gingersnaps and drink a big glass of milk. (Newman 14)

Towards the middle of the book Heather attends a playgroup. It is during a story time session at her playgroup that Heather becomes aware that she does not have a daddy. A discussion takes place between Heather's teacher Molly and Heather's playmates showing that each child has a unique family situation: "Molly picks up Heather and gives her a hug. 'Not everyone has a daddy,' Molly says. 'You have two mommies. That's pretty special. Miriam doesn't have a daddy either'" (Newman 22). The children all draw pictures of their families to share in their uniqueness. When Heather's mommies and her pets come to pick

her up she shares her picture of their family (a drawing of Jane, Kate, and their dog), and they all go home, presumably happy.

The story's plot is simplistic and not overly problematic on the surface. What I find most disappointing about this book are the illustrations. Nodelman states that "[illustrations] imply an overall mood or atmosphere that controls our understanding of the scenes depicted" (42). I would add that illustrations often depict emotions or ideas not present in the text of a story. The text and illustrations work in tandem to create meaning, which is not something that is happening effectively in *Heather Has Two Mommies*. The black and white illustrations are gloomy, cold, and uninviting to the reader. Color often provides a sense of mood and emotion, so the use of black and white illustrations in this text creates a mood counter to the mood seemingly elicited by the text. Certainly the decision to use black and white may not have been entirely Diana Souza's (the illustrator of *Heather Has Two Mommies*), as the editor and the production department might have made this decision as a cost-saving measure. Nonetheless, the detached feeling that comes from the illustrative devices of black and white seems to suggest that Heather's family is secretive and/or depressed.

The ways visual information is conveyed is not unlike the way in which most information is communicated. Illustrations use "systems of signification that work to create specific expectations in viewers" (Nodelman 42). Nodelman continues, "Like other aspects of pictorial significance, these systems depend upon a viewer's prior acquaintance with a variety of forms of experience" (42). The more experience a viewer has in the world, the more information he or she will be able to receive from an image. Because the pictures are so literal, there is very little room in *Heather Has Two Mommies* for a child to insert her

own experiences. Newman is very heavy handed in her attempts to depict a family with homosexual parents as normal and okay and perhaps this didacticism, this over the top educational message speaks at, rather than to, a child reader.

What I am most concerned with is the absence of a queer child in *Heather Has Two Mommies* and other similar texts intended to present homosexual families. Heather is a very carefully constructed child, from her Kewpie Doll appearance to her over-the-top innocence and naivety. When Heather realizes that she does not have a daddy, she is quite upset by this “new” information: “‘I don’t have a daddy,’ Heather says. She’d never thought about it before. Did everyone except Heather have a daddy? Heather feels sad and begins to cry” (Newman 21). I find it improbable that Heather would, at three years of age, just realize that she does not have a daddy. This sudden realization would mean that she had never read any books with fathers, watched movies with fathers, or gone to the store and seen children with their fathers—all highly unlikely. Heather’s naivety is unlikely but not uncommon in literature for children. If a child is without sexual desires or intentions and is oblivious to the sexuality of those around her, how can she have a sexual orientation? As Ohi suggests, “To say that children aren’t queer is a way of asserting that we know what children are and that we therefore know what adults are” (82).

A large number of reputable scholars and critics of children’s literature and culture agree that the sexual child does indeed exist, and with it a likely assortment of non-heteronormative children. Among these scholars is sex therapist Erika Pluhar, Ph.D. Pluhar notes that “Kids as young as nine begin to have crushes and perhaps physical feelings directed at other people” (Dolgoff n.pag). Kerry Robinson also takes on the sexual child in “Making the Invisible Visible” where she marries Butler’s notion of a socially constructed

sexual/gender identity and psychological/biological notions of a natural sexual identity. She notes, “sexuality is often narrowly defined by the physical sexual act rather than a crucial part of one’s identity, which is socially constructed and constantly reviewed and renegotiated by individuals, including children, throughout their lives” (419). However, the “architects of the child in culture have developed elaborate means of editing out or avoiding the kinds of sexuality children aren’t supposed to have” (Bruhm x). The existence of a queer child is an affront on the asexuality expected in children and the “supposedly blissful promise of adult heteronormality” (Bruhm ix). By making Heather’s mommies the sole focus of the queer label in this book, Newman seems to be perpetuating the myth of the asexual, yet heterosexual, child who will somehow, mysteriously, emerge one day as a sexual adult.

While *Heather Has Two Mommies* fails to address the queer child, I find that such texts as *The Story of Ferdinand* and *Elmer* are more successful in breaking with many of the traditional assumptions and depictions of the sexual, or queer, child in picture books. However, this recognition of the queer child is made through both subtle and more explicit subtextual clues. Thus, the double-edged sword that is presented tempers the success of these texts; childhood queerness can be ignored or relegated to a subtextual level.

Munro Leaf’s *The Story of Ferdinand*, illustrated by Robert Lawson, centers around an effeminate bull named Ferdinand. *Ferdinand* is the story of a young bull who prefers smelling the flowers to jumping around and butting head with all the other bulls. While all the other little bulls “would run and jump and butt their heads together,” Ferdinand would sit quietly and smell the flowers (Leaf 3-7). As Ferdinand grows big and strong, his temperament remains mellow, until the day he meets the wrong end of a bee (read: he sits

on, and subsequently is stung by, a bee). In a moment of true irony, the only day Ferdinand is not his mellow self (due to the unfortunate bee sting) is the selfsame day a group of men come to choose the fiercest bull for the bullfights in Madrid. Thanks to his comical outburst, Ferdinand is carted off to the city. However, Ferdinand quietly refuses to fight when thrust into the bullfighting ring, despite instant prodding. Ultimately, Ferdinand is carted back to his pasture where the text ends with an image of him contentedly sitting upon a hill, smelling the flowers.

Ferdinand's story possibly resonates with some queer children who do not enjoy the heteronormative activities ascribed to their gender. When Ferdinand opts out of the normative male conduct, the character can be seen as subverting heterocentrist assumptions, thus creating a queer subtext (Bruce 387). It is interesting to note that the presence of a constructed gender within a seemingly asexual text appears to exist with the intent of allowing Ferdinand the experience of breaking the gender construction. While it is not likely that Leaf intended a queer reading, it is hard to deny the resonant chord it strikes for a child who wishes to break free from his or her expected gender roles. This type of subtextual reading is a good example of Doty's concept of adopting a reception position, which was discussed earlier. Ferdinand refuses, even as a grown male bull, to play by the rules of normative male conduct. We are confronted with a standoff when Ferdinand is introduced into the bullfighting ring:

Ferdinand ran to the middle of the ring and everyone shouted and clapped because they thought he was going to fight fiercely and butt and snort and stick his horns around. But not Ferdinand. When he got to the middle of the

ring he saw the flowers in all the lovely ladies' hair and he just sat down quietly and smelled. (Leaf 56-58)

