

THOSE QUEER TEEN YEARS:
AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF READING AND REALIZING QUEER IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

High school can be a harrowing time for almost anyone, but that is especially true of any number of students who fall into underrepresented or subaltern groups. Students that identify with marginalized populations may often face difficulty finding characters and people to relate to not only in real life, but also in the media. This thesis looks at the ways in which the struggle to find these mediated representations—especially in young adult targeted literature can affect the worldview of queer identified teenagers.

In order to dynamically and effectively interrogate the availability and quality of queer representation in young adult literature, this thesis makes use of the autoethnographic tradition, examining the effects the literature may have on the formative identity of a queer teen through personal narrative and lived experience. Through this narrative, presented as a layered account, theoretical concepts such as the closet, passing, representation, performance, and muted groups are all presented as part of “those queer teen years.”

DEDICATION

Hey Mom...Dad

First off, I love you. More than you can know and more than I could conceivably show you through my actions or words. I know you love me too, and I hope that will be enough. But, there are some things about me that you may now know, may not want to know, but they are things that I *need* you to know, someday. Maybe sooner than later, I don't really know, but you need to know them. If you can't answer the question will you love me no matter what with a resounding yes, then just stop reading now, because you are probably not going to like the next part.

In case you couldn't tell by me, or my interests, or that time you asked me why there was a heart next to Joe's name when he texted me, or the notes I know you read from when I was in high school, or the time that someone called the house when I was 14 and called me a fag before hanging up, I am gay. Technically, I identify as queer, but that's hopefully and likely a conversation for another day, but the things I need you to know right now are that I still am and always will be your son, nothing I have ever done or said has ever been to hurt you, and no, I don't think any of this is your fault. Above all though, know that it took a lot of courage to confront this and that I am happy. I once wrote a blog about how much things would change if you knew and how sad that made me, but now...I think I am finally able to at least hope that's not the case.

I wouldn't have necessarily chosen this for myself. It's not the easiest thing but I am happy. I'll always be the same son you read books to, you bought a brass tic tac toe set for, that excitedly told you that seal babies were called pups, and I need you to know *that*, possibly more than anything else, especially when I let you see this.

Always Your Son,

Colin

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Hiding in the Stacks

I was not invested because the words were especially beautiful or well written, though at times they were, but because I needed those words. What those words brought to life was a part of me that rarely—if ever—was found in my small town, on the basic-extended cable that my parents provided, or in the books we were told to read in school. The industrial poly-blend carpet dug into the heels that hung off the back of my too-small flip-flops. I sat on the floor of the Barnes & Noble¹ in Huntsville, Alabama, a book clutched to my raised knees, desperately hiding the cover from any would-be prying eyes while I devoured the words in front of me. I knew I had to finish the book that night, because someone like me might buy it before I came back. Whenever one of the bookstore employees would walk by, I would act like I was looking for something on the bottom shelf of the Young Adult section that hid me. If anyone at all rounded the edge of the bookshelf that shielded me, I would feel my breath catch a little and wonder if they could tell what I was reading, what I was thinking about. In spite of fear and discomfort, these books enraptured me; they spoke of things that could not be a part of my everyday life, yet were somehow part of my identity.

I had a lot to learn from those words—that my feelings were real, and I wasn't the only

¹ A chain of booksellers

one having them, that people like me mattered and had stories worth telling, that sometimes it got hard, but happy endings existed for us too ... but the only way I was going to get their lessons was clandestinely on the floor of Barnes & Noble, because I didn't dare bring a "gay" book into my parents' house for fear of being outed.

Fast Forward

The few books with queer representation I was able to read undeniably shaped how I felt about my queer identity and how that identity—or at least the idea of it—manifested as performance. Queer-centric young adult literature—literature with prominent queer themes or characters—had a profound effect on me, and will continue to throughout my life—understandably, as it helped me shape a major part of my identity. These books and characters got me through “the closet” (Sedgwick 1990, Adams 2011), offering images of what could exist when the clashing of my identity and misguided perceptions of what “should be” made it impossible for me to picture a happy future for myself. Those books helped me “name” myself as non-heterosexual, and gave me the representation that was absent from my existence.

Queer-centric books and the ideas behind them are important. They allowed me to realize and reimagine myself in honest and necessary ways. They are important to queer individuals of all ages who are developing themselves, questioning their identity, and/or need to better understand where they fit on the spectrum of sexuality.² The existence, persistence, and growth of queer young adult literature points to its importance and marketability for coming-of-age queer youth. There are collections dedicated to compiling writing on the appearance of queer

² I refer to the spectrum of sexuality as a way to define sexuality for my reader and for my narrative as both mutable and non-binary (Butler 1990, 2004). For this project, the spectrum references all identifications from heterosexual to homosexual and any identification “in-between” such as bisexual, queer, and nonheterosexual.

representations in youth-targeted literature (Abate & Kidd 2011), investigations of how queer representations and individuals act and are reacted to in an educational space (Blackburn 2012), and cataloguing (Cart & Jenkins 2006). There are, however, few works that interrogate the representations themselves and how they influence those that they represent.

In this thesis I have investigated how young adult literature featuring queer representations influenced me since 2002 when I was a confused thirteen-year old secretly reading in the bookstore. I question the tropes or stereotypes that arise in queer representations, discuss how they inform performances of queer identity, and address the honesty and realism of queer characters. I will also identify limitations of queer depictions in this genre using my lived experience as evidence and text.

Bringing the Books Home

The opening in current research about queer youth's identification with queer texts leads to a project that allows me to interact with the texts in interesting ways while also allowing me to question how they may interact with those who consume them. I herein present samples of queer literature—*Boy Meets Boy* by David Levithan, *How I Learned to Snap* by Kirk Read, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky, among others—that influenced my sexual identity as it was forming, alongside my lived experiences. I also present an accessible questioning of the “reality” of these (mostly) fictionalized narratives as well as some of the limitations inherent to them in a way that resonates more strongly than a ‘close reading.’

While my approach has had many benefits, there are also some limitations to privileging my own narrative. First and foremost, it is important to acknowledge my positionality in terms of intersectionality (Combahee River Collective 1982; Crenshaw 1989). Intersectionality theory

deals with privilege and oppression; more specifically, it offers those who may feel the effects of systematic oppression a way to intellectually explain the complicated ways in which the multiple “sections” of one’s identity may interact. For example, a black, working class lesbian may face oppression on the grounds of her gender identification, economic identity, sexuality, and/or race. I am a white male, Intersectionality is a theory rarely used in research where a white male is the primary subject, due to its foundations with black feminism and the hegemonic privileging of white male identities; furthermore, it is primarily a way to interrogate the dynamics of privilege and oppression. Because white men are privileged in Western society, some tenets of intersectionality theory are more difficult to apply to them as a demographic.

However, in research and engaging the self as text, I have found intersectionality theory helpful in interrogating not only the privileges inherent to some parts of my identity, but the oppressions associated with my evolving sexual and class identifications. I was raised in a working class family, but did not realize it at the time; now I am on a track of upward mobility that will eventually raise my economic self-identification above how I was raised. My sexual identification has also evolved, and at times I have identified as bisexual, questioning, gay, and most recently queer. Most obviously this part of my identity will be most heavily extricated through this research, but some of the others may become limiting factors for the scope of my writing. For example, since I am privileging a first-person account and to some extent using that to sample the representations that I plan to interrogate, it is likely that non-heterosexual white male narratives will be privileged over those with which I do not identify. Considering my positionality, the representations I sought out as a teen focused almost entirely on white male characters; however, my ability to find these representations may point to the privileging of these representations. As a teen, I was aware of the books I examine as well as books that included

white female queer representations, but rarely—if ever—did I interact with a queer person of color in the literature I read.

Queer Questioning

As I approached these representations, I have made use of several guiding questions:

1. What kinds of queer representations exist/existed in young adult literature during the selected timeframe? Do these representations contain problematic elements or tropes?
2. How do these representations interact with queer lived experiences? Are they honest depictions when compared with my own lived experiences? Or are they idealistic?
3. How do queer representations in the sampled books inform or even create a culturally approved performance script for queer public or private identity and performance?
4. Within the frame of the narrative, have queer representations grown or improved? If so, how?

With the critical consciousness I have gained since leaving the discomfort of the nooks of Barnes & Noble, I have discovered new facets to these texts and new ways to engage them. Those books had a lot to teach me, and I continue to learn from them—only now, I learn from them in new ways and additional types of texts.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In interrogating the queer representations of young adult literature, I have drawn on several epistemological traditions: queer theory, performance theory, and privilege and representations theories. Within each theory, there are some guiding concepts that recur throughout my research such as concepts of the closet, passing, and hegemony. My research at times uses combinations of these traditions, and at others builds on them. Furthermore, I have engaged existing research on queer representations in young adult literature.

This project benefits from a mixture of theoretical groundings and concepts, befitting its interdisciplinary nature. I have found it necessary to let these traditions interact amongst themselves in order to properly analyze these queer representations in young adult literature and my relationship to them.

