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Queer Christian Voices in YA Literature: A Scholar's Account of #OwnVoices Positioning in the 21st Century

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Introduction

The inaugural issue of *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature (RDYL)* asks scholars to engage with their own experiences interpreting and engaging with literature in an #OwnVoices context, reimagining literature studies through one's own lived experiences and positioning within social and cultural contexts in relation to the work of Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop. The inspiration for this particular examination of literature comes from my own personal experiences, not only through my own privilege (I am white, middle-class, and male) but also through my non-visible minority status (queer.) My own experiences as a queer male position me within both a privileged and non-privileged system, and my own identification as a Christian complicates both of these positions. If I were to be a heterosexual Christian male, I would be in an ultimate place of privilege, however my positioning is complicated by my queerness, which, according to some, reduces my value as a human being within Christianity and heteronormative¹ masculinity. By this, I mean that I am seen within some mainstream Christian denominations² as tainted by a sin which I refuse to renounce, thus lowering my status and willingness to obey certain principles around sexual purity.³ This lived experience combined with my own academic interests in literature have, over the years, led me to a number of examinations of queer Christian representation within literature for young readers.

The relationship between queer narratives incorporating elements of Christianity, and the larger body of young adult (YA) literature (and its necessity) can be better understood by looking at its relationship to the lived experiences of teens, and in this particular case, my own. Literature, including YA, has many functions particularly where its relationship to readers is concerned. Dr. Bishop, in her groundbreaking work on “Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors” (1990), discusses three primary possibilities with respect to this relationship between text and reader, each of which I will consider within my examination of personal history and academic pursuits. First of all, there are windows, which offer “views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange” (p. ix). A young reader who hails from a religious upbringing

¹ Heteronormativity in the context of this article refers to expectations of adherence to cultural norms of masculinity, namely expectations of heterosexuality and strict gender norms.

² I grew up in the Christian Missionary Alliance of Canada (a mainstream evangelical denomination), which was founded in the 1880s and focuses primarily on local and overseas missionary work.

³ The rejection of individuals who identify on a queer spectrum is not something that is generalizable across all denominations throughout mainstream evangelical Christianity, but it was the majority perspective within the evangelical churches I was raised in.

outside of evangelical Christianity or outside a queer lived experience may be exposed to new ways of thinking and understanding either or both of these realities through the “window” of the narrative. Similarly, a reading experience discussed in detail in contemporary discussions of #OwnVoices, Bishop discusses the role of some narratives as mirrors: “When lighting conditions are just right [...] a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation...” (p. ix). And lastly, “[t]hese windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created and recreated by the author” (p. ix). The existence of queer Christian experiences and realities expanded upon in YA literature gives teen audiences the opportunity to—at least to some extent—walk for a few moments in the shoes of someone living a different life from their own.

In addition to Bishop’s work, I also look to queer studies and literature studies scholarship throughout this analysis. Michelle Abate and Kenneth Kidd, in the introduction to their work *Over the Rainbow: Queer Children’s and Young Adult Literature* (2011), discuss some of the difficulties of utilizing queer terminology. These difficulties will hopefully explain why it is necessary to understand in what ways I will be using the term within the realm of this research. Abate and Kidd write “[q]ueer’ defies definition, indeed is the antidote to definition in any easy or clear sense. The term at once fortifies and dismantles the notion of a stable or knowable self, in relation to gender and sexuality especially but not exclusively” (p. 4). It is with this paradox in mind that I will attempt to narrow down, if only slightly, the ways in which the term is used for the remainder of this essay. I use queer as both an umbrella term for multiple sexual and gender identities and as a term to indicate a changing of normative ideologies surrounding sexuality and religious beliefs, as in the case of queer theology. Queer theology itself is an intriguing and nuanced concept that I will explore in further detail, prior to a more in-depth analysis of specific queer YA texts that incorporate elements of Christian rhetoric and religiously affiliated characters. But first, I examine my own positioning within the research, including my own experiences with queer YA literature and Christianity.