This standoff enlists the use of camp humor, which relies on extravagant, exaggerated, and dramatic elements presented with a level of naiveté (Bruce 384). Queer culture has long used camp humor as a way of subverting heteronormative assumptions. Behind Ferdinand's naive, even innocent, comedic refusal to participate in the bullfight is the deeper subversive message of his refusal to play into normative male conduct. While Ferdinand sits peacefully smelling and gazing upon the beautiful flowers, a cast of characters parade before him, stamping their feet and waving their arms attempting to engage Ferdinand in his aggressive masculine role (Leaf 61). While the scene is laughable, it also holds poignancy in Ferdinand's calm refusal to play along. Camp humor is also enlisted when Ferdinand is chosen as the fiercest bull of Madrid. As readers, we are aware of the circumstances leading to Ferdinand's outburst (his sitting on a bee). Lawson camps up this scene for us by depicting Ferdinand with a rather comical expression (Leaf 33). We can see that he does not look fierce even during this supposedly fierce outburst. Rather, he looks surprised. It is our intimate knowledge of Ferdinand's gentle demeanor, and Lawson's choice to depict Ferdinand in a comical manner, that creates the camp humor in this scene. This scene also shows us Ferdinand's real identity as opposed to the identity others think he is supposed to have by juxtaposing the two to show gender expectations as imposed from the outside, as constructed.

The dialogue that exists between the text and pictures adds an element of irony to Ferdinand. Nodelman discusses the subtle sort of irony that exists "when the tone of the words in a picture book does not seem to match the situation the picture shows us"

(Nodelman 226). For example, while we are told several times in the text that Ferdinand is happy, the images seem to depict a lonely protagonist. The only bovine character we see Ferdinand with is his mother. Of the three images illustrating both Ferdinand and his mother in the same scene, only one image depicts Ferdinand and his mother interacting. The other two images show his mother in the foreground and Ferdinand relegated to a lonely silhouette in the far left corner of each page. While the text tells us in a matter of fact tone that Ferdinand is happy, the illustrations suggest otherwise. Another such irony is created the first time we see Ferdinand as an adult: "...Ferdinand grew and grew until he was very big and strong" (Leaf 18). The illustration on the facing page does in deed depict a large, muscular bull (presumably Ferdinand). He is looking rather dreamily at the remains of a half dead tree, and up the remaining trunk are marks indicating years in Ferdinand's growth. Sitting atop the broken trunk is a vulture looking serenely down on Ferdinand. We are expected to assume Ferdinand is a healthy bull. However, the symbolic use of a vulture seems to indicate death hanging around Ferdinand's lonely existence. Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins point out that queer texts are riddled with homosexual characters "doomed to either a premature death or a life of despair lived at the darkest margins of society" (Cart xvi). Ferdinand's queer subtext subtly perpetuates this unfortunate role for queer characters. Ferdinand must exist either as a dead bull in the bullfighting ring of Madrid or as a live queer bull on a lonely dark hill. *Ferdinand* could be read as a cautionary tale about the hard road ahead for those who opt out of heteronormative conduct and therefore may, ultimately, be more harmful than helpful as a queer subtext.

David McKee's *Elmer* presents a different, more optimistic queer subtext and arguably one that may have developed during its production. This is the story of an unusual

elephant that has a multicolored patchwork coat amongst a herd of characteristically grey elephants. Despite Elmer's positive attitude and friendly personality, he begins to feel self-conscious about his appearance and starts to worry that the other elephants are laughing at his multicolored skin. In the jungle, Elmer discovers a bush of elephant colored berries. Thus, he covers himself in the berry juice and returns to the herd looking like the other typically grey elephants. At first Elmer enjoys his anonymity. However, after a while he realizes how dull things are when he's not around. Eventually Elmer reveals himself and has the herd laughing and joyful in no time. The story ends with a depiction of a newly established yearly celebration where all the elephants paint themselves multicolored to celebrate and honor their love for Elmer.

The character of Elmer reads as a walking gay pride flag, a patchwork of colors splashed across his elephant body. The text and images work in tandem to create the sense that there is a double entendre at play. Elmer is both gay in the sense that he is delightful and happy, and in the sense that he is queer. It is interesting to note that, unlike Ferdinand, Elmer exists in a space devoid of heteronormative assumptions. In fact, the normative assumptions made in the text turn out to be false and created within Elmer's own self-doubt. It is not the other Elephants who question Elmer's identity, but Elmer himself.

Camp humor is used in the depiction of Elmer to further express his queerness. He is over the top in both actions and depictions:

The other elephants were standing absolutely still, silent and serious. Elmer had never seen them so serious before. It made him want to laugh. Finally he could bear it no longer. He lifted his trunk and, at the top of his voice, shouted -- BOOO! (McKee 21-24)

The elephants jump about in surprise and begin to laugh. McKee chose to illustrate their reaction to Elmer's outburst as a mess of elephants flying through the air in exaggerated surprise and delight.

We find that, despite the other elephants' delight in Elmer and the illustrative depictions that suggest an exuberant elephant, Elmer is unhappy with himself. While the other elephants have accepted Elmer's differences without question, Elmer is unable to accept himself: "'Whoever heard of a patchwork elephant?' he thought. 'No wonder they laugh at me!'" (McKee 7). The development of identity is a task wrought with self-doubt, and this doubt is doubled for an identity that is formed outside the normative construct. As Sedgwick states, "It's always open season on gay kids" (Cart 18). Elmer's self-doubt and subsequent attempt to make himself just like the other elephants by covering himself with mud resonates a queer sensibility. Queer children lack explicit advice on how to develop their queer identity and are often left with self-doubt and the feeling that they should simply act as heteronormative children do (Sedgwick 23). The explicit message of Elmer is that we should accept the differences in ourselves and others. The text comforts children with queer identities by suggesting that they are loved for the person they truly are and need not perform under a false identity to be accepted.

However, McKee's choice to have Elmer perform as a normative elephant in the final scene, which I half jokingly refer to as the gay pride parade, suggests a dual message. While McKee creates a safe space for queer children to develop an understanding of how they might be accepted, he also allows for the possibility that they are not ready to come out or be received as queer within heteronormative society. It is important to remember that we create our identity somewhere between how we are received by society and how we behave

with regard to our own sense of self (Butler 5). It is in the act of hiding his identity that Elmer becomes such a perfect allegory for the closet in which many homosexual children exist. Elmer is not able to fully embrace his identity until he it is hidden. The act of hiding his identity allows Elmer to gain agency and maintain control. Ultimately, the text creates a comforting subtextual dialogue to help queer children to develop their own identity.