Queer Theory

Queer theory encourages scholars to look past binary ideas and complicate them by acknowledging the spectrums that exist in identity constructions such as sexuality and gender (Sedgwick 1990). Queer theory was initially coined (somewhat jokingly) at the University of California Santa Cruz during a conference concerning gay and lesbian sexualities. Teresa de Lauretis—who originated the term—later used the term in the title of a journal article, further

legitimizing it (Pinar 1998). Queer theory or queer studies came to describe some forms of academic work that were already happening—whether or not they fit into a preexisting academic categories; scholars who worked within realms of gender, sexuality, and identity adopted the term as a way to identify research that addressed the liminal spaces between gender, sexuality and desire (Halperin 2003).

The term queer may refer to those things that fall outside of the realms of traditional sexual or gender identity (Turner 2000), but queer theory is not necessarily limited to discussions of sex or sexuality. Queer theory may refer to the act of “complicating” ideas, identities or actions through a postmodern way of thinking (Marinucci 2010). This ‘complication’ leads queer theory to resist an easy identification, as it “ruptures” more traditional forms of scholarly discourse (Jagose 1996). While queer theory is an often accepted and encouraged form of academic conversation, by its nature, it struggles against the institutionalizing effect this growing academic acceptance may have on its “process of ambiguous (un)becoming” (Sullivan 2003). Within the scope of this project, though, queer theory primarily discusses identifications and performances associated with sexuality—more specifically the identity of nonheterosexual, white males.

The Closet

The closet as a concept is almost inseparable from gay or queer identity; Tony Adams (2011) defines the closet as a, “canonical expression of being gay” and the “metaphorical origin of gay identity.” He goes on to establish further parameters and conditions for the existence of the metaphorical closet. In order to exist in a closet, one must be able to name her or his identity, accept it, and perform, either consciously or not, another identity construction. The closet is an

ongoing structure in the lives of many queer individuals. As Sedgwick (1990) states: “people find new walls springing up around them ... every encounter with a new classfull of students, a new boss, social worker, loan officer, landlord, doctor, erects new closets” (68). Despite this persistence, the closet is seen as hurtful to both the individual and the queer community (Signorile 1993); it is emotionally arduous for an individual to stay closeted, to constantly maintain a passing performance. It can cause depression, severe emotional distress, and anything that can result from that. For the LGBTQ+ community, some argue, it is detrimental for individuals to remain closeted because visibility is often cited as a strong component of acceptance (Cooper 2012). Because of all of this, the closet becomes the subject of heavy personal and communal stigma.

Many of the books investigated in the scope of this project will deal with queer coming of age, and in turn, realizing identity and the process of “coming out of the closet.” Although some propose that the closet may soon become an antiquated idea (Seidman, Meeks, & Traschen 1999), it is an integral part of performing queer identity in a heteronormative world where queer identities are in constant danger of muting or erasure. Indeed, it becomes hard to discuss the realization of sexual identity without, in tandem, discussing the closet as a theoretical construct.

“Passing”

Nella Larsen wrote the novella *Passing* (1929) as an investigation of performing different races and identities. Passing is a truncation of the phrase “to pass for” (another identity) and has been in popular use since the 1920’s when Larsen’s novella was published. As Blackmer (1995) points out, “passing” is “being accepted for something one is not” (50). To “pass” then, is to attempt to be accepted for something that one is not by performing an identity other than ones

own (Shugart 2003). Passing can pertain to performances of race, class, and any other identifier (Day & Hooten 1932); as queer studies became more relevant, scholarship regarding passing performances has grown to include gender and sexuality. At times, the concept of “code-switching” becomes important to a passing performance, particularly of sexuality. Although it is sometimes specific to swaps in language, this concept may refer to the switching in physical and verbal performance in different situations following various social, cultural, and interpersonal communication cues (Auer 1998). The notion of passing sexuality may be viewed as a complement to the closet; a performance of closeted identity must necessarily attempt to pass in order to fill the void left by the identity that is being disguised. Passing played and continues to play an important role in my own narrative of queer identity, and much like the closet, is often integral to the coming-of-age literature that is targeted to queer young adults. It is—in some ways lamentably—a major part of growing up queer and/or growing to realizing a performance of any queer identity.

Performance Theory

Performance theory allows us to acknowledge those parts of identity that are performed through scripts or are created through social and cultural constructs (Bauman & Briggs 1990). While performance theory can often refer to staged manifestations of these identities—wherein the performative aspects may often be heightened—it equally applies to the performances that we consume in everyday life—performances of gender, of sexuality, of race, of our very identity. Many may view the idea of lived performance as speech-centered; however performance may sometimes exceed the inherent limitations of language and become (also) about bodily acts. In fact, this relationship may be viewed as a progression: the body “gives rise to language” and the

language then carries out bodily aims and deeds (Butler 2004). Performance theory often finds itself working in tandem with queer theory as individuals create, perform, or curate queer performances. Munoz (1999) observes, “There is a certain lure to a queer standing onstage...opening up a world of queer language ... aesthetics and politics” (1).

Queer performance can further exist through approved and constructed scripts on stage or in daily life (Case 2009). Queer performance is similar in concept to gendered performance in that it exists on a spectrum and can have a mixture of identifying parts or facets, either tangible or intangible. Furthermore, gender and sexuality are inextricably linked through performance, with the spectrum of gendered identifiers (masculine to feminine) feeding conceived constructions of sexual identities. These performances of identity, then, are necessarily personal and political in nature (Dolan 1993); not only do they construct cultural conceptions of the performer, they further communicate perceptions about the performer's positionality and—in terms of queer or nonbinary performances—elicit strong cultural reactions, often rejection. Beyond that, though, queer performance can transcend staged and lived performance, and can even be read into or applied to textual performances (Salvato 2010). It is this aspect of queer performance that will be most heavily utilized in this thesis; it will allow me to engage the scripts that are created through queer young adult literature as well as the performances that evolve from those scripts. Furthermore, the application of performance theory to my own lived experiences through autoethnography will allow me to analyze those scripts not only in idea, but in practice and embodied performance.

Privilege and Oppression Systems

Muted Group Theory

Muted group theory has its roots in anthropology and was coined by Edwin Ardener as a way of investigating the inequality of men and women through language (Kehoe 2009). Cris Kramarae (2005) adapted the theory to the field of communication, offering the succinct definition: “people attached or assigned to subordinate groups may have a lot to say, but they tend to have little power to say it” (Kramarae, 2005, p. 55). This is a result of access to major media representation historically being controlled by privilege-identified groups (Shugart 2003b). This phenomenon not only marginalizes certain identities, but also strips them of amplification for, or mutes, their proverbial voices—damaging the chances of acceptance through stunting the possibility for voice and representation. This muted state is an extension of being subjugated to the identification groups that are at the top of privilege-oppression systems.

Although we exist in a heteronormative society—one where heterosexuality is the assumed “norm,” the very existence of queer young adult literature is in ways at odds with the idea of being muted; however the frequent lack of prevalence or lack of knowledge of these books serve to mute these representations. Furthermore, availability of these books is sometimes ‘muted’ through book banning, lack of commercial availability, or internalized homophobia and other delicate identification issues for queer youth.

Representation Politics

As a result of muted group theory, it is difficult for individuals from subaltern groups to find themselves in mainstream media. Often, when individuals from muted groups manage to find representations of themselves, the characters are reduced to stereotypes or are thinly

realized; they are shown as “cardboard characters rather than multidimensional people with actual lives” (Bobo 1995, p. 36). These representations in turn inform the performances of subaltern identity, creating what Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) discusses as a “crooked room.”³ The metaphor of the crooked room explicates how skewed ‘cardboard’ representations affect the expectations of our identities—they proverbially place us in a crooked room. In reaction, oppressed individuals perform a muted version of their identity in order to feel “straightened” amongst the crookedness of the room. As I have analyzed lived experience alongside queer representations, I at times I have found a “crooked room” effect, an amplification of certain parts of queer identity to better match the archetypes offered in the media around us.

As a cultural consumer and member of a subaltern group, it is nearly impossible to escape thin representations in media; therefore, it becomes increasingly important to find the balance of being a consumer and being a critic. In watching media, members of oppressed populations must be aware of the representations and the “crooked room” effect in order to actively engage and subvert the expectations put upon them. By watching/engaging these texts with an oppositional gaze, we are stating: “Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality” (hooks 1992, 116). While it is important to note that in *Making Movie Magic*, bell hooks was engaging visual media when discussing the oppositional gaze, this idea can be transmuted and applied to other cultural artifacts like books, as I do in this research. Through looking or reading these texts, we create the audience for them, and therefore a demand. By creating this demand through our “gaze” we are resisting being silenced by hegemonic power structures and (idealistically) ensuring the

³ The crooked room as a metaphor bears resemblance to Plato’s Allegory of the Cave; however, as Harris-Perry references it, it is based on a physical study wherein subjects were placed in a crooked chair in a crooked room and then asked to vertically align. According to the study some subjects tilted themselves up to 35 degrees and would still report themselves as “straightened” (Harris-Perry 2011).

increased and growing prevalence of these representations in the future; therefore, not only are we staring/reading, our looks are able to change reality.