Christianity in Queer YA Fiction

As a young queer Christian in the 1990s, I experienced windows and sliding glass doors while consuming narratives about other Christian teens,⁴ but these were still almost entirely populated by heterosexual, cisgender, white, middle-class protagonists who seemed able to quote any part of the Bible on command. It was not until the early 2000s that I began to finally see myself, at least partially, within literary mirrors. It was 2004 in fact, when I was twenty-years-old, I came across David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* (2003) on the shelf of a bookstore, that I realized I could finally experience a YA narrative as a mirror where my sexuality and religious upbringing were concerned. The novel primarily follows Paul, a sophomore in high school, who meets Noah, the new kid. They fall for one another, but Paul ends up messing things up and spends the better part of the novel trying to win Noah back and find a happy ending. This was not the narrative component that spoke to me the most, however. I was much more enthralled with Tony, Paul's best friend, who is trying to reconcile his queer sexuality with what his Christian upbringing and ultra-religious parents have been preaching to him as far back as he can remember, namely that being gay is an abomination. Although my own situation was not as extreme as Tony's, *Boy Meets Boy* gave me a chance to see that I was not alone, and that someone else, though fictional, was able to survive.

Prior to that point in my life, I had been unable to access books—even the limited number of queer YA narratives with religious content available in the 90s (or queer YA in general, for that matter)⁵—due to the many gatekeepers attempting to keep me morally pure. I was attending a private Christian school with fewer than 10 students in my grade and there was no way the school librarian was going to bring in books featuring homosexuality. I was mostly only able to shop at the local Christian bookstores with my parents as I did not have any income of my own earlier on, and of course there was no possibility of coming across queer content in any books for teens there (with the exception of non-fiction texts focusing on “sexual purity” and avoiding queerness at all costs). The local library as well, being in a small town, was not an

⁴ My reading materials in the 90s consisted mostly of novels by Frank Peretti, an author writing both adult and teen fiction, mostly about angels and demons and overcoming the forces of darkness. Though entertaining at the time, later exposure to these books reveals the overtly proselytizing overtones and blatant evangelizing.

⁵ In “It’s Not the Book, It’s Not the Author, It’s the Award: The Lambda Literary Award the Case for Strategic Essentialism,” Thomas Crisp writes: “I graduated from high school in the late 1990s without having been exposed to a single book with LGBT characters. The only exposure to LGBT issues I recall from my 13 years spent in the public school system came in the form of abuse from my peers [...] and teachers” (2010, pp. 91-92).

inviting place—as far as I knew—for a boy newly coming to terms with his own burgeoning queerness. Needless to say, seeing *Boy Meets Boy* at that bookshop in 2004 was a revelation; not only was there a book that featured a queer Christian secondary character, but to find out that the author himself identified as gay was beyond thrilling to my early-twenties-self. This moment in my life was so powerful, that my research has continued in this line for over a decade, researching trends in queer representations within the world of YA, with an emphasis on those narratives that incorporate Christianity.

When it comes to Christian resources on sexuality, written for teens, the majority are non-fiction texts that focus on heterosexual norms, often in connection to reproductive futures that include “traditional” marriage, including *Every Young Man’s Battle* (Arterburn, 2001) and *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (Harris, 1997) which encouraged a return to an earlier era, emphasizing courtship and betrothal. Due to the existence of these types of texts and this mode of thinking within some Christian denominations, teens are often forced to choose between an acceptance of religion or of sexuality with one emerging more fully at the expense of the other. However, over the last decade a number of YA novels have been written which tackle the issue of queer youth struggling with their sexuality, Christian values, and spiritual development. In this essay, I focus primarily on three novels that were essential in my own exploration of Christianity and queer sexuality. Although there have been a number published more recently that are more along the lines of what I hoped to see as a teenager, I am interested in the transitional texts between the absence of queer Christian exploration and the more widespread availability of acceptance narratives. Thus, I focus here on two earlier texts that showcase a rejection of religion—*Deliver Us From Evie* (1994) and *Desire Lines* (1997)—and three texts that depict an acceptance of a queerer form of Christianity—*The God Box* (2004); *Nothing Pink* (2008); *Thinking Straight* (2008). These texts allow for an examination of the evolution of queer theologies within YA literature, and a development of new mirrors for queer teens attempting to exist within intolerant or resistant Christian communities.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, queer YA novels presented stronger, more positive queer characters able to survive in the world with their identity intact. In comparison, late twentieth century queer characters tended to end up dead, or emotionally and/or physically

traumatized.⁶ However, within these novels, there was still a binary consideration of queer-Christian identity: abandonment or acceptance at the expense of all other aspects of personal identification. In novels of abandonment the character dealing with sexual identity in the context of a religious upbringing finds the need to abandon either sexuality or religious beliefs in order to live a life of personal fulfillment. In novels of reconciliation, on the other hand, the characters are often able to find a way of balancing their sexuality and their belief systems, though not necessarily with adherence to the rigid teachings of a mainstream religious institution intact. More often than not, a personal spirituality is formed, in which pieces of theology from a religious background are kept and then molded into a workable belief system that allows for a more liberal understanding and acceptance of queer sexuality. Even among these novels of reconciliation and novels of abandonment, however, the YA genre still turns to endless variations on questioning one's sexual identity and the agonies of coming out.