Meaningful depictions of queer childhood have proven elusive in children's texts. As Abate and Kidd note, queer picture books often "push lesbian/gay identity into queerness, and both into the forbidden zone of childhood" (*Over the Rainbow* 7). Yet the queer child persists. Their first experiences with literature help shape their self-understanding, which clues us into the idea that there must be something below the surface of children's literature. Borrowing from established methods of understanding subtext in mass culture we can begin to understand and make visible queer subtexts in children's literature. While some may argue that sub-textual understandings are the result of "just reading queerness into things," by revealing what encoded details are present in a text we are able to shed light on something real (Doty xi). *Ferdinand* and *Elmer* have subtextual clues that suggest something queer lies below the surface. Subtextual queerness does not necessarily detract from the message nor from enjoyment intended in a text. It can, however, provide an alternative message, or an augmented message that allows for the enjoyment of children who might feel out of place in normative culture. There has been little work in developing understandings of queer subtext in children's literature, and it is clear that such scholarly pursuits are greatly needed if we are to support healthy self-awareness in even our most curious children.

Chapter 2—More Than Good Friends: Queer Subtexts in Books for Young Readers

Early readers are generally intended for readers nearing or on the verge of going through puberty. These are children who are beyond childhood, but not quite welcomed into young adulthood. Thus, as a culture we acknowledge sexuality as a future goal for this cohort. In fact, even in texts with explicit LGBT content at this level, such as James Howe's *Totally Joe*, in which the protagonist is an openly gay middle schooler, the promise of sexual intimacy and desire is pushed into the future: "I may have figured out that I'm gay, but sorry, I'm *not* ready to exchange saliva with anybody. The boyfriend thing can *so* wait" (187-88). This insistence on keeping sexuality as a future possibility (both homo- and heterosexuality) often leads to early readers with same-sex friendships at the center of the narrative as these friendships seem innocent to the assumed heterosexuality of the readers. What these same-sex friendships fail to account for, however, is the possibility of homosocial desire and/or homosexual desire that might be forming for readers at this stage.

The term homosocial refers to the social bonds between people of the same sex. While this bond is often depicted non-sexually (regarding neither sexual desire or sexual orientation), Sedgwick, among others, argues that there is a continuum linking homosocial desire with homosexual desire. She also outlines homosocial desire in literature as a driving force between male characters. However, this homosociality (as the driving force between male characters) seems to traditionally require homophobia as a precondition. Sherman Alexie's *Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* illustrates this in the scene where Junior (the protagonist and narrator) shares an illustration of his friend Rowdy and himself holding hands while jumping into a lake together. Below the image is the caption: "Boys can hold hands until they turn nine" (17). What Alexie is bringing to our attention is the fact that

homosocial bonds carry very strict rules about what is permissible, presumably to keep the bonds from being misconstrued as homosexual. It could be argued that adults are driving children at this stage into homosocial networks as we hope to prepare them for their gendered stations in life.

Often the most important relationships in early readers, where the most transformative action takes place, are between two males or two females. While lots of early readers focus on same-sex friendships, very few consider the possibility that these friendships might one day develop into romances. It is subtextually that this possibility for romance might be accessible. I worry, though, that relegating the possibility of same-sex romance to a subtextual level alone can be harmful to child readers as they are further taught that queer sexual desire must be hidden and should not be discussed openly.

Michael Kimmel outlines homophobia as a manifestation of the homosocial:

Which is the fear that other people might perceive us as being gay. This is where it ties in most directly to the ideologies of masculinity or femininity as we know them. To make sure no one could get the wrong idea that I might somehow be gay, one goes through an elaborate repertoire of behaviors, ideas, displays... That terror that someone might see us as gay fuels all the ways in which we talk, dress, move in the world—to make sure no one could get that idea. As a result, homophobia becomes a real straightjacket, pushing us toward a very traditional definition of masculinity (Nodelman and Reimer 167-68).

Children almost self-regulate their gender construction out of fear that they might be perceived as non-normative (queer). They don't want to be singled out as being different, to

be called “gay” or to feel like a freak. Thus, the rules of homosocial bonding are strict and tend to be followed very carefully.

As children’s bodies change and sexual desires begin to manifest, it seems there is a desire, on the part of adults, to keep children separated by gender. I use gender very carefully here, as it is often during this stage of a child’s life that gender becomes a carefully controlled performance. The “natural” assumption is that heterosexuality is the norm, that boys will begin lusting after girls and girls after boys, and so boys should be kept away from girls as their sexuality begins to manifest, and vice versa. Boys are encouraged to play with other boys, girls with other girls.

Nodelman and Reimer note that, “Deprived of the opportunity to read books describing situations like their own—and as Virginia L. Wolf reports, few such books exist—these children have no choice but to conclude that they are freaks” (52). I agree with Wolf’s further assessment that “The lack of information available to young people about the gay family is an injustice” (quoted in Nodelman and Reimer 52). It is in these instances where child readers’ own situations are not reflected, however, that we find queer subtextual readings. Further, Nodelman and Reimer quote Elizabeth A. Ford as suggesting “ultimately, it is the fear that children might learn about their own sexual identities, not about the sexuality of adults around them, that makes these books [with explicit queer content] controversial” (129). These fears necessitate subtexts.

Texts for early readers tend to either construct normative gendered behavior or purposefully subvert these constructions. We see normative depictions in books like *Charlotte’s Web*. Conversely, books like *Ivy and Bean* construct protagonists who are in contrast to normative gender roles and expectations. *Ivy and Bean* is great example of queer

subtexts in early readers because it positions Ivy and Bean within a homosocial bond, but then breaks the expectations of how these two girls should behave. While *Ivy and Bean* is an excellent contemporary text imbued with queer possibilities, it draws heavily on the success of books like *Pippi Longstockings* and *Harriet the Spy*, which have been previously marked as containing queer subtexts.

Karen Coats writes about *Pippi Longstockings* that, “Cast in Lacanian terms, Pippi’s subjective position is the position of the not-all, which she, unlike the Woman qua symptom of man, actively inhabits. It is, ultimately, a position of queerness, and one of joy” (113). In short, Pippi is neither male nor not male and is thus positioned queerly for the reader and within the text. We see a similar position taken up by Bean in Annie Barrows *Ivy and Bean*. Bean does not behave the way a little girl ought to and is constantly placed in stark contrast to both her sister and Ivy, who seem to exemplify the physicality of the female gender. *Ivy and Bean* is an early chapter book, a set of early readers that follows two seven-year-old girls, Ivy and Bean. Bean is a troublemaker who specializes in stomping in puddles while Ivy is the “nice” girl next door who just so happens to be practicing to be a witch. The two girls become quick friends and subsequently pull several pranks on Bean’s older sister Nancy.

For me, the queer subtext of *Ivy and Bean* is apparent before even opening the book as the cover seems to suggest a romantic desire between the girls. The title on the book appears as “Ivy + Bean” harkening to young girls who write notes in their binders pairing themselves with their love interest using the plus symbol with an equal symbol adding up to the word “love” or a heart. Below the title “Ivy + Bean” the two girls stand back to back but gaze slyly at one another. The shape of their heads suggests a crude heart shape.