Representations of queer characters seem to carry a stigma, though. Because of the intangible nature of sexuality, a representation must be fairly explicit in defining the character as gay, lesbian, or queer. Although many researchers define queer as broadly as one of any subcultures that contrast typical heteronormativity (Murray 2013), this broad terminology for representing a queer character in a clear way still requires a certain amount of explicit intent. Because of the perceived controversies of representing this identity, some writers fear that the inclusion of a queer character may hurt their chances for a strong financial and cultural reception (Green 2013). In spite of this, queer characters continue to be represented through reality television, sitcoms, literature, movies and other forms of media with increasing prevalence; this presence suggests that cultural consumers enjoy or take some form of pleasure from this representation (Dines & Humez 2003).

While scholars frequently engage the identities of queer characters as they appear in film or television, it is rare to find scholarship focusing on the importance of queer representation in literature, and beyond that, it is increasingly difficult to find communication scholarship dealing with representation issues in media that is not targeted at adult audiences. As such, a gap exists in the research that addresses queer representations in what is, perhaps, the most important time for a queer person—the years between ten and twenty when we realize our sexualities and begin to incorporate a new aspect of ourselves into our private and sometimes public identities.

□

Queer Young Adult Literature

My research builds on the considerable existing research about queer young adult literature, but will stretch the research into new disciplines and methods, ultimately achieving something new in the topic. Current research focuses on how young adult queer literature could be beneficial when integrated into schools, for heterosexual and non-heterosexual students (Blackburn 2012), or the ways the literature can challenge normative assumptions in the developmental period of the young adult (Wickens 2011). More literature, still, works to compile instances of queer representations or experiences in young adult literature (Day 2000; Jenkins 1998; Mason, Brannon & Yarborough 2012). Another line of research focusing on queer young adult literature focuses on analysis through a literary lens—looking at the texts in terms of quality and importance (Banks 2009, Gross 2013, Trites 1998); these types of pieces are more closely related to the kinds of content analysis I have carried out in my research, but lack the personal interrogation of autoethnography.

Notably, there is one major compilation of writing on queer young adult literature that uses analytic essays from many researchers and writers to address different kinds of questions: *Over the Rainbow, Queer Children's and Young Adult Literature* (Abate & Kidd 2011). While much of the writing in this collection focuses on cataloguing or queer transgressive reading of more canonical young adult texts, there are still several essays that relate strongly to the research I am currently compiling; for example, *The Trouble with Rainbow Boys* (Crisp 2008) looks at the young adult novel *Rainbow Boys*—often celebrated for being queer-centric—and critiques it in spite of its popularity. Crisp looks at the ways in which the representations reinforce stereotypes (the feminine gay man) or reinforces stigmas the gay community faces (the AIDS virus). Even with this line of interrogation, existing research fails to address queer literature from the youth

that consume and are influenced by it, instead distancing the theories from the consumer through its various academic and educational lenses. While this kind of content analysis is necessary and important (and is included in my research), by itself, it fails to capture the ways in which the literature influences and creates conceptions of what it is to be, identify, and perform as a queer individual.

Reader Response Theory

Largely, this project takes a Reader Response Theory approach to criticism of the literature; this means that instead of privileging the author or the content of the work itself, that the reader's response and reaction is considered more heavily in criticism of the literature (Tompkins 1980). This approach is noted in the works of Louise Rosenblatt. She takes a transactional response to reading, focusing on the ways in which the reader experiences text as an artifact with social, political, and cultural connotations (Rosenblatt 1938). Rosenblatt later elaborated on this theory, further stressing the "lifting" of the position of the reader in the two-way relationship between reader and text, explaining the reader to have similar or equal weight as the text or author in textual analysis. This theory is supported by a reading of poetry by her students, exemplifying what Rosenblatt refers to as a "personalization" of the text (Rosenblatt 1978).

In terms of this thesis, Reader Response Theory has allowed me to more openly allow interaction between the literary texts and the text of my own lived experiences, showing a strong embodied sample of the theory through the lens of autoethnography within the presented narrative. Each of the novels I interrogate are heavily personalized through my interactions with them as they become a template and contributor to a unique mosaic of queer identity.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

In order to utilize my personal narrative in the interrogation of queer representations in young adult literature, I have chosen two primary methodological lines of inquiry: textual analysis and autoethnography. Textual analysis allows me to make sense of primary texts while autoethnography allows me to explain and analyze my personal experiences against the experiences represented in the literature. By looking at queer representations ‘side-by-side’ with queer reality, I discuss the potential impact young adult queer literature may have on one’s perception of queer performance and identity.

Textual Analysis

Textual analysis is a methodology that influences many different facets of research, specifically in the social sciences. This form of analysis can be used in order to critically analyze and engage not only text, but music, film, interviews and any other artifacts that may serve the researcher as “text” (Roberts 1997). In fact, textual analysis may be defined as broadly as the categorical study of any “human communication” (Babbie 2010). Although broad, textual analysis must begin with a sample or an object of study. The researcher must choose the data or artifacts and define them as a group to be analyzed—looking towards the larger bodies of work they come from, the contexts in which they are related, the targeted audience, and other considerations about the texts’ relationship (Krippendorff 2004). Once the parameters of the

sampled texts are set, the analysis must also be defined; this analysis is drawn from a close reading and comparison of the texts and strives to uncover the inferences made within text. Ole Holsti (1969) defines this process as methodically defining specific aspects of content, text, or messages.

For the purposes of this study, the textual analysis focuses on actual texts—a defined sampling of young adult literature that features queer characters. In the scope of this project, I primarily use McKee’s (2003) description of textual analysis:

Textual analysis is a way for researchers to gather information about how other human beings make sense of the world ... the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are and how they fit into the world in which they live. (p. 13)

He goes on to contextualize this definition; when using textual analysis, “we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text” (McKee 2003, p.1).

Many scholars have made use of this brand of textual analysis (Lucas 1988) as it allows the researcher to closely engage the text and, “reveal and explicate the precise, often hidden mechanisms that give a particular text ... rhetorical effect” (Burghardt 2005, p. 563). This form of analysis rewards those who return to the text multiple times for multi-layered close readings—as it “slows down the action of the text” allowing new accessibility for the scholar and audience (Lucas 1988).

Textual analysis is especially important in this project as I engage my own life as a text alongside more traditionally defined texts that interact with and within my catalog of lived experiences. Close textual analysis offers a “creative way to articulate experiences that would

otherwise be inaccessible to empirical research methods, “ while also, “ (improving) our understanding of popular media and culture” (Philipov 2013, p. 209).

In order to perform textual analysis, one must first choose the texts that will be closely read. For the scope of this project, I have opted to use texts that I have read independently of this research to more strongly engage the interaction of my chosen methods; I will look at *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky, *Pretty Things* by Sara Manning, *How I Learned to Snap* by Kirk Reed, *Is He or Isn't He* by John Hall, and *Boy Meets Boy* by David Levithan. These books were chosen because I read them as a part of the target audience; these were the books that I read in the hidden aisles and corners of Barnes & Noble. By using texts that I originally read as I developed conceptions of my queer identity, I have been able to use my experience as a queer reader of these texts as a lens through which to critique them, engaging how these books influenced my development as well as analyzing what I am able to see in them now—as I have reread them—as a queer adult and scholar.

Autoethnography

“It is self and other and one and many” (Spry 2011).

Autoethnography is a way of engaging research or concepts that accesses cultures and ideas through the use of a first person account—the author’s lived experience. Ellis & Bochner (2000) define autoethnography as “autobiographies that self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history, and ethnographic explanation” (38). Autoethnography, then, asks the author to tell her or his story, but also to go beyond memoir and to situate that set of experiences theoretically and analytically (Adams 2011). An autoethnographer must recognize her or his story as unique or as

representative in order to capably relate it to the cultural issues or questions he or she addresses. The autoethnographer must do more than tell her or his story; they must find the ways in which the singular life becomes resonant with the lives and experiences of others (Boylorn 2012).

Autoethnography is, as its root word suggests, an extension of ethnography. Ethnography is a form of methodological inquiry which values observation and storytelling as a way to “pull the veil” back on cultures and offer understanding of their cultural positionalities and customs through “thick descriptions” of cultural happenings and moments (Geertz 1973). Through examining these cultural moments, ethnography allows us to study and observe the way members of a culture relate to one another (Ellis 1986, 1995; Phillipsen 1975, 1976) and their artifacts: writing, clothing, architecture, film, etc. (Borchard 1996; Goodall 2006). As an extension of ethnography, autoethnography is not always or necessarily limited to writing about the self.

As nonfiction writers view truth as a subjective idea in that it can vary via viewpoint and be clouded by memory and the writing process, an autoethnographer must acknowledge the understandable inconsistencies of memory (Freeman 2010) even while striving for “narrative truth” (Bochner 2002). As such, truth as a concept can often depend on contextualization and can be complicated by interpretation or point of view (Denzin 2003, 2007).