In M. E. Kerr's *Deliver Us From Evie* (1994), 18-year-old Evie falls in love with Patsy Duff, the daughter of the local banker, and the two are swept into a whirlwind romance set against the backdrop of a rural farming town populated by mostly religious families who have a less than positive view of queer sexuality. Narrated by her brother, Parr, Evie's story is one that illustrates the tensions at work between sexual awakening and self-discovery, and religious intolerance. *Deliver Us From Evie* is a significant story, however, since, in the end, Evie is able to live her life freely as a lesbian (at least as much as one is able in a predominantly homophobic North American society).

Even with its mostly positive ending, the novel still fails to break out of the general harshness associated with queer literature of the 80s and 90s. Evie still suffers because of her sexuality, and the text focuses on the torments of other characters and their reactions to queer sexuality rather than concentrating on Evie's growth and development. Even though Evie eventually escapes the town and the hatred of her girlfriend's family, this escape happens only after she has endured torment and adversity relating to her sexual identity which, in the context of the history of queer themes in YA literature, is an incredibly well-worn trope. The utilization of violence against queer individuals is overwhelming, and when these texts are viewed as

⁶ For a more in-depth examination, see *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004* by Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins (2006).

windows or sliding glass doors, the inherent message seems to be that violence due to non-normative sexuality is inevitable.

The subject of religion complicates Evie's experience. Her family belongs to a conservative Christian congregation and Parr, Evie's brother and the narrator of the story, dates a girl from a church in the next town. Conversations throughout the novel reveal a mistaken and naïve understanding of queer sexuality on the part of the religiously affiliated characters in the text, and one that actually mirrors the narrow view of many religious institutions. For example, during a discussion between Parr and his mother about Evie's sexuality, Parr states that he does not fit the stereotype of a farm boy: his mother responds, "[t]he difference is, you're not against the law, Parr. And the church doesn't call you a sinner" (p. 67). Following this conversation with his mother, Parr talks with his friend (and Evie's would-be suitor) Cord, about Evie being a lesbian. Cord's comments reflect the narrow views and intolerant rhetoric of many religious institutions:

"Do you think being a dyke is sinful?" I asked Cord.

"Hell no! It's not serious enough to be a sin. It's kid stuff. Two women... Now two men – that's another matter. That's sin in the Bible" (p. 101).

Because of these less-than-nuanced ways of thinking, the journey for Evie is even more difficult. She not only has to overcome issues within her family, but within the religious community she grew up in as well.

Seen through the eyes of a sexually ambiguous narrator, Jack Gantos' *Desire Lines* (1997) focuses on the lives of two non-religious lesbians who, exposed to the intolerant and hateful rhetoric of the fundamentalist son of a pastor, eventually attempt a murder-suicide. While *Desire Lines* not only provides homosexual teens with a negative scenario leading to tragic consequences, it also distorts religion, even if it does mirror some real-life "Christian" congregations.⁷ Gantos' treatment of religious fundamentalism results in Christianity being portrayed as a destructive force that leads to ultimate tragedy for the lesbian couple. Gail Radley, in her article "Spiritual Quest in Young Adult Literature," speaks to this type of novel, explaining that some novels show the protagonist finding answers within themselves, but in others, such as *Desire Lines*, "[o]rganized religion [...] is presented as quirky, repressive, even

⁷ I include quotation marks around the term Christian in this context because the Westboro Baptist Church and other radical churches that may consider themselves Christian operate far outside of any form of recognized or mainstream doctrine as understood by the majority of Christian denominations.

destructive” (para. 3). The novel, then ends up being a good example of the trope of homosexuality as not necessarily evil but leading inevitably to negative consequences when intolerant religious rhetoric is wielded against queer individuals, mirroring the experiences of many queer young people in conservative religious communities even today.