We begin to see queerness more explicitly in Bean as she revels in the in-between spaces, much like Pippi. While reading about one of her favorite subjects, cats, she takes particular joy in the sphinx cat noting, “All the cats looks the same [in her reading] except the sphinx cat, who didn’t have any fur. He looked halfway between a dog and a rat. Bean liked him best” (7). Just as Pippi existed between male and not male, Bean seems to take particular joy in the negotiations of identity and self. For a reader just beginning to go through puberty, whose body is changing at rapid paces and who may be starting to question her sexuality and/or gender, such a character becomes a reflective pool in which she can enjoy the pleasure that Bean is taking in the identity flux.

Ivy presents an equally flexible character that, while not renegotiating body or identity directly, focuses her renegotiations outside of the body. She constantly repurposes the spaces of her room. The spaces are divided using chalk which further points to Ivy’s flexibility as these lines can be erased and redrawn at will. As Jennifer Miskec notes, Ivy “utilizes ‘typical’ icons of little girlness but subverts expectations by repurposing them” (165). Just like Janie Gibbs in *Harriet the Spy* who “had a chemistry set and planned one day to blow up the world” (29), Ivy repurposes her play kitchen to be used as a “science lab for making potions” (62). Both Ivy’s and Bean’s flexible identities can be read as subtextually bisexual as they both seem comfortable in the in-between and constantly renegotiated spaces of identity.

While Ivy is more recognizable as a typical female, from her physical appearance to her collection of dolls, her identity is equally as queer as Bean’s androgyny. Of particular note, she identifies as a witch, which is often associated with queerness and even lesbianism. Antonella Corsani makes this comparison apparent in her article “Beyond the Myth of

Woman: The Becoming-Transfeminist of (Post-) Marxism,” when she states, “Witches were women without husbands who refused marriage, figures of a sexuality that resisted normalization, a sexuality that did not find its goal in procreation, but in a non-productive, deviant sexuality” (123). In fact, Miskec points out that Bean’s androgyny is almost to be expected in a white middle-class young girl, while Ivy’s performance as a witch (albeit a badly performed witch) is far more queer (165).

Early reader books seem to exist within their own marginalized realm. They are neither full chapter books nor picture books. Defining the reading age for these books proves equally difficult. Perhaps, as Miskec opines, “it is with these funny little chapter books—this already queer subgenre of early reader—where true change is going to happen [with regards to the depictions of girlhood]” (170). Miskec is talking specifically about the portrayals of girlhood in early readers but her point is still relevant here. It is often in marginalized spaces that artists have the freedom to subvert dominant ideologies. *Ivy and Bean* seems to be doing just that by representing the possibility of queerness for preadolescent readers.

Chapter 3—Making Themselves Queer: Queer Subtexts in Young Adult Literature

While sexuality in literature for young children is not overtly recognized, sexuality is an expected and accepted aspect of Young Adult literature (YA literature). The image of the hormone-driven teenager pervades our cultural assumptions regarding adolescence. It is because sexuality is recognized in YA literature, however, that we find a more stringent construction of what this sexuality is and should be. Homosexuality has traditionally been categorically erased from mainstream adolescent literature. Queer characters were secondary props in another character's story, as seen in both Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and Francesca Lia Block's *Weetzie Bat*. Queer narrators were all but absent from mainstream YA literature until recently. Furthermore, historically, most of the queer characters present in mainstream YA literature were equated with despair, loneliness, and death.

In recent years, however, the explosion of Queer YA literature has inspired optimism with regard to homosexuality. Themes of homosexuality in YA literature are far less troubling for most readers as these texts are dealing with the sexuality of adolescents, as opposed to the sexuality of children (Kidd 114). We are presented with Queer narrators in YA literature, and these queer characters are afforded the possibility of hope and strength. However, while these overtly homosexual texts are certainly a step forward, they often perpetuate the binary construction of sexuality pervasive in our culture (i.e. homo- vs. heterosexual, masculinity vs. femininity, and the idea that sexual relationships involve maleness and femaleness). The construction of such characters enables stereotypes regarding homosexuality, and regarding sexuality as a whole, to continue. Homosexual characters, in these texts, often seem to unfold only when isolated from heterosexual society/characters.

This is seen in the novels *Rainbow Boys* by Alex Sanchez and Francesca Lia Block's *Baby Be-Bop*.

Sometimes queer themes unfold in more nuanced, complex ways in texts that address queerness more subtly. Indeed, it may be in queer subtexts that themes of homosexuality are able to break free of these binary and heteronormative constructions, ultimately subverting them in the process. This is not always done successfully and often falls into many of the binary and normative traps of explicitly homosexually themed literature. Ultimately, YA literature about queer characters, whether they are explicitly queer or subtextually so, is founded in language rather than in biological acts (Trites, *Disturbing the Universe* 115). The ways in which these texts explore queerness requires, to a certain extent, that readers bring their own metatextual and experiential knowledge to the reading. In the end, explicitly and subtextually queer literature relies on the dynamic between language, power, and repression to create discourses about what it means to be queer in our own world. Ultimately, I believe that subtextually queer YA literature is often more successful in deconstructing normative assumptions pervasive in our culture than explicitly queer YA literature.

Young Adult literature is often assumed to have a bibliotherapeutic application for readers, especially when exploring themes of sexuality. Kirk Fuoss notes that “numerous scholars comment on the importance of books in the lives of gays and lesbians” (159). While books about homosexual teenagers allow for readers to explore “freedom from past constraints, freedom from continued repression, freedom from narrow-minded discourse” (Trites, *Queer Discourse* 143), these same books often perpetuate the oppressive binary and normative constructs and ultimately create what Trites refers to as “double-voicedness” (Trites, *Queer Discourse*). Ultimately, these conflicting messages boil down to the three

levels of ideology outlined by Peter Hollindale: The explicit ideology or profound message found in a text, the unexamined assumptions or implicit ideology under the surface of a text, and the cultural ideology inherent to any text. The explicit ideology in some texts does not match up with the implicit or cultural ideology below the surface of the same text.

Hollindale points out, “It is at this level of intended surface ideology [explicit ideology] that fiction carries new ideas, non-conformist or revolutionary attitudes, and efforts to change imaginative awareness in line with contemporary social criticism” (28). While an author may set out with the purpose of creating a text with a particular ideological purpose, often there is a level of ideology, with which the author may not even be aware of infusing the text, that does not match the explicit/purposeful ideology the author intends. This is, unfortunately, what often happens with YA literature that has explicit LGBT content.