In order to effectively engage the queer issues I address within the scope of this project, engaging my story through an autoethnographic lens becomes important not only in defining the personal resonance of this work, but in looking at how I responded to the representations in question. These texts influenced my conceptualization of queer identity and queer performance—they shaped my ideals of what it meant to be a gay man—how to be in relationships with other men, how to act (or not act) gay and what the consequences of that were,

how to think, how to love, and how to act. They shaped my lived experiences, and I cannot think of a way to properly interrogate them without letting them coexist alongside my life as they have for the past ten years.

Application

As noted above, I have selected literature that I read as a teen/young adult as my sample set; these include *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky, *Pretty Things* by Sara Manning, *How I Learned to Snap* by Kirk Reed, *Is He or Isn't He* by John Hall, and *Boy Meets Boy* by David Levithan. These titles were read while I was a teen and have been chosen for the increasing prevalence of their queer characters; this increase in queer presence closely mirrors my increasing comfort with queer identity as I read these texts.

I present these texts alongside an autoethnographic account of reading them; this also encompasses facets of my life that each book has influenced. Additionally, I performed a thematic textual analysis of the sampled selection throughout the presented narrative. Through autoethnography, each chapter addresses combinations of my experiences as a reader and the way those books influenced my lived experience. Through this interrogation, the literature's influence on my ideas of queer identity and performance scripts became clear.

In the Now

I mentioned earlier that I sought different things from these books now, as a scholar and not a teen. It is important to look beyond the acceptance of these queer characters as representations, and ask if they are (not necessarily good or bad representations) but if they are “real,” well-constructed, and fleshed out characters when balanced against lives experience.

Even beyond that, we must interrogate these representations—perhaps more so than those targeted at adults—for the things they tell us about the characters, and by extension, the people who share positionalities with the characters. Speaking from experience, these books and characters taught me to act in certain ways; they affirmed behaviors and performance scripts that may or may not have been beneficial to me as I grew to accept my own queer identity. Therefore, it is incredibly important and necessary to bring a new, personal lens to the research about queer representations in young adult literature through the use of autoethnography; incorporation of autoethnography has allowed me to access the questioning teen and his relationship to these representations, giving amplification to a voice that was maybe not audible before.

Now over ten years since I first picked up *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* at a bookstore closing sale, I know what the books have taught me: I know that my feelings are real and that I'm not the only one having them; I know that I am ok, that I matter and that I have a story worth telling; and I know that everyone can hope for, and potentially have, a happy ending. That is, in a sense, what I optimistically hope I find as I continue my research—that there is a happy ending to the “story” of these representations, that they have become more prevalent, accessible, and diverse. Although I am optimistic, I am sure that I will find there is still work to do in reaching those goals, as representation is almost always an ongoing issue for those who identify in non-privileged ways.

CHAPTER 4

CONTEXT

This chapter will allow me to clarify several facets of this project before getting to the bulk of the autoethnographic narrative and analysis. Contextualizations of history, content, and structure are important to this work as they offer a greater understanding of the text and my own positionalities. This includes explanations of language, historical structure, personal history, and a brief recommendation on how to approach chapters 5-7.

Contextualizing Queer

I use the term “queer” to discuss my identity and the literature I have chosen to dissect. In spite of my descriptor, it could be argued that most, if not all, of the characters that I am looking at could be considered “gay” instead of “queer.” In fact, many people in my daily life prefer to label me as “gay” instead of “queer” despite my personal preference. That said, I do not think it is incorrect to think of me as “gay” though it is also not incorrect for me to simultaneously identify as queer.

Queer is often looked at as an umbrella term that describes a variety of sexualities that, “challenge...social categories of sexualities” and “reflect a variety of meanings to different individuals” (Cherng 2012). The word queer has had a somewhat transformative life, developing from the homophonic queer meaning strange; in the 19th century it gained traction as a

derogatory word for an effeminate homosexual man (*Oxford English Dictionary*). In the late 1980's though, Q/queer was reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ community as a way to self-identify, culminating in a defense of the word as identity in a 1990 pamphlet titled *Queers Read This* (Queer Nation 1990).

“Queer” as a word can also have colloquial or contextual meaning dependent on the community. This, too, has influenced my self-naming as I have grown closer to more queer-identified individuals or people who are coming into a queer identity in recent years, which has caused me to think of myself as part of a larger “queer community.” Some scholars contextualize variations of queer as an important addendum to the already complicated word. To implicate the complex relationship of race, region, and sexuality, E. Patrick Johnson (2001) uses the term “quare” to infuse a queer identification with added contexts.

I do not identify as exclusively hetero- or exclusively homosexual nor do I see myself as bisexual, which denotes a stasis on the Kinsey scale.⁴ On a personal level, I identify as queer largely because I view sexuality as fluid and mutable. However, the books I am discussing were largely read (for the first time) while I was between the ages of thirteen and seventeen. At that time I had not arrived at my queer identification, but found myself sexually fluid. Between those ages, I—at various intervals—thought of myself as straight, bisexual, gay, questioning, or confused; there were even times that I *willed* myself to be asexual to avoid the stigma identified with these queer identifications. In order to capture the shifting sands of my sexuality, I use the umbrella term queer to include my teen years in my sexual orientation identification.

⁴ a list of positions on a “sliding scale” of 1-6 denoting a range of exclusively hetero- to exclusively homosexual developed by Dr. Alfred Kinsey (1948).

The characters represented in the texts I analyze are largely referenced as gay; however, in my search for representations that paralleled my own, I would try to identify the characters in ways that matched my own shifting positionality. If the character did not clearly mirror my identity, I would “mentally bend” the character to be what I needed—what I will later discuss as “queering” the character, or willing the character to be queer in a different way than the canonical text denotes. Through this process the literature—which already includes LGBTQ+ characters became marked by whatever stage of my evolving sexuality it was read during. In order to capture the “head-canon”⁵ of the texts, I have chosen to analyze them as they relate to shifts in identity, and look at them as a “queer” collection, even though I recognize that they are not marketed as such and the intention of the author may be different. This is important to note, additionally, because the interaction of the ways the texts influenced me may differ in ways from how I read the texts today. The first time I encountered these texts, I read them as a teenager struggling with a formative sexual identity that seemed to change—at times—weekly. These books were confidants and secrets and solace, but they also influenced me in ways that I was not aware of, which is represented in the autoethnographic narrative. Now, though, I read these books with a more critical eye. I view them through the lens of representation politics and with an awareness of the ways that culture shapes and molds our perceptions of our own identity, including positive and negative affirmations and mutations of subaltern positionalities.

⁵ “Head-Canon” is a term that simply means the mentally accepted conditions of a piece of media; for example, if I mentally see two characters as dating even if it is not canonical knowledge within the mediates sample, then that qualifies as a “head-canon”

Contextualizing the Timeframe

While it is important to acknowledge my shifting sexualities in writing this autoethnography, it is also important to look at the time that shaped and informed my self-identity. I came of age during a time post Clinton-era when there was swingback from 80's conservatism, and after Ellen DeGeneres⁶ had come out of the closet. Ellen's coming out opened proverbial closet doors for television, allowing a slow but steady stream of gay programming to reach the waves of major programming (Shugart 2003). Gay voices were becoming a larger part of the larger American cultural identity as evidenced through the evolution of programming up to, and through the years I look at in my autoethnography (2002-2008). Although I did not have the knowledge at the time, I was forging my identity as part of a community that had survived bushes and bathhouses and the AIDS epidemic. Although it was outside of my purview, I vaguely remember whispers of policies like "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" as ways to "deal with" queer individuals by limiting queer voice and visibility. Even on the news reports I heard over the sounds of my video games growing up, I could sense the oppressions queer groups faced through the ways they were spoken about and the muttered comments my family sometimes made in response. Even though I didn't know it in a concrete way, to identify with the queer community was to define oneself through the strength and resilience that comes as a result of that adversity.

The aspect of queer identity that I was able to know concretely is what was represented in the evolving cultural cornerstone of television. *Will & Grace* debuted in 1998, when I was eight years old. I did not watch it when I was eight, but I did pick it up several years later between

⁶ Lesbian actress and comedian who portrayed a fictionalized version of herself in an eponymous 1990's sitcom.

seasons four and five. Around the same time, in 2003, two queer-centric shows debuted on Bravo (*Boy Meets Boy* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*) making it my favorite station to watch secretly when home alone or with the door locked.

Looking back with the lens of what I know now, neither show was that great in terms of critical quality. They both relied on sexualizing and desexualizing gay men respectively or to reducing queer identity to a collection of quips and affectations, but to me they were groundbreaking. For the first time gay men were central to the storyline in a television series and not *always* the brunt of a joke. In *Will & Grace*, Will is, at times, heteronormative as he plays the comedic “straight man” to Jack McFarland’s flamboyance. While *Queer Eye* and *Boy Meets Boy* were hidden pleasures, and incidentally guilty-pleasure, low quality reality television, they at least spoke to the existence and agency of gay/queer men. It was *Will & Grace* however that proved more accessible to me. *Will & Grace* aired on primetime on a major American network—NBC. It was a critical and commercial success, winning 16 Emmy awards (with 83 nominations), and running for eight years and seasons. It was gay, but not as flamboyant as Bravo’s programming, which likely benefitted from the more focused network identity afforded by cable channels. Bravo did not necessarily have to please larger American audiences, but instead had the luxury of defining a niche. *Will & Grace*, though, had to appeal to a more massive audience, and it did. In fact, my mother even once said, “It’s a really great show...if you can get around all the gay stuff,” and it was that attitude that allowed me to watch gay characters openly, and even get season 4 of the show (my favorite) in my Christmas stocking one year.