What is particularly interesting about many early queer YA narratives, particularly those with Christian characters and themes, is the fact that so many were written by #OwnVoices authors, queer authors relating their own experiences of the world, at least to some degree (Cart and Jenkins, 2006). Within queer YA, the twenty-first century saw a swing to more prominent straight, cisgender authors writing queer narratives. With #OwnVoices bringing more awareness to the subtleties and nuance that authors can bring to a text through their own lived experiences, a move to increase prominence of #OwnVoices queer authors is very welcome in the YA literature landscape today, especially when it comes to examining authenticity in light of the use of literature as a window into certain experiences. Part of this move and the underlying academic interest in these texts, is influenced by the critical theoretical landscape that has evolved over the last decade as well.

Queer Theology and Literary Analysis

While the theoretical framework for this study is informed by queer theology, specifically, the works of Cheng (2011) and Loughlin (2007), it is important to note that the theoretical frame is influenced by the work of Judith Butler on gender performativity and Eve Sedgwick’s work that explores and uses the metaphor of the *closet* to articulate the notion of silence or silencing of someone regarding his or her sexuality. Queer Theology seeks to deconstruct historical and heteropatriarchal assumptions in previously hetero-exclusive theologies. By breaking down assumptions and expanding current notions of what theology is—or should be—queer theology is able to find ways of understanding identity in relation to God that are not limited to heteronormative conjecture. Queer theologians, such as Goss (1999), Loughlin (2007), and Cheng (2011) dismantle sexual ideologies that have been assimilated into much of mainstream theology over time, and in doing so are opening up the realm of theological discussion to not only include queer individuals, but to also include queer readings of scripture and the queering of heterosexual expectations in mainstream Christian culture. The following queer YA texts which incorporate Christianity and Christian characters will be critically examined using a queer theological framework. Furthermore, the following examples will serve

to illustrate how YA texts with Christian themes and characters have changed over the last few decades, serving as not only windows, but also evolving to mirror the lives of more diverse queer young people within religious communities.

The God Box (2007) by Alex Sanchez (a gay-identified author) focuses on queer protagonist, Paul, who comes from a conservative Christian family living in a small town in the southern United States. A new student, Manuel, arrives at Paul's school. Manuel is attractive, funny, and friendly, and also seems to have no problem reconciling his sexual identity with his Christian beliefs. Through his interactions with Manuel, the protagonist is prompted to reconsider his own understanding of himself, his sexuality, his friends, and his religious identity. *Nothing Pink* (2008) by Mark Hardy (a gay-identified author) is about a young boy in the 80s, living in small town America. Vincent is the son of a pastor, he is gay and, as the story unfolds, he is attracted to another boy, Robert, who attends the same Protestant Christian church. As his attraction for Robert grows, Vincent must examine his religious upbringing and the Christian doctrine his parents teach against his own identity and his feelings for Robert.

Thinking Straight (2008), by Robin Reardon (a straight author), is quite relevant to my own lived experience in terms of the text speaking to popular culture and current events in North America at the time of publication. The protagonist, Taylor, has fallen in love with another young man, but his conservative Christian parents are deeply opposed to the relationship. Fearing for their son's future—an eternity in hell, as they see it—they send Taylor to a camp for reparative therapy. While there, Taylor meets a group of Christian teens who are not afraid to examine their sexuality alongside the religious doctrine they have grown up with. Taylor is able to better understand his own conflicted feelings and has a chance to let others—his parents, the leaders at Straight to God, and others he meets in the future—know that he is not in need of fixing.

Roberta Trites and Thomas Crisp have both questioned the ability of queer YA texts to overcome heteronormative and heterosexist social assumptions. As discussed earlier, much of how society regards homosexuality comes from or is at least influenced by Christian dogma. Trites argues, in her article "Queer Discourse and the Young Adult Novel," that "all too often the rhetoric these [queer] texts employ to construct gay discourse is more repressive than it is liberating" (p. 143). Crisp concurs in "From Romance to Magical Realism," stating that queer YA fiction "ultimately reinscribe[s] heteronormativity through the assumption that monogamous

coupling is the goal of LGBTQ youth” (p. 333). He goes on to say that “Rather than ‘mainstream’ acceptance of non-normative sexual identities, [...] representations of gay characters are frequently molded to fit into a heteronormative frame” (p. 334). *Nothing Pink*, *The God Box*, and *Thinking Straight* are queer texts that queer theological assumptions, Christian dogma, and expectations of Christian attitudes toward homosexual teens. But through all this, have the texts actually gone so far as to make for themselves a place outside of the heteronormative box, where gendered expectations and rules around masculinity in society are concerned? To simply say that the novels by Hardy, Sanchez, and Reardon conform to heteronormative assumptions may prove correct, but why does it matter?