Power and repression are central to Young Adult literature, and even more so in queer YA literature, as our society tends to regulate sexuality very carefully. The sexual acts in YA literature are often metaphors for empowerment (Trites, *Disturbing the Universe* 84). In many ways, acting on sexuality is what marks a character in YA literature as having “left childhood behind” (84). Even as these characters appear to be empowered, however, they are repressed. Trites notes that often YA texts share the ideology that sex is to be feared, not celebrated. Michel Foucault very carefully separates sexuality and sex. He suggests that sex is a biological act while sexuality is a construct of language (*History* 68-69). This separation is a way to regulate and repress sexuality in our culture. YA literature deals mostly in sexuality (that is, after language), but in the language rather than the act of sexuality. This sexuality, then, depends upon repression so it can be constructed within the binary of what is normal and what is deviant. Even texts explicitly touting the belief that adolescent sexuality,

even homosexuality, is normal ultimately point out the pervading assumption that sexuality, most especially homosexuality, is deviant. The very act of expressing an assurance that something is normal makes visible the idea that it may not be. Texts explicitly for homosexual adolescents try especially hard to empower queer teens. This empowerment is repressed, however, in the tendency of such novels to focus on the discourse of sexuality rather than the physical sexual acts of homosexuals (Trites, *Disturbing the Universe* 103).

Characters like Dirk in Block's *Baby Be-Bop* are constructed almost entirely by language. Dirk's sexuality is not based in the biological acts of sex but in his own knowledge and in the language he uses to express his sexuality. *Baby Be-Bop* is a prequel to *Weetzie Bat*. In the novel Dirk gains an understanding of his homosexuality. Dirk illustrates another important aspect of queer YA literature. As Trites states: "Sexuality is defined by the relationship between power, knowledge, and pleasure" (*Disturbing the Universe* 103). Power and language together form a repressive barrier on pleasure in queer YA literature. It is the knowledge of homophobia and AIDS that stunts the physical pleasure of characters in these novels. In *Baby Be-Bop* Dirk feels more pain than pleasure as he is rejected by his best friend Pup due to homophobia. Trites continues on to say that despite his pain "he never denies his knowledge of the pleasure he takes in his orientation" (*Disturbing the Universe* 107). In *Weetzie Bat* it is Duck who has his pleasure undermined when he learns of his friend Bam-Bam's AIDS. In the letter he leaves for Weetzie, My Secret Agent Lover Man, Dirk, and the babies, Duck says, "Even though we're okay, how can anyone love anyone when you could kill them just by loving them?" (Block, *Weetzie Bat* 98). The rejection of love as a plot line is part of the homosexual AIDS trope in YA literature which I will discuss in more detail later. What is most notable about the discursive nature of Dirk's pleasure and

pain is the deferment of his pleasure. In *Weetzie Bat* Dirk functions as a secondary character, a role often reserved for homosexual characters in YA literature.

The relegation of homosexual characters to a secondary position is also seen with Patrick in Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. As the only explicitly homosexual character in the novel, he functions only within Charlie's first person narrative. Similarly, Dirk is only given a voice retroactively in the prequel *Baby Be-Bop*. He is promised happiness with Duck, but only in the future (103-104). A paradox is created in which he can either have a voice or pleasure, but never both simultaneously. His happiness, his pleasure of sex and sexuality, exists only within the pages of *Weetzie Bat* where he is rendered voiceless. This connects to Kirk Fuoss' concern:

The implication (of having almost no homosexual narrators) seems to be that while it's one thing to permit talk *about* homosexuality, it is quite another matter to permit a homosexual to talk. (106, my emphasis)

While Block has certainly created a positive characterization of male homosexuality, this paradoxical implication is problematic.

Even when homosexual characters become protagonists and are given a voice, a text can remain problematic in the ideology it espouses. The construction of gender and sexuality in YA literature is extremely important. These constructions in Sanchez's *Rainbow Boys* series are seductive in that they seem to empower homosexual adolescents through the exclusive use of homosexual protagonists and in their breaking from the historic tradition of equating homosexuality with death and despair in YA literature. However, it is important to be aware of the ways in which unconscious cultural ideology shapes the construction of gender and sexuality in this series. As Butler states, "The institution of a compulsory and

naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire” (*Gender Trouble*, 22-23).

Though all three protagonists (Nelson, Kyle, and Jason), who alternate narrating each chapter, are explicitly homosexual, they ultimately reinforce normative binary constructs. The construction of their sexuality relies heavily on stereotypes of normative gender and sexuality. The stereotypes of males as aggressive and dominating and females as submissive and self-sacrificing are perpetuated in the characterizations that fall within the stereotype of one gender binary or the other. For example, Kyle is constantly swooning before Jason: “Kyle melted beneath Jason’s brown eyes. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said, though he wasn’t certain why he was apologizing” (Sanchez, *Rainbow Boys* 17). Kyle reads easily as feminine throughout the series, while Jason remains unabashedly masculine. Furthermore, these stereotypes are enacted within the homosexual relationships depicted in the series, thus maintaining the fallacy that gay male relationships consist of one partner enacting the part of a stereotypical female and the other of a stereotypical male (Crisp 240). While the use of stereotypically gendered relationship roles is likely done to make the texts more appealing to non-queer readers, it perpetuates the construction of homosexuality as other and fosters misconceptions about it. It is a sad truth that for a queer text to be a commercial success, as Sanchez’s series has been, it must appeal to non-homosexual audiences as well as to homosexuals. The necessity to market for both homosexual and heterosexual readers further proves that “Heterosexual culture does not like to conceive of itself as ‘heterosexual culture,’ preferring instead to conceive of itself as ‘culture’” (Fuoss 163).

Sanchez's series perpetuates the abjection of homosexuality by constructing a world that is a "frightening and dangerous place where homosexuals find solace *only* when isolated from the heterosexual population" (Crisp 240, my emphasis). All three characters seem to be on their guard in the larger world. It is only within the isolated homosexual communities that they seem to be most comfortable with themselves. Later in the series the three stay at a "sanctuary for gay and lesbian people" (Sanchez *Rainbow Road* 65) while on a road trip. The sanctuary is described as a place where "no one hassled you for being crazily queer, a place where you could totally be yourself" (70). Aside from the unfortunate comparison in my mind of a wild animal "sanctuary," Sanchez seems to be sending a message to his implied readers that "gay people can find solace from intolerance by isolating themselves from heterosexuals" (Crisp 258). To drive this point home, within the larger cultural context of the series Jason, Nelson, and Kyle have injustices and homophobia enacted upon them repeatedly:

Kyle arrived at school to find a group of students gathered in the hall pointing at his locker. As he got closer, his heart sank. Across the front in prominent letters was scratched the word QUEER. (Sanchez, *Rainbow Boys* 129).

Kirk Fuoss points out the contradiction that while acts of homosexuality are not often acceptable in YA novels, violence against homosexuals (homophobic violence etc...) is allowed (164). The prevalence of homophobic violence is, certainly, a reality faced by many LGBT adolescents. The Gay, Lesbian, Straight Educational Network released a study in 2010 that noted nearly 90 percent of LGBT youth reported experiencing harassment in school due to their gender and/or sexual identity in the past year. While Sanchez is certainly more explicit about the sexual acts than the ellipsis used in the past for homosexual acts of

sexuality in YA literature, Fuoss' argument seems to hold true. Sanchez is far more explicit in describing the homophobic gay bashing Neslon and Kyle endure compared with the abstract treatment of their respective sex scenes. It seems that Sanchez is trapped in an impossible situation familiar to many multicultural literature authors: write what is authentic and real or write what is positive and provides a model of what could/should be.