So, no, I did not have LOGO—a gay targeted TV network—during that time; it was not launched until 2005. Gay Marriage was not legal (at all) yet. Until around my junior year of high school, I did not even have high-speed Internet to explore my sexuality (relying instead on

shirtless photos of Ben Affleck in *People Magazine*). The early 2000s were, however, a time when queer individuals were pushing the movement for my rights forward, a time when the movements that had started before were not halted. As a teen in small-town Alabama, though, I did not have a lot of access to those empowering movements. I could not drive, had very limited access to the internet, and relied completely on my parents for everything financially. Coming from a conservative family, the risks of publicly self-identifying with movements that fought for my own rights were greater than the rewards at the time.

Context and Summary of the Samples

Limitations to culture and access in my small, conservative town drove me to ride with older friends to bookstores in the closest larger town, where *maybe* they would have something for me. Even there, until my friends knew, I had to look secretly—put magazines inside magazines or pick books with nondescript covers. You never knew when someone who knew you—or worse—knew your *parents* might see you, so even forty minutes away, I had to be careful. That was where I got most of the “queer” books that I read during those years (*Boy Meets Boy*); others were passed down from queer friends (*Perks of Being a Wallflower*).

As mentioned before, I initially read each one of the books I will discuss in this study between the ages of thirteen and seventeen. The initial readings (between 2003-2008) will interact with a current-day (2013-2014) textual analysis in an interesting and unique way that allows me to more fully realize my analysis of the performance scripts presented in the novels.

While I feel selection criteria are an important aspect of my sample and an asset to the voice of my research, it must also be acknowledged in some ways as a limiting factor. Because of my chief selection criterion, my research addresses a very specific span of time (roughly 2002

to 2008, or my middle and high school years). Because of this chronological focus, I am unable to adequately address overarching questions about the presence of queer characters in YA literature as a longstanding institution; however, I feel the growing presence of these characters is addressed fairly well in existing research (Abate & Kidd 2011).

Finally, I offer brief summaries of each entry in my selection; as stated, I read all of these books for the first time in either middle or high school, and they all played some part of informing my identity in terms of what it was to “be” “act” or “perform” gay/queer.

The Perks of Being a Wallflower by Stephen Chbosky

Perks as I, and many fans, affectionately refer to this novel does not have a protagonist that explicitly exists in gay or queer territory, but one of his best friends does. While *Perks* tells the story of Charlie adjusting to high school as an outcast after a close friend’s death through a series of letters addressed to an anonymous acquaintance, the character of Patrick (or “Nothing” as he is nicknamed) is the one who most clearly resonates with a young queer reader. Patrick is part of the social “outcasts” at the high school—along with Charlie and most of the other characters, but is in a closeted relationship with Brad, the quarterback of the football team. When Brad’s father catches them together, he physically beats his son, leading to the end of the relationship which in turn sends Patrick into a self-destructive depression in the final semester of his high school career.

Pretty Things by Sara Manning

Pretty Things is told through the rotating perspective of four narrators—Brie, Charlie, Daisy, and Walker. Based (however loosely) around a Summer theatre production, the book

focuses on the relationships or desire between the four main characters. In short, (straight female) Brie wants to be with (gay male) Charlie who wants to be with (straight male) Walker who wants to be with (lesbian female) Daisy. Charlie was the most interesting character for me as a teen, as he is portrayed somewhat atypically. He cares about his appearance, but is focused more on bleaching strips of his hair and making sure his band tee-shirts are worn just-so than looking conventionally fashionable. His lust/desire for Walker is also a point of reference for my own (and likely most gay men's) life, as he attempts to persuade or will Walker to be at least a little bisexual, if only to give Charlie a chance.

How I Learned to Snap by Kirk Read

How I Learned to Snap (or *Snap* as I sometimes refer to it) is different from the rest of the selection through its genre—instead of fiction it is a collection of memoiristic essays by Kirk Read detailing how it is to come into one's own identity, and subsequently come out in a small town. While all the essays are notable, two specifically stand out; they both detail young Kirk's infatuation with a slightly older student who, in spite of time and setting, displays a discernably queer performance highlighted by his rendition of "Beat It" at the school talent show. Later in the book, the character is revisited as a victim of a "gay-bashing" at the hands of other high-school students.

Is He or Isn't He by John Hall

Is He or Isn't He tells the story of best friends Paige and Anthony as they are confronted with an alluring new student at their upscale New York prep school. The student, Max, is clearly desired by both, but neither can tell what his sexuality is—therefore the book is dominated by the

(sometimes problematic) question of the title. This book relies to some extent on tropes and stereotypes as the characters attempt to answer that question. However, it still captures the wishful thinking or “queering” that resonated with me as a young gay man—the feeling of wanting something bad enough maybe making it true. It can also be emblematic of a queer mode of consuming media—creating queer transgressive readings of non-queer cultural artifacts as a way to create a queer-centric experience.

Boy Meets Boy by David Levithan

Boy Meets Boy is an unapologetic gay love story with a setting that mirrors the real world, but with utopian ideals of acceptance; the setting is clearly a safe-space for all types of characters. The characters include Paul and Noah (the Boy and the met boy, respectively), the homecoming queen/star quarterback (a transgendered student who was Daryl, but prefers to be referred to as Infinite Darlene), a gay student, Tony, who is dealing with super-religious parents outside of the safe zone of the school, and the usual host of friends. With several subplots that prove resonant—such as Tony’s—the book focuses on the traditional romantic comedy structure applied to queer teenagers: boy meets boy, boy loses boy, and finally boy wins boy back. This book adeptly focuses on the “problem stories” that can, at times, dominate queer narratives while also offering a positive representation with the safe space of the school and the queering of traditional romantic structure.

Understanding the Text

Beyond this context chapter, the text primarily functions as an autoethnography; it is in form narrative. It is my belief as a researcher that having presented a variety of theories and

groundings for the reader, these academic themes present themselves inherently within the narrative writing. In fact, these themes were present as I lived the narrative, but are only truly unpacked with distance from the lived experiences themselves.

In form, the bulk of the text alternates between purely narrative sections and sections that apply analysis to the texts as well as the text of lived experience through a hermeneutical practice of “meaning making.” Through this, the sections that are more narrative in nature are presented in italics. In this case, this shifting presentation functions as a layered account. Layered account is a form that allows the researcher to address an issue from various voices or observe multiple consciousness on a particular topic (Ronai 1993, 1995, 1996). Following Ronai’s example of layered accounts, this text attempts to function simultaneously as art, narrative, and academic text, entertaining shifts in voice that allow for multiple tenses and timeframes, analysis and reflections.

As part of this layered account I have framed specific sections of the narrative with objects that represent either facets of my identity or facets of my experience as I developed my queer identity. These objects are set off as “ARTIFACTS” within the text and then described. A close reading of those artifacts, as well as the narrative sections, is required to fully see the themes and theories that are present in the account of lived experiences. For the most part, the narrative is chronological in spirit although the voices jump between present-tense and past-tense recollections. It traces a time when I was completely in the closet and unaccepting of my own queer identity and contains references to the present, implicating not only my younger self as a character, but also implicating my current self as a way to chart the full growth that is present in the narrative of my queer identity.

Chapter 5

LOOKING FOR QUEER IDENTITIES

ARTIFACT: A red and purple armband. It is turned inside out; the alternate side contains a full spectrum of the rainbow. It is a secret show of pride.

The Start of a Queer Identity

I confronted my sexuality for the first time at a band competition when my friend Rachel tried to introduce me to a gay trombone player. I had felt gay before then, but that is the moment in which I intellectually began the confrontation of my own identity. I spent the rest of that weekend in my freshman year thinking about myself, my attractions and what they meant, and whether or not it was just a phase.

I approached the weekend as an obstacle in the narrative I saw for myself. If I pushed through this as fiercely as I could, it would be more interesting when I wrote about it later. I returned to school triumphant on Monday morning, feeling tentative and assured in my new identity. I tapped Aimee, who sat in front of me in Algebra class on the shoulder, “Hey. So, this weekend I figured something out, I think.”

“Yeah... what is it?”

“I’m gay. Well...bi, I think, but I figured that out.”

“Well... yeah.” She seemed indifferent about the emotional effect my revelation was having on me; apparently, she already knew.