The effectiveness of a text can be linked to its ability to break from traditional expectations based on genre. If a text queering an idea—in this case protestant Christian dogma and heterosexist assumptions—attempts to do so within the framework it is trying to destabilize, can it be considered effective? An example of this is outlined by Crisp in regards to the use of homophobic language to make queer texts realistic:

The intention here is not to suggest that any author of young adult fiction is endorsing or approving of homophobia, but simply to draw attention to the fact that many titles rely upon homophobia and homophobic discourse to provide readers with a sense of ‘realism.’ (p. 339)

Authors of many texts attempt to normalize homosexuality but in reality the use of homophobic discourse in these texts only serves to show that homophobia is real and that it is part of the queer experience. The purpose of showing realism in these texts ultimately provides youth with the idea that homophobia and homophobic discourse is inevitable. The same can be said of books about queer subjects that ultimately conform to heteronormative expectations. In effect, these books are effectively showing that to be gay still requires succumbing to heteronormative, and in many ways protestant Christian, relationship dynamics and behaviour. For queer readers, then, the message being expressed within these narratives is that they must conform to particular mainstream expectations around gender/sexual expression in order to succeed or find acceptance. In addition, the homophobic rhetoric and pushback from society within the narratives may lead to a sense of inevitability for queer readers.

In *Nothing Pink*, Vincent undergoes a dilemma about this very subject of acts versus identity as he laments,

I've never so much as held hands with a boy under a blanket at a football game. I've never kissed a boy behind my open locker door, or slow-danced to a Commodores song at a sweetheart dance. [...] If I go down to the altar, what do I repent? (16)

The novel's premise rests on the idea that Vincent is able to analyze, rebel against, and reclaim a queered form of Christian dogma by which to live, but there is still an underlying idea at the beginning that homosexual acts are problematic. If he never *did* anything, then what should he repent? Identifying as a queer individual does not prove troublesome for Vincent, but doing anything would require repentance. In the end, after some kissing and cuddling, Vincent and Robert end up as a couple. Biblical scriptures are examined and decisions are made, prayers are sent up and hope for change is exhausted, and in the end Vincent determines that being gay is not a sin, and neither is being with Robert. He says, "Now that I've loved and kissed Robert, I'm pretty sure the biggest thing wrong with being gay is that the Bible says it's wrong" (p. 106). Hardy also utilizes language that still identifies Vincent and Robert as "others" within a naturally heterosexual world that follows strict assumptions of acceptability regarding behaviour and relationships.

But even within their relationship, Vincent and Robert still hold to the boundaries of sexual exploration set forth within Christian dogma. They may be a gay couple, but they are still a good Christian gay couple, refraining from sex outside of a more committed relationship. Of course, within the confines of the time-frame, gay marriage would not have been an option anyway. All of the above examples are not to show that *Nothing Pink* is a "bad" book or that it is unsuccessful in queering Christian dogma in the text. Hardy navigates difficult terrain, especially by moving his novel back to a time that was even more difficult for homosexual youth than today, and he manages to give positive examples of rebelling against, and yet being able to reclaim Christianity without abandoning sexuality or sacrificing faith for a queer identity, at least to the extent with which one would be able in rural America in the 80s.

In *The God Box* assumptions of sexual acts are revealed during a Bible study session that Paul is attending. One girl in the group, Elizabeth, makes a comment that shows how Christian dogma can become just a natural part of everyday thought: "If you accept gays [...] you're saying what they do is okay" (p. 27). There is an immediate association between gay and homosexual acts to Elizabeth and other Christians in the group. Another dogmatic assumption is that homosexual individuals do not know Jesus or are not *really* Christian. Evidence of this

shows up shortly after the Bible study fiasco when Paul is wondering about Manuel: “It surprised me that [Manuel] knew the passage. I still didn’t get how he could accept being gay and consider himself a Christian. Did he pray? Did he really know Jesus?” (p. 32). While not immediately evident here, much of the assumption of homosexuals being unable to truly be Christian stems from the idea that because they are gay, they are constantly sinning until they overcome their homosexuality, but their sexuality is still defined by the sexual acts. Sanchez follows much the same path as Hardy in having his protagonist(s) rebel against, rewrite, then rebel against Christian dogma before falling into a monogamous relationship.