In addition to addressing issues of violence against homosexuals, Sanchez is also frank about AIDS within the homosexual community. I agree with Thomas Crisp's assessment that "although well-intentioned, it seems that [Sanchez's] efforts to educate and raise consciousness about the AIDS virus may actually reinforce homophobic discourse" (240). The way that Sanchez depicts the virus within his texts seems to imply that AIDS is an inevitability for gay men. When Kyle comes out to his parents, his father immediately questions, "Since you brought all this up. Is there's anything else we should know? About your health?" (Sanchez, *Rainbow Boys* 106). His father is concerned that Kyle may have AIDS. This concern is echoed several times over for all three characters. When the second novel, *Rainbow High*, begins, Nelson is reflecting on the inevitability of his contracting the AIDS virus while waiting for the results of his HIV test. When the test comes back negative, he reveals that he wants to contract the virus so he "wouldn't have to worry all the time about when I'm going to get it" (Sanchez, *Rainbow High* 168). Interestingly, Crisp points out that the third novel *Rainbow Road* is stamped with an HIV/AIDS awareness logo despite the minimal references to the virus. He goes on to argue that this is "problematic (and heterosexist) unless every book depicting teen sexual activity...is stamped with such a logo" (258). In essence, constructing AIDS as an inevitable part of homosexuality suggests that it is "the gay identity itself, and not certain activities, that place [a gay male] at risk" (McRuer

140). Admittedly, AIDS is a very real concern within the gay community. My issue is not so much with Sanchez's decision to include this topic in his series; rather, I am troubled by the way in which he includes it.

Successful or harmful, homosexually explicit texts are still, as Kenneth Kidd reminds us, "frequently removed from school and public libraries" ("Introduction: Lesbian/Gay Literature" 114). Therefore a great deal of homosexuality becomes subtexted either in the creation phase, by an author, or in the reception phase, by a reader. This is not to say that subtexted queerness works in the same ways that explicit texts do. Kidd argues, "Our challenge is to acknowledge that while bodies of attractions are real and should not be trivialized, representations transform as well as profile those realities" ("Introduction" 115). What Kidd is calling for is careful depictions of homosexual desire within literature for children and adolescents that both depict the realities but also account for the power these depictions have within the real world. He seems to be touting the belief that literature can effect change and that a positive depiction of homosexual youth can help change real attitudes in the world. He goes on to note that "what is often more interesting about literary texts...is not how they fit certain categories, but how they complicate and/or evade them" (115). I would argue that queer subtexts do just that, complicate and evade assumptions of what sexuality in literature for children and young adults could and should be. Queer subtexts in YA literature seem to allow for the complex constructs of sexuality to unfold in a way that empowers the queer adolescent reader. Michael Cart suggests that YA literature is "the quintessential literature of the outsider" (Cart 2004), and no adolescent reader feels like more of an outsider than a homosexual teenager. It is often in subtexted queerness that homosexual young adult readers find reflections of their non-heteronormative identities.

Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*, for example, reads like a coming-out story. *Speak* is the story of a girl named Melinda who is outcast as a high school freshman for having called the police at a summer party which led to the police breaking up the party. Throughout the novel, readers slowly learn the reason for Melinda's call to the police; a senior named Andy Evans raped her at the party. The novel follows Melinda through a full school year as she comes to terms with the trauma of having been raped and ultimately confronts her rapist. Not only does the protagonist, Melinda, literally and metaphorically retreat into a closet to cope with the trauma of having been raped, she also works towards (re)constructing her identity (Latham 369). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests that the closet serves as a metaphor for homosexual secrecy and disclosure (*Epistemology* 67-68). Melinda uses the closet to maintain the secret of her sexual assault. Melinda spends the majority of the novel positioned as an outcast. Additionally, she is silenced for the bulk of the novel. While the silence of explicitly homosexual characters in YA literature traditionally served to repress their sexuality within a text, Melinda's silence is, in many ways, self-inflicted and ultimately serves to empower the discovery of her identity through voice. Cart, Jenkins, and Sedgwick separately note that homosexuality is "the love that is famous for daring not speak its name"³ (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 67). Don Latham explores the ways in which Melinda's trauma connects with her silence and finds that often victims of sexual abuse find their trauma to be "unsayable" (372). The connection between Melinda's explicit sexual trauma, her silence, and the queer subtext present is undeniable. Anderson may not have been aware of this conjunction, but that does not keep homosexual readers from picking up on a subtextual queerness here. Latham suggests, "From the queer perspective of the closet,

³ This line is in reference to Lord Alfred Douglas' poem *Two Loves* printed in 1986. The line "the love that dare not speak its name" was made famous, however, during Oscar Wilde's 1895 indecency trial.

Melinda is able, perhaps a bit more clearly than her peers, to see the performative, nonessentialist nature of identity and gender” (373).

According to Butler, gender and identity are performative in nature. She continues, “As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender [and by extension, identity] requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 178). It is from her outsider perspective that Melinda is able to recognize the performative nature of identity. The farther Melinda is removed from her culture and the performance of her own identity within that culture, the more aware of the fluidity of identity she becomes. She notices the change in her ex-best friend, Rachel, and in her own fragmented identity. Ultimately, Melinda’s loss of identity and subsequent reconstruction symbolizes Lacan’s mirror stage. Melinda rejects her image in mirrors as a way of rejecting the illusion of herself being whole. It is not until she folds herself into the three-way mirror that Melinda accepts the “performative nature and inherent fluidity of identity” (Latham 375). This concept of identity is, ultimately, postmodern in the idea of self as evolving and changing and unknowable in full. In becoming aware of the fluid nature of identity, Melinda brings to light for the reader the possibilities for his or her own identity performances. Just as a homosexual teenager must first become aware of the inconsistencies in her heteronormative gender performances, Melinda has to accept the inconsistencies in her performances to fully construct a new identity. In doing so, a queer subtext is created for YA readers either in the closet regarding their sexuality or in the process of coming out.

The trouble with the subtext in *Speak* is, of course, the connotation between homosexuality and sexual trauma. Unfortunately, all too often homosexuality is conjoined

with unfortunate aspects of human existence like trauma, familial dysfunction, rape, or abuse. In *Baby Be-Bop* the genie explains why he appeared: “Do you know that only two things have been proven to help survivors of the Holocaust? Massage is one. Telling their story is another” (Block 104). While Block was likely trying to make the connection between discourse and power here, she ultimately compares homosexuality to the Holocaust, though it is worth noting that homosexuals were persecuted in the Nazi concentration camps. Both Anderson and Block fall into the language of pathology in their construction of non-normative identity.