For a heterosexual-identifying individual, these harrowing emotional moments of self-confrontation and eventually announcing yourself as something non-normative are not always necessary, but for anyone who has ever lived in the closet, the feelings of conflicting emotions, doubts, and fears are all too common. Although I had begun to realize that I was non-heterosexual before that weekend, it was the first time I really let myself see it. Homosexual culture is, culturally speaking, a muted group—it is traditionally completely silenced or subjugated to “acceptable” pockets of our larger cultural narrative. This silencing differs in ways from other subaltern groups or cultures. Although the falsity of a “gaydar” exists—it is the idea that certain people are able to spot a nonheterosexual individual by sight—queerness is largely an invisible marker of subjugated identity. That may mean several different things for queer people as a demographic. Oftentimes, it may be easier to “pass” for straight than it would be for a Black individual to pass for white. By the same token, though, it becomes increasingly difficult to spot representations when and if they are present, unless it is canonically stated that, “Yes. This character is queer-identified!”

This encoding or hiding of present representations is especially true in media targeted for youth—from children’s media all the way through young adult and adolescent targeted media. That is not to say that it is not present—because it is—but it can be hard, and maybe dangerous for a queer youth to find.

Queer Eyes

In 2003, the Bravo network began airing episodes of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. *Queer Eye* is a makeover show; in it, five—mostly flamboyant—gay men take an unkempt straight man and change the way he dresses, grooms, and cooks. The five men are Jai—who specializes in culture; Kyan—grooming; Thom—interior design; Ted—food; and Carson Kressley—de facto “leader” and fashion specialist. It gained popularity and ushered in the metrosexual movement. Metrosexual—a portmanteau of metropolis and heterosexual refers to a straight-identifying man who exhibits cosmopolitan or urbanite grooming and lifestyle tendencies that—to the public eye of 2003—were generally seen as markers of queerness.

I am in my bedroom; it is marked by a tattered poster of Pinocchio that has been on my door since I can remember. When I was young, I put a pink, glittering Cabbage Patch girl sticker on the corner to hold it down. It is a night in 2003, and I am one of the middle school kids who is lucky enough to have a TV in their bedroom; at this point it is the only light. On the screen, five gay men watch their own TV as it broadcasts a burly man showering and shaving. “Ugh—why do they always shave so fast, and against the grain!?” Kyan exclaims, more of a frustrated statement than a question. I hear someone in the house move—the bathroom down the hall. I hit the ‘previous channel’ button that is set to an infomercial and act like I’m asleep.

Looking for the Words

I have always been around a lot of books—I even worked on a volunteer basis in a library for about five years. I loved reading, but as I got into the age where boys tend to read fantasy like Tolkien or survival like Paulsen, I found myself not connecting with what I was *told* to read any more. I thought for a while that it was because of my high reading level, so I began reading

bigger things—more challenging things: *Les Miserables* and *A Clockwork Orange*⁷. As it turned out my reading level was not that high yet. I still read a great deal, but I did not love it the way I used to. Right after I started high school, a book was passed to me hand-to-hand by my friend Michelle. “You have to read it,” she said. “I think you’ll like it.” It was Stephen Chbosky’s *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. I took the book with a creased yellow cover and tucked it into my overstuffed backpack between two hard-backed textbooks for safe keeping. I noticed that the ostensible wallflower of the title seemed relegated to the upper right hand corner in his baggy brown slacks. He, too, had been marginalized. I wondered if he knew? If he was like me, he didn’t quite understand yet.

The book focuses on the relegated wallflower—Charlie. His story unfolded through letters sent to an anonymous friend. The format of the book allowed me to read through quickly, offering small stops in between correspondence that allowed its reader to digest what had happened and spend a brief second supposing what might happen next before diving right in. In my case, I would stay up all night reading this book, as I was often caught doing. I would (and still do) forgo sleep for something compelling enough, and as soon as the character Patrick (who is also identified as Pattie or “Nothing”) in *Perks* as defined as gay, I was definitely compelled.

Patrick was a brash character—in his opening scene he stands up to the bullying of his shop teacher who insists on calling him Patty. “You’ll call me Patrick or you’ll call me Nothing” he says, and earns the nickname which seems to stick in the high school setting. Although I was immediately drawn to an intelligent rabble-rouser, the later revelation that Patrick was gay is what really intrigued me. When I first experienced this book, I was not out yet—not even internally, to myself. A mixture of societal pressure to be conformant and religious upbringing

⁷ *Les Miserables* by Victor Hugo; *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess

kept me from admitting something I knew to myself. When one has internalized and locked up part of them that they see as taboo, it becomes natural in my experience that they will gravitate towards those things in furtive ways, so I was fascinated with Patrick as soon as his sexual identity became clear. I did not have to clandestinely sneak glimpses of him on a television late at night, he hid between the pages of a book I did not even own. He was a safe way for me to interact with this identity that intrigued me—even if it was not mine yet.

Patrick opened the idea that I could look for these characters outside of late night television; he allowed me to see a new way to explore this identity that I was inexplicably drawn to.

Secret Identities

After school, I was at home by myself. My mother worked every day until six; my father was in construction, so he didn't have a set time, but he was usually home at around 4:30. I'm sitting in the front room of our home. Our house is small; it's cozy, but it has a certain pride to it. It can be explained as a square with short legs extending off of the three sides. The central space allows one to walk continuously from the kitchen to the "middle" room, a hallway, the den and the dining room. One wing contains a bathroom, my bedroom and my mother's bedroom. The back leg contains my father's room and a sunroom. The final side is our living room, which is really a converted carport. Most of the rooms are heavily worn, corners covered by things that we don't use but are too frugal to throw away. Sometimes they are covered with a sheet of fabric or a screen in a feeble attempt to convince the visitors we never have that the house is not cluttered. It is cluttered. The front rooms—the living and dining rooms are not really ever occupied; they are, in some ways, my favorite part of our home. These private rooms have all of

the ornate things we have come by in them: a marble table that was an anniversary present; a cabinet with speakers and a turntable in it and a full china cabinet, both from my mother's first marriage; two orange velveteen chairs with curling legs that may have been hand me downs from an older relative but I am not sure; and the Bible that my barely literate maternal grandfather read every night before he went to sleep. I associate these rooms with a Southern predisposition with appearances. If you asked my mother, she doesn't care about "that stuff" but these rooms are evidence to the contrary.

They are mostly private, and I enjoy going into them when no one is home. I often choose the very front living room because of the brown velvet curtains that cover the windows. Between the tassled swaths of heavy fabric, a double layer of ruched sheer allows me to see out but no one to see in. Here, I can do whatever I want and still know when someone arrives home.

I keep some things in one of the side-tables in this room: a deck of cards, some notes passed around in classes, and two magazines. One National Geographic that my mother brought home from her work at the chiropractor's office and an old Nickelodeon magazine. Sometimes a catalog or sales paper will join my stash for a while, but those two I keep around. The photos are higher quality. If I don't hide them they will get thrown away like the rest, and I don't want that. I open the cabinet and take out the Nickelodeon—it naturally opens to the page I want. It's a caption contest of an old black and white photograph. The part that I remember now is a man on jet-skis. He wears the short swimming trunks of yesteryear, and appears to be the stereotypical vision of blonde 1950's beefcake. He has large shoulders and pecs and flexed biceps and a clean-cut smile and huge thighs. I look at him and the hand that is resting on my thigh begins to move. I look back at him and think about what it would feel like to touch a body like that—a truly masculine body. I think of how the light dusting of hair on his chest would feel on my face or

against my skin or....and I hear a door slam. I stop moving for a split second, like a deer does when analyzing a dangerous situation. I toss the magazine underneath one of the orange chairs to be dealt with later and begin turning off all the lights in the room. If I don't get out before he gets inside, then my stash might be discovered. More importantly, though, they might know something about me that I can't even tell myself yet.

The fact that I was almost fifteen before I encountered an accessible canonically gay character in all of my reading that was put on the page in a dynamic, well-rounded, and mostly positive way speaks to why it took me so long to admit to myself my own queerness. When subaltern identities are not represented in a realistic, rounded, or positive way, they cease to be a “viable option” even for people who otherwise identify with them. The effects of muted group theory move from our larger cultures and become internalized into individuals forcing those who are trying to develop or realize identities to internalize this representation of—in this case—homophobia and see it as not only a definite choice, which can at times be very damaging, but a choice that bears no realism or truth to it. If we do not talk about, represent, and reaffirm identities, they may become either nonexistent to developing individuals or at the very least internally and externally dangerous to inhabit. These ideas are evidenced through the well-documented amount of suicide among LGBTQ teens and the amount of hate crimes that are perpetrated against queer individuals (Hammelman 1993, Proctor & Groze 1994).

While I was never suicidal or truly discriminated against in the ways that people tend to think of—incessantly harassed or physically beaten, but then, I was never bold enough to live truly openly in my teen years—or even completely now. As I write I am still not out to my family and I honestly do not know when I will be. That is, as it is with every single queer individual, my decision to make. I am usually not out to classes that I teach, because for some

students, I know it would undermine my credibility, even though in actuality it does not at all. I am dating someone who is only out to people that he knows through me—none of his older friends or his family know, although I imagine some suspect his bisexuality or his queerness. Obviously, though, as a teen in my parents' house I had to keep a lot of secrets.

Looking for an Out

ARTIFACT: A small collection of cards and pins purchased from Hot Topic circa 2004. One pin is rainbow. A card has a joke, "Straight? So's spaghetti until you heat it up." I kept them behind the books on the top shelf of my bookcase; I don't know if my mother has ever found them.