Reardon, in *Thinking Straight*—possibly the queerest of the three texts—makes a slightly different argument from Hardy’s, choosing to look at the possible reasons why homosexuality would have been considered a sin in the time of Moses in the Old Testament. One of Taylor’s allies at Straight to God, at a meeting one night, describes the problematic notion of being homosexual in a time when procreation was a necessity:

If you had lived two thousand years ago and you’d refused to marry a woman and have kids because you’re gay, [someone else’s] children would have to take care of you when you got old.... [W]ould you be endangering the community by setting that example? If seven percent or more of the people in a community deliberately didn’t have kids, what then? (p. 181)

The argument is still about acts versus identities, but in this case the act is for the purpose of procreation, which, in the Biblical context, was a heterosexual necessity to further the human race. Reardon, through Nate, declares that we are in different times, with different views, and different understandings, but still stuck on heterosexual assumptions based on outdated dogma. By using this train of thought, it is possible to see homosexuality in a contemporary context as something that cannot be dictated by a text—the Bible—with millennia old assumptions.

Taylor and Will explore sex and intimacy as neither of the other two couples in Sanchez and Hardy do. Taylor is still somewhat haunted by scripture, but that is clouded by the experience of sexual intimacy. Taylor says, “I don’t know if it comes from being a teenager, or being gay, or being a gay teenager, but [...] I just wanted sex. And in particular, sex with Will” (p. 8). Reardon gives herself a textual buffer that keeps her out of trouble from either gay or straight readers who might have an issue with the intimate moments. Assumptions of gay promiscuity are shoved away by the reference to just “being a teenager,” but assumptions of

teenagers being aroused by anyone are redirected as Taylor admits that he wants, specifically, “sex with Will.”

What Reardon does differently than Sanchez or Hardy, however, is allow her characters to experience physical intimacy beyond the kiss or cuddle, which is fascinating in the context of #OwnVoices, since in this case Reardon is the only non-queer author I have included. Her writing includes more explicit sexuality than most mainstream YA by queer authors, which is likely a combination of her lack of precarity within the industry as a white, cisgender, straight individual and the fact that the sexual nature of her narrative mirrors the mainstream obsession with cute gay couples (see: *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda* or *The Gentleman’s Guide to Vice and Virtue* for examples of the fandom behind gay couples in YA.) In addition, the queer-identified authors within these examples are focusing more on the queer/religious reconciliation than the abandonment, which may speak to an insider desire for queer acceptance as opposed to an outsider assumption of desire to escape from religious influence. In either case, it is interesting to note that the #OwnVoices authors focus more on acceptance narratives and less on sexual intimacy than the non-#OwnVoices author.

Gendered Performance and Indicators of Queerness

Corinne Wickens (2007), in her doctoral dissertation on “Queering Young Adult Literature,” writes, “As characters question and struggle with issues of sexual identity and desire, they also struggle with heteronormative constraints regarding gender” (p. 92). The same is true not only with characters within literature, but with the authors who write the novels. Authors are confined, in many ways, to heteronormative discourse regarding gender and the performance of gender. Without creating new language or some new form of gender neutral pronoun, however, writing within a framework which relies on assumptions of a male/female binary is inevitable in many ways. Hardy, Sanchez, and Reardon are attempting to queer certain social and religious assumptions within the text, but by using language that relies on the assumptions they are attempting to queer, and this is problematic. The three novels being examined here, like many queer YA narratives in general, conform to heteronormative discourse that attempts to appeal to a mainstream heterosexual audience, namely treating the stories of queer characters as windows for straight audiences to experience (limited) parts of queer lives. Due to adherence to such norms, using queer YA narratives as windows for straight readers and mirrors for queer readers can actually perpetuate these commonly used arcs as “normal” for young readers.

Vincent's gender performance in *Nothing Pink*, to return to Butler, is described in a way that makes him automatically *gay* without even having to admit to liking other boys or having to engage in sexual acts. Vincent describes himself this way: "My hair is a dead giveaway. People sometimes think I'm a girl because of my feathered Farrah Fawcett hairdo.... They can see the queer in every layer of hairspray" (p. 12). He goes on about his gender performance a few pages later:

Is it evil to walk and talk like a girl? There's not one word in the Bible about the sin of fumbling a football. There's no Thou shalt not spend Saturday night helping your mom curl her hair [...] while the cake you just made from scratch fills the house up with air so chocolaty it covers the beauty-shop stink of home-permanent solution. (p. 16)

The way he describes himself is, in its own way, troublesome for the book. As Crisp describes, characters often employ the use of certain homophobic or heterosexist discourse to describe events or people. This is the case with Hardy, describing Vincent's appearance using descriptions reserved traditionally for female characters, and by showing Vincent taking part in feminine activities such as cake baking and hairdressing. He is also unable to conform to traditionally masculine performances, such as sports, by being unable to catch a football. Vincent, though eventually affirmed to be okay in the end of the novel, is being called out as somehow less of a man because of his non-conformance to expected masculine qualities, making the descriptions inherently problematic.