Pathology is not the only avenue available for presenting or reading queer subtexts in YA literature. Rather, a more viable, and perhaps more easily visible, path lies with homosexual experience itself. An author, or a reader, can explore queer possibilities within a text by recognizing the familiar experiences of coming-out, performing sexuality, and dealing with societal pressures dictating sexuality and gender. J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series allows for just such a reading.

The queer subtext in Rowling’s series is easily accessible for readers in varying gender and sexual identity situations. Not only is Harry an outsider within his own family, his Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon are so embarrassed by him that they force Harry to repress the non-normative parts of his identity (namely his magic/wizarding powers). For instance, when Harry Potter and Rubeus Hagrid meet for the first time since Harry’s infancy, Hagrid is horrified to learn that Harry knows nothing of his identity, “‘Yeh don’ know what yah *are*?’ he said finally. Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice. ‘Stop!’ he commanded. ‘Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!’” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 50). Additionally, Harry’s Aunt and Uncle quite literally keep him in the closet (the

cupboard beneath the stairs) from which he must emerge to accept his non-normative identity as a wizard. In several ways, Rowling wages a war on normalcy in her series, though it ultimately ends in a heteronormative way (i.e. the protagonists are all married off to opposite sex partners and have children of their own). However, Tison Pugh and David L. Wallace state, “The *Potter* series establishes a tension between normativity and queerness, in which queerness might appear to have the upper hand” (262). There is certainly a struggle between this queer subtext and the reality that heteronormative heroism and normalcy exist in the series. Annette Wannamaker sums up why the text is still important:

Ultimately, these books are popular with so many child and adult readers, not because they didactically advocate *either* feminist or patriarchal ideals, but because, through their complex portrayals of characters, gender, and relationships, they depict the anxieties, tensions, and uncertainties about contemporary gender roles that readers of all ages are continuously working to define and to negotiate (para. 1 emphasis in original).

In many ways, the *Harry Potter* series is more realistic in establishing conflicting notions of normalcy and queerness than many of the other texts discussed in this thesis. Rowling seems to embrace the contradictions present in our own cultural constructions of gender and sexuality. Some heteronormative gender roles are present; Mrs. Weasley is the quintessential image of the homemaker and her domestic duties along with her excessive worrying break no gender mold. Yet other gender roles are shattered, or at the very least stretched with such characters as Dumbledore and Hermione.

The queer subtext, however, seems fairly straightforward. Aside from Harry’s residence in a closet, from which he must “come out of” to accept his non-normative

identity, Rowling includes a few other clues for readers knowledgeable of LGBT history and culture. If Harry had not been swept up in the world of witches and wizards, he would have attended “Stonewall High, the local public school” (Rowling, *Sorcerer* 32). Stonewall carries a strong homosexual connotation “as it refers to the gay bar in New York City that many historians credit as the foundational site of the modern gay rights movement in America” (Pugh & Wallace 265). Furthermore, Harry’s introduction to the wizarding world of London reflects a queer coming-of-age tale. The wizard community of London, and the world for that matter, is hidden in plain sight much like many gay communities have traditionally existed out of view from heteronormative culture. Harry enters the wizarding world within the trope of being guided by an older and more experienced mentor much like young homosexuals traditionally looked to older, experienced, individuals who could make the elusive gay culture visible. Hagrid functions as said mentor in Rowling’s series when he collects Harry and introduces him to wizard culture, hidden from the muggle world Harry has grown up in. Additionally, the Dursleys’ fear of the wizarding world reads very much like homophobia in their blatant fear of even appearing to be anything but normal.

Harry is not the only subtextually gay figure in the series, however. The werewolves in the *Harry Potter* series parallel both the marginalized status homosexuals experience in society and fear of AIDS within the gay community. Remus Lupin’s description of the bigotry he endures as a werewolf echoes the sentiments of homosexual experience: “[Dumbledore] let me into Hogwarts as a boy, and he gave me a job when I had been shunned all my adult life, unable to find paid work because of what I am” (Rowling, *Prisoner* 356). This fear of the other reflects the atmosphere of fear and hatred towards the queer community in our own world. Pugh and Wallace suggest, “Bill and Remus...appear to

serve as sympathetic and likeable representations of the Other, who model that queers should not be shunned, despite the overarching cultural prejudices against them” (267). Lupin is further used subtextually to explore the unfortunate tradition of homosexual teachers in YA literature losing their jobs when the parents of the school discover their homosexuality. Lupin says, at the end of *Prisoner of Azkaban*, “[parents] will not want a werewolf teaching their children, Harry” (Rowling 423).

It is the parallels to AIDS that I find most interesting about the werewolves in *Harry Potter*, however. Lycanthropy, in the series, functions as a disease that is transmitted, like the AIDS virus, through the exchange of bodily fluids. Just as AIDS can destroy a family in our world, so too can lycanthropy, in *Harry Potter*. When Ron’s older brother Bill is infected at the end of *Half-Blood Prince*, the Weasley family does not reject him. Rather, they rally around and support him, though we get the sense that this is unusual. Though the expectation that his fiancé Fleur will abandon him is never realized, we are aware, as readers, that Bill’s family easily could have abandoned him.

It is in the astounding number of slash fiction stories that the reception of a queer subtext in the *Harry Potter* series becomes clear. Catherine Tosenberger points out, “Slash fans are always on the lookout for hints of the homoeroticism in the source text that can be spun into a story” (Summer 2008). Unmistakably, a large portion of Rowling’s non-scholarly fan base finds a queer subtext in the series, so much so that in October 2007 when Rowling announced, during her appearance at Carnegie Hall, that Albus Dumbledore was gay, the slash fiction writers were unsurprised. In fact, they had preceded her announcement by three months’ worth of slash fiction stories exploring the homosexual relationship

between Dumbledore and Grindelwald (Tosenberger, Summer 2008 200). It seems the queer subtext of *Harry Potter* did not go unnoticed by even non-scholarly readers.

The use of language in constructing power and repression is central to discourses on YA literature, and most especially on queer YA literature. Whether the queerness of a text is explicit or subtextual, the dynamic between power and repression of identity relies on the ways in which an author uses language to construct or demolish normative assumptions. Because these texts exist within the paradigm of our cultural constructions of identity and sexuality, it is unreasonable to expect them to work in ways contrary to our cultural ideology. We can chastise Sanchez for perpetuating binary constructs of gender and sexuality or reprove Rowling for censoring out any explicit depictions of homosexuality. We would be wasting our time, however, as the problem exists not solely between the covers of these books but within our larger culture. I believe, ultimately, it is in queer subtexts that authors are most successful in presenting subversive constructions of identity and sexuality. This success is owed to the nature of subtexts in that such texts require the reader to draw on their own metatextual and experiential knowledge of queerness. Because such readings exist below the surface and are not recognized universally, they are not usually regulated as stringently as explicit depictions of queerness ultimately allowing for a wider readership.