While the cover of *Perks of Being a Wallflower* was innocuous enough for me to bring into the house without raising any troubling metaphorical eyebrows, I began searching out more books with queer characters that I could relate to. My friend who lent me the book—Michelle—was about a year older than me. I didn't learn to drive until seventeen, so she offered me the autonomy that a car otherwise would have. She and I would drive to the nearest sizeable town—Huntsville, Alabama—and go to all of the stores that seemed alternative to us then. We would stop into arty, incense-filled headshops and look for band tees and odd accessories at Hot Topic, a store that focused on punk and goth influenced design details rendered primarily in red and black. While I enjoyed these counter-cultural field trips, the real draw of Huntsville for me was Barnes & Noble. I realized after encountering Patrick in *Perks* that there must be more characters like him to look for, so I started to do just that on those visits to Barnes & Noble.

For a while before and after I confronted myself the weekend of that band competition, I focused largely on the young adult fiction section of the bookstore. I would find books that gave

hints on their covers, but I found myself shying away from the more brazen book covers. I eventually also discovered a section that was somewhat innocuously titled—something like “Lifestyles.” It was one of those generic phrases that we tend to use when we want to talk about a group of people without offering the empowerment that assigning a real thickly descriptive name can offer. In there, I found several things—primarily there were a lot of books that collected stories of erotica. I stayed away from those just as a force of habit from my religious upbringing; if being queer was sinful, conflating that with actual desire must be irredeemable in the eyes of the church. There were also books with drag queens on the cover, autobiographies by people like Ellen Degeneres, and more academic books about gay identity that I didn’t quite understand yet. While I mainly gravitated back towards that young adult section to find the books I would read furtively at the end of the aisles of shelves, occasionally my friends and I would be bold; we would read sections of the erotica books, but never for arousal, always for humor.

Allison went to pre-school with me. Everyone thought that we would date when we were in eighth grade. We didn’t. There was pressure for us to date for a long time—until I had realized that I was nonheterosexual. Because of our history, I was terrified to come out to her. In 7th grade we had every class together with the girl I was “dating” at the time—Savanna. Savanna was my first kiss, but she moved at the end of eighth grade. In her absence, Allison and I got incredibly close, and that led to people thinking that we should or in some cases were dating. I put off coming out to her, even though she was my best friend.

After the band competition, I called my friends Michelle and Lacey. Lacey was openly bisexual and had been in a long-term relationship with a girl. I had suspected Michelle was also a lesbian—as did (very vocally) my mother. I told them I needed to see them. We had a practice

of talking about any deep issues in our lives at night, lying face up on Lacey's trampoline, looking not at each other but at the expansive blanket of the sky. That night, we had trampoline time and I came out for the first time. I even asked them if they thought Allison would be upset—"I don't think she'll mind." Lacey explained, as if she knew something I did not.

Several days later, I contacted Allison. We went out to dinner together and afterwards, I had planned to have "the talk" that needed to happen. I told her, and Lacey was right. I told her what I had told Lacey and Michelle—I did not know what I was or if I was gay or bisexual or what, but I knew that I was not entirely straight. I felt that while I was attracted to men, I would end up in the long run with a woman, because I couldn't picture anything else. She responded not with the disbelief or anger I had expected of her, but by returning my sentiments. She was bisexual; unlike me, she came out to her family later that week.

A Dangerous Purchase

I have never seen my parents read an actual book—the closest thing that has happened is my father leafing through a history of Alabama football. Most of the books in our house belonged to me; either for school or not. My mother would buy a lot of books for me, too, usually at Wal-Mart, since that was one of the only places she shopped. Occasionally, though, I could get her to go to other stores. The most frequent stores she would go to were in a strip mall on Highway 31; it used to be Wal-Mart, but now it housed some clothing stores, a tractor supply, and an entertainment store. I could not have cared less about tractor supply, but often went with my mother to the clothing store and then managed to get her to visit the entertainment store—FYE. Around my sophomore year of high school, FYE was going out of business and being replaced by a gym much to my chagrin; however, the silver lining of all of this was a clearance

sale. I managed to visit the store on several occasions with mom to purchase various “off” things—a DVD that Wal-Mart would never carry or some weird music that I had heard about through social networking site Myspace on our dial-up only desktop in my mother’s bedroom. The real crown jewel of the closing-sale haul, though, was my very own copy of that yellow-covered book that Michelle had lent me before. With a copy of *Perks* I transgressively convinced my mother to pay for, I brought that first queer character into my home. Within one week and a re-reading of the book, I had felt pretty successful in my testing of those particular waters.

ARTIFACT: A book. It has three candy hearts emblazoned on a sky blue cover. The small pastel candies bear the title: *Boy Meets Boy*. It is a transgressive adaptation of a childlike vision of candy-heart romance. It has pages marked with notes and photos and slips of paper. On one, the word “debauchery” is underlined.

I was finally going to do it. I was going to buy this book that I had read two chapters of, darting around the store to hide from employees. I tucked it underneath my arm, obscured by another tamer book and strolled through the store straining every inch of my identity to hide my anxiety and look normal. Terribly afraid of being mocked or scorned by the cashier, I placed the blue book cover-down to hide the openly queer title: Boy Meets Boy. As nervous as I was, one of these books was finally coming home with me.

CHAPTER 6

FRACTALS OF QUEER PERFORMANCE

Longing and Queering

Michelle and I spent a lot of our summers swimming at her father's house. We never really went inside, aside from changing clothes, but the outside area was warm and softly lit with plenty of poolside lounging chairs that we were never really uncomfortable. I don't know what Michelle's father did, but he smoked a lot of pot—mostly with the high school mythology teacher, but never with us. He had a wife, not Michelle's mother. His wife had a gaunt white cat that would stare at us from a second-story window while we swam. Once, as we were swimming in the evening, I looked at Michelle with large sad eyes, "call Zach."

"Why?" The truth was that I hoped that he would come over and swim, but mostly I wanted him to take his shirt off.

"Because..." I wasn't going to tell Michelle that though. She knew though.

"I'll call him, but only because you like him."

Zach came over, but he swam fully clothed like the rest of us did; I should have known. We went to dinner later that night at some chain restaurant, perhaps an O'Charley's. It was Friday night so we had to wait a while for a table. While we were waiting Michelle preyed upon her new knowledge about my crush on Zach, asking us to go around the circle and say our favorite thing about each person: me, Zach, Michelle, and Allison—now Michelle's girlfriend. I

don't remember much about the waiting game aside from the back and forth between Zach and me. I went first, "I really have a thing for eyes, like, there's a really deep connection to people's eye's y'know, and Zach, you have these kind of eyes, that, like, you could really fall into. They're a really nice warm brown and they're just really nice."

"I guess I like your hair. You do cool stuff to it."

As unenthusiastic as that was, I held on to the fact that a cute boy had liked my hair once when I was fourteen and I kept a terrible faux-hawk hairstyle for the greater part of three years as a result.

As it turns out, though, Zach was not gay, or bisexual, or interested in men. At the time, I later found out, he identified as asexual. My desire had come up against reality, and in my mind he was gay. While he may have been identified within the queer umbrella, I had used my desires to "queer" my perceptions of him to match my desires for him. It's a phenomenon I still catch myself falling victim to, and not only with people, but with cultural representations as well. As evidence through my "queering of Zach" sometimes the power of desire becomes a strong tool in the search for camaraderie in subaltern identity, but it is an equally powerful tool in the search for representation.

As a queer individual, it is easy to read any ambiguity or existence outside of strict heteronormativity as a queer alliance of sorts—in the ambiguity, these people and things become whatever we need them to be. In *Is he or isn't he?* by John Hall, this phenomenon is illustrated in a way that is very similar to my view of Zach.

In Hall's book, there are two protagonists—Anthony and Paige, both students at a lux, upper-class Manhattan prep school. While I did not relate much to them based on lifestyle, reading page after page of Anthony agonizing over the titular question in regards to the sexuality of new

guy Max struck pretty close to home. As much as I related to Anthony's struggle, though, he was presented at times as shallow and two dimensional; he—as a character—had problems and privileges that I could not relate to, and I needed to find representations that could support my identity more strongly so that I could continue to grow and reaffirm myself.

Looking for More

ARTIFACT: DVD's. They are in a green case with the cast contained in image bubbles—green-toned faux candid shots. Season 4 of *Will & Grace*, a Christmas Gift from “Santa.”

After I experienced those first few queer characters, I became more aware of them, seeking and occasionally finding them in other pieces of culture: television, film, anything I could get my hands on. Often, though, I found that those characters were pushed aside or exploited by their narratives instead of celebrated. As I watched Carson Kressley overuse the word “fabulous” on *Queer Eye* or read about yet another gay best friend, I started to wonder if that was all that being nonheterosexual was. Were these guys—often punchlines with lisps—all that I had to look up to?

Different Queer Strokes

A New “Gay Best Friend”

“We met him at the football game. He’s really cool.” Allison explained to me. I had not met this eyeshadow-wearing boy because I was busy being in the marching band. “You guys have got to hang out.”