While Sanchez, in *The God Box*, does not go as much into specifics of gendered performance as Hardy, there is still exploration of reputations and assumptions based on dress and association. Manuel, when he first shows up in homeroom, is assumed to be gay because of his appearance: "Tiny hoops pierced both ears and his left eyebrow—surprising for our conservative little west Texas town, where even a single earring could get a guy accused of 'going gay'" (p. 2). Keeping in mind that the novel is set in the early 2000s and there has been some move away from automatic assumptions related to piercings and other accessories, by wearing earrings, Manuel is automatically labeled without even having to say anything, do anything, or admit to being gay. When Manuel and Paul sit at the same table one day at lunch, another assumption takes place based on Paul's association with the new guy. Paul, simply by hanging out with Manuel, a self-professed gay boy, is destabilizing assumptions about his own gender and assumed heterosexual identity. Paul is rebuked at one point for not warning one boy

that Manuel is gay. The same boy warns Paul, “Watch out you don’t get a reputation” (p. 22). By simply sitting at the same table as another queer individual, a person is automatically accused of not following assumptions of how a real man would act and who a real man would hang out with.

Robin Reardon works similarly in her novel, with Taylor understanding himself as *different* because of the way he is perceived by a friend after a non-masculine act. In *Thinking Straight*, while skinny dipping with his friend Jim, has an overwhelming desire to touch his friend in a non-heterosexual way. This action gives the friend a shock and causes outrage, followed by estrangement. Taylor goes through the situation in his head and tries to understand what his old friend might have been going through: “Imagining things from his side, it might be like he suddenly found out a person he thought he knew really well actually came from outer space. Or that I was a girl, and not a boy like him at all. Because, really, even though I’m not a girl, in one very important way I’m not a boy like him. And I wanted him the way a girl would” (p. 4). His behavior is assessed in opposition to that of a normal boy. His actions are described as those of a girl toward a boy instead of a *normal* boy toward another boy. This makes him girl-like, and definitely not like other boys. Taylor’s “difference” comes from an association with non-masculine actions, and these actions are even more wrong when placed in a Christian context where boys just do not do things with other boys.

Performance of gendered characteristics is important to understand ways of identifying as male or female, gay or straight, masculine or feminine. By acting in some way contrary to hegemonic assumptions of masculinity, one is automatically labeled as something less than. This classification as something lesser in these texts automatically gets read as the characters being gay, and therefore being something contrary to Christian and heteronormative social understandings of what it means to be a “true”, heterosexual male. My own lived experience mirrors this and also mirrors the depictions in both Hardy’s and Sanchez’s texts. As someone not partaking in hypermasculine sports (I was told swimming did not count) but who was not particularly effeminate either, I lived in a strangely marginalized space, neither explicitly performing my queerness, nor entirely able to avoid being read as queer at all.

Conclusion(s)

Queer characters in YA literature exemplify the struggle of youth against social institutions and, in this case, they mirror real-life attempts to transgress the boundaries of the

conservative Christianity. Roberta Trites perhaps says it best in *Disturbing the Universe*: “The chief characteristic that distinguishes adolescent literature from children’s literature is the issue of how social power is deployed during the course of the narrative” (p. 2). In Queer YA literature, the social powers are sometimes those of a political or religious nature that are deployed in such a way as to deny the character his or her ability to develop a sexual identity with which to be comfortable. Often, “a major developmental crisis can occur when gay and lesbian adolescents attempt to establish an identity in a society that devalues their sexual orientation” (p. 190).