Conclusion—Where Do We Go From Here?

In August of 2010 in the state of New York a 17-month-old boy was beaten to death by his mother's boyfriend. When Pedro Jones was arrested for first-degree manslaughter, he exclaimed, "I was trying to make him act like a boy instead of a little girl" (Rowe para. 4). Jones was concerned that the 17-month-old was acting *too feminine* and he acted in an attempt to "toughen him up." What does this horrific news headline tell us about our contemporary culture? What does this say to youth in our culture who may feel they fall somewhere outside the normative assumptions regarding gender and sexuality?

This next anecdote seems to address the question of what message we are sending the youth of our nation. In June of 2010 fifteen-year-old Kentucky blogger Brent posted on his blog *Naughty Book Kitties* about his (mostly negative) experiences being gay in small town America. Of particular note is the bit where he shares an interaction with his school librarian:

When I set out to find more LGBT titles, I turned to my school's library. Honestly? It was pathetic. There was not one single LGBT novel. But oh, of course the librarian went out of her way to buy books about gangs, drugs, and teen pregnancy [...] When I asked her about it, she replied, 'This is a school library. If you are looking to read inappropriate titles, go to a book store' (para. 8).

Brent's experience was certainly not as harrowing as the death of a 17-month-old; however, it is equally disheartening as a snapshot of our contemporary culture. Certainly, not all librarians, teachers, or parents are quite so violent or antagonistic about LGBT issues. Yet this remains a reality that LGBT youth face in our country. At best, queer kids find

themselves ignored or erased. At worst, they find themselves the victims of hateful crimes and abuse.

I am left wondering why there seems to be such an overwhelming consensus. In their article “‘Watch What You Teach’: A First Year Teacher Refuses to Play it Safe,” Nicole Sieben and Laraine Wallowitz point out that “English teachers often avoid controversial topics, particularly issues of race, gender, class and sexuality” (44). They go on to argue that this is likely coming from a genuine desire to create a safe and comfortable classroom environment. Yet, they ultimately state, “the ‘safer’ our classroom spaces, the more we silence students for whom school seems foreign, hostile, or irrelevant” (44). It also seems that in avoiding these “controversial” topics, teachers are underestimating their students’ capacity to approach these issues with mature and respectful attitudes: “Sometimes high school students are not given enough credit; we [teachers] underestimate their maturity levels. Therefore, teachers often shy away from teaching seemingly controversial topics” (Sieben and Wallowitz 48).

Teachers are often faced with a great deal of difficulty including controversial topics in their classrooms (such as LGBT texts and issues). Not only are teachers underinformed about LGBT issues (it seems they lack sufficient training and resources on how to approach such topics in the English classroom), but the students are also often misinformed or come with hostile and/or harmful attitudes. It can be very difficult for a teacher to imagine exploring a topic they feel unprepared to discuss with a group of students who might have negative and/or uninformed opinions. This discomfort is certainly understandable. How can teachers approach topics that are unfamiliar to them, or which they are not confident addressing?

Despite these concerns, these are still important topics to include in English education. As Alan Luke clearly states, “English studies is ‘utterly troubled’ by diversity” (Bauer and Clark 294). We cannot avoid issues of diversity in our English classrooms as all literature deals with perspectives different than our own or our students’ own perspectives. Karen Kopelson also points out that queer theory, and I would add literature with LGBT content, is helpful for all readers in that it “challenges [readers]...to reorganize or, perhaps more accurately, to disorganize, rather than merely organize around, our terms [regarding sexuality and gender]” (19). Further, unfamiliarity or lack of confidence does not seem to keep teachers from addressing non-contentious subjects about which they have only cursory knowledge. It may be that teachers must shoulder some of the burden in educating themselves and working to become confident in addressing issues that may be socially contentious.

This argument, that LGBT issues need to be included in English curriculum, is similar to arguments for including feminist theory in an English classroom even where, or when, a teacher might be faced with unfavorable reactions. In a post on *As If!* blog Laurie Halse Anderson discusses the frequent challenges to her novel *Speak*, a book that deals with the aftermath of a date-rape for a young girl just starting high school. The book is most often challenged for the inclusion of discussions surrounding rape. Anderson comments on her favorite story about a teacher defending the use of her book, “a priest who teaches [*Speak*] in his Catholic boys’ school—10th grade English—because of the opportunities he feels it gives him to discuss sexual assault with his students” (para. 3). By exploring gender and sexuality in the English classroom, readers are forced to think more critically about the world, culture, and themselves. In failing to address these issues in the classroom, it seems that we are

perpetuating the belief that LGBT issues do not matter and that LGBT identified students do not matter. As Sieben and Wallowitz state, “Remaining ‘neutral’—or silent—in the face of discrimination always condones the behavior of the oppressor” (44).

Some teachers and administrators argue that even though they are not including LGBT texts and issues in the English classroom, they *are* working to create safe environments for students through the inclusion of an anti-homophobia curriculum. It seems, however, that an anti-homophobia curriculum is not sufficient. Rather, schools need to include pedagogy that directly reflects LGBT issues. It seems that we need to move beyond looking at acceptance (anti-homophobic curriculum) and really focus on understanding through the use of LGBT/Queer pedagogy (Sieben and Wallowitz 45). An anti-homophobia curriculum can be limiting in that it does not require students to investigate the constructed nature of gender and sexual identity in our culture. Further, pedagogy focused on tolerance, like an anti-homophobia curriculum, often carries with it a hint of antagonism toward difference. By merely teaching the acceptance of homosexuality, it is possible to make students more aware of how LGBT students are *not* normative, making their differences the major focus. On the other hand, LGBT/Queer pedagogy can be, as Sieben and Wallowitz point out, a “powerful lens with which to disrupt traditional power hierarchies and imagine alternate ways of being in the world” (45). Queer theory tends to focus on the labels and binaries (heterosexual/homosexual, man/woman, black/white etc...) and how they are used to police behavior and identity in our culture. Such a lens could allow students to think outside the box in their literary interpretations and readings, a skill often promoted in pedagogical rhetoric.

LGBT and questioning youth are often fearful of the reactions they may face from their families, peers, and teachers. Thus, they often remain silent about their identities and are left without guidance or support. Not every LGBT youth is as vocal or strong as Brent the blogger. Perhaps, queer subtexts provide a safe avenue into exploring sexuality for young readers. Teachers may face less fear of parental complaint for including a text or discussions of texts with queer subtexts, and young readers can explore and learn to negotiate sexuality outside what is deemed normative without drawing attention to themselves.

What is needed, then, is more exploration as to how we can support subtextual readings at varying age levels and what this might look like in an educational setting. It is not so much about imagining a curriculum that can fly under the radar, though there might be an element of that. Rather, I propose that we explore how subtextual readings might aid educators and youth in expanding reading possibilities to include non-normative identities and to make visible what is often made invisible within our culture and our educational systems.

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