Whether in a social, political, or religious context, queer youth have to deal with repression from a plethora of outside influence. Bullying in school, political oppression, and religious condemnation are all elements in the life of queer young adults. But is this *all* bad? Or is the struggle against institutions that propagate certain ways of thinking and being a way for young adults to become more involved in their personal growth and identity formation? And how is the Queer YA novel going to help in these situations? Roberta Trites proposes that

[t]he YA novel, with its questioning of social institutions and how they construct individuals, was not possible until the postmodern era influenced authors to explore what it means if we define people as socially constructed objects rather than as self-contained individuals bound by their identities. (p. 16)

Queer youth are constantly searching for answers to who they are and what they should be, through dialogues with institutions that are concerned with ethical, moral, and spiritual ideologies.

The social environment surrounding young adults is therefore responsible for affecting individual growth, whether positively or negatively, by creating situations that require personal confrontation with institutional ideology; in other words, “the social power that constructs them bestows upon them a power from which they generate their own sense of subjectivity” (p. 7). By engaging in a dialectic relationship with institutional authority, the young adult is able to better locate his or her individuality than if simply left with nothing to fight against. In essence, the twenty-first-century young adult is in need of institutions and authorities to rebel against, “and indeed, adolescents do not achieve maturity [...] until they have reconciled themselves to the power entailed in social institutions with which they must interact to survive” (p. 20).

The novels I have examined here speak to the complex and often frustrating process of rebelling against hegemonic religious and cultural norms of sexuality and identity. Family, socio-political ideology, Christian institutions and dogma, and current events all play very influential roles in the lives of queer teens as they attempt to create personal identities in a rapidly changing world. The difficulty for most queer youth is the expectation of conforming to the heteronormative assumptions displayed so prominently in much of daily life, in family relationship dynamics, in Christian dogma, and in ideologies of advertising and pop culture such as film, television, and music. Many teens become frustrated because of the ways in which they differ from the hegemonic expectations surrounding them. *Nothing Pink*, *The God Box*, and *Thinking Straight* show this clearly within their narratives and in the process each protagonist undergoes to accept a queer (Christian) identity through the erasure of heteronormative and religious boundaries.

Descriptive gendered statements and heterosexist assumptions still lie at the heart of these novels and, in some ways, trouble the queering of sexual assumptions by existing within the confines of a heteronormative frame. The body is still read as a social construction on which meaning is projected by others in a contemporary American, Protestant Christian context. Judith Butler speaks to the body as a passive site on which social meanings are projected:

‘The body’ appears as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed or as the instrument through which an appropriative and interpretive will determines a cultural meaning for itself. In either case, the body is figured as a mere *instrument* or *medium* for which a set of cultural meanings are only externally related. But ‘the body’ is itself a construction, as are the myriad ‘bodies’ that constitute the domain of gendered subjects.
(p. 12)

To break away from such a lens is considered by many to be extremely difficult if not impossible, and I have yet to personally read a novel that is successful in completely navigating away from any form of heterosexist assumptions or frameworks that involve assumptions of sexual orientation based on gendered performance or expectations. And though I am being harsh where published queer Christian novels are concerned, it is because of the fact that so little is discussed in traditional youth ministry where queer sexualities and *other* identities outside of heteronormative ones are concerned.

Furthermore, many of the novels I have discussed, though successful as mirrors in my own engagement with them, are still being written more for the purpose of being windows for those entirely removed from queer and/or Christian lived experiences. Windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors are incredibly important concepts to incorporate into critical queer/theological examinations of YA literature. #OwnVoices authors are an integral component of the conversation as well, but they complicate the landscape of queer YA considerably when one sees how few #OwnVoices authors are writing the queer Christian narratives that I so appreciate. In addition, the focus of much of the mirrors and windows discussion of sexuality and gender often fails to encapsulate considerations of queerness in a larger context, including the fact that so many texts about gay men are written by heterosexual women. What made my interaction with *Boy Meets Boy* so powerful was the fact that the story was a mirror and the author himself was also writing from a position in life similar to my own, at least in part. Many of the mirrors I come across now are important and more often than not are successful in their depictions of queer Christian experience,⁸ but the still notable lack of #OwnVoices authorship,⁹ at least for me, still makes the mirror slightly less reflective in the end.

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⁸ See, for example, *Dress Codes for Small Towns* (2017) by Courtney Stevens and *Georgia Peaches and Other Forbidden Fruit* (2016) by Jaye Robin Brown, among others.

⁹ In 2017 the Cooperative Children's Book Center released statistics on LGBTQ+ literature for children and teens, noting that out of the 134 books with significant LGBTQ+ content that they received, only 21 (15.67%) were #OwnVoices (<http://ccblog.blogspot.ca/2018/04/ccbc-2017-statistics-on-lgbtq.html>)

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