One night we were at Zach’s house, and Allison invited Brandon over. He was tall, multiethnic, somehow wore more black than me and always had eyeliner on. He was the first gay

man of the same age that I had been introduced to as part of our friend circle. Immediately, there was a kind of power struggle. Each of us needed to seem “cooler,” “more over it,” and in some ways “gayer” than the other. The message was that there was one space for a gay man in this friend group and it was a battle as to who got to keep it. To this day, Allison and I will still make jokes about how introducing a “new gay” to a group will sometimes upset “the old gay” and reference that night. Brandon and I kept trying to outdo each other in flamboyance, to perform the most blatantly obvious version of homosexuality possible. We reached into realms of self-parody, and I became something that I was not. Eventually, no one else was speaking as Brandon and I were ostentatiously lisping through our high-pitched conversation: “Oh, she’s an absolute BITCH!” he exclaimed, incidentally about my favorite English teacher.

“Shut your whore mouth. She is a saint! I love her and if she is a bitch she is a FABULOUS one.” Then Brandon did something no man, gay or straight had ever done to me before or since, he pulled his artificially limp wrist back into the air and backhanded me across the face. It took every ounce of self control in my body not to tackle him with my linebacker-shaped frame into the car behind him. I didn’t do that. I took a step back; my warfare would be far more effective. I talked to Allison; I talked to Michelle; Zach asked Brandon to leave; and I didn’t speak to Brandon again for a long time.

Brandon was—and is—pretty naturally “campy” in demeanor; he has a certain idea of his sexuality and how to display it to people. My queer performance relies much more heavily on code-switching to fit the moment, as was and is necessary in my daily life. That night, though, we struggled to be what we conceived of as the gayest thing we could possibly be in order to better serve as the token gay man of our group. What I was just beginning to realize, though, is that there were different kinds of gay men and different ways to be gay—the camp aesthetic that

was so often pushed by funny sidekicks like Jack Macfarlane (of *Will & Grace*) was just one way—no more or less valid than any other way one could choose to express their sexuality. I looked back towards Patrick from *Perks of Being a Wallflower*—while he was a sidekick, he was not portrayed as particularly flamboyant or campy, in fact he was kind of reserved in his countercultural-ness. In my search for representations I came to look for more representations like him. My search led me to *Pretty Things*, a Sara Manning book that became one of my favorites for a few years during high school.

I gravitated towards Charlie (not to be confused with the protagonist of *Perks*). He had a similar relationship to his best friend Brie that I felt Allison and I had, a kind of “if you weren’t gay then we would be together” acknowledgment. In the case of *Pretty Things* though, the female was straight identified. Like I had been and like Anthony of *Is he or isn’t he?* Charlie was attracted to a man who was not attracted to other men. On the page, though, Charlie was a unique gay character; he had a unique blend of characteristics, and was not written in the pithy sidekick manner that dominated the representations I seemed to find. He had elements of that: he took great care of his appearance and listened to Britney Spears⁸ and other pop music that was seen as feminine, but he also cut his own hair with nail clippers, had bleached bangs instead of frosted tips, and listened to more obscure bands like Belle and Sebastian and The White Stripes⁹.

Charlie was more like me than any character I had encountered at the time in the way he identified himself and his sexuality. He mixed personal aesthetics in ways that defied expectations in a practice that still effects the way I self-present my sexual identity today. He exemplified code switching in different settings, ably handling the social obligations of visiting Brie’s family and subtly letting straight-man Walker know he was interested. As a character,

⁸ late 90’s pop artist, famous for hits like “Hit me Baby (one more time)” and “Slave 4 U”

⁹ Influential “indie” or independent rock bands

Charlie reaffirmed my teenage identity; it was all right to not identify as a Jack Macfarlane or a Carson Kressley; you could be gay or queer identified and still retain a certain kind of autonomy from cultural expectations. While the character reaffirmed me in so many ways, allowing me to more boldly inhabit my growing identity in my life—I still needed more real-world, tangible affirmations. I needed to seek out queer role models and safe spaces, but eventually, they came to me.

Safe People and Safe Spaces

“This is weird.”

“It’s weird”

“Very weird”

“Frickin’ weird”

“I’m so mad that I don’t know what to do...”

I was singing a censored Tango: Maureen from Rent the Musical with Zach’s mother. Her partner, Sarah was in the passenger seat and I sat in the back with Zach. We were leaving church ... where we had seen a drag show. They attended a church in Huntsville called “The Metropolitan Community Church” and their particular congregation was made up of LGBTQ+ people. I had heard rumors of a “gay church” and even heard my mother scorn it once when the local news had covered the church and its inclusive practices, but I had never been there. Before we went I was filled with anticipation that only doubled when I learned it was going to be some kind of drag show—my first outside of “Ugly Walks” where men dress impassably in women’s clothes for the ostensible humor that comes out of it. Sarah was a woman, and identified as a woman, but she went in drag as a woman that night, too. Although female-identified, Sarah also

identified as butch. I had only ever seen her in cargo shorts and a ballcap before that night, when she donned a 1920's fringed dress and the largest, thickest purple boa I have ever seen.

I met Zach's mother and her partner at a time when I was beginning to struggle with the idea of reconciling Christianity with my "new" sexual identity; it's still something I struggle with in a different way, but then I was conflicted over the idea that a queer person could embrace something that seemed to scorn them in so many ways. I was raised in a very conservative Church of Christ, and although we may not have attended every time the doors were open, my mother's belief in the church is very real, and is a part of why I have not been able to come out to her to this day.

Lies I Tell My Mother

In my parents' home I am not a different person, but I am a fraction of the person I am everywhere else. I am a 24-year-old gay man who is in a relationship that is over two years long, and I have not shared this part of me with anyone in my family. There is a border between my sexual identity and my family identity, and that border erodes little by little. One day, it will finally rupture and I'll have that moment, but I don't know what will happen after that.

Some days, my mother says things that lead me to believe she knows: "Maybe you're not the type for kids..." "We'll like whoever you love..." But logically, I understand those cavalier statements to be lies in the context of truth. Especially the second one.

Directly after my senior year in high school, my mother found gay porn on my computer. I don't remember many exact moments or quotes from the conversations that happened as a result, but I remember the tears in her eyes, the word disgusting, and her telling me, not asking, but telling me, "You are not gay." That was the last conversation directly addressing the issue.

With her, I like the same things that I like now. I listen to musicals and watch Project Runway, but I never mention my boyfriend or refer to a man as 'hot.' I think of saying something. I have thought of leaving a note for her to find. I have thought of just saying it. I have thought of casually mentioning that I just left my boyfriend's house one night on the phone, but every time I get close I remember the look in her eyes. That day, I saw the possibility of every positive thing I have done and worked for being erased by one simple truth, and it was terrible, and it's terrible every single time I see it in my mind's eye.

I slowly get bolder, though. She has met my boyfriend but she didn't know it. She's very religious, and often tells me about nightmares she had as a child of hell and how terrible it was, and how because of that she knows it's real. I know if I came out to her, she would see me there, in the hell of her mind, with no real escape.

Maybe I don't actively try to pass with my mother as straight. She asked about a research paper that I was once writing—on gay marriage amendments. "You're against it right?" "God, no...you know that...I'm a huge liberal." "I can't believe that!" I went on to defend it from a merely political standpoint, but I thought about telling her then.

There is no maybe, I don't actively pass for my mother. I avoid the topic, but most people know without asking that I like men, especially if they know my interests, but, frankly, denial, love, and religion are a hard combination to overcome.

A Queer Community

ARTIFACT: A book with no back cover. It is tattered and dog-eared and a little dirty. The back pages are all damaged due to the lack of cover. It is a gift from Brandon. *How I Learned to Snap.*

While I was intrigued by the confluence of sexuality and religion presented to me through the lens of Zach's family, what I found I really needed was a kind of safe-space to interrogate what my identity may or may not be developing into. While I was gravitating towards queer representations in the literature I chose to read to find affirmation, I retrospectively realize that in my real life, the queer people in a small town like Athens somehow gravitated to each other, forming a kind of micro community. Even just within the people I found in high school, I was lucky enough to have a fairly sizeable support group of peers that would allow me to experiment and find my own performance and expression of my evolving sexual and cultural identity as well as connections to older queer identified individuals. We created a kind of clique made up of mostly LGBTQ people and some people who were more like allies. While in small-town Alabama we had no semblance of a gay-straight alliance, this peer group still kept any of us from ever being truly alone. We found each other, and we shared time and interests with each other. Many within the group dated—a phenomenon I was mostly out of. There was even a chart linking who had done what with whom; I mercifully stayed off of that chart for most of high school.

A Brief Field Guide of Queer Students of Athens High

Colin (me)—gay most of the time, class of 2008, linked to Matt, wants to be linked to

Zach and Jeremy instead

Allison—Colin's best friend, class of 2008, dated Michelle for most of High School,

wealthy family, owned the Green Day discography in its entirety

Michelle—dated Allison, class of 2007, her dog Briley once ate a bottle of green apple

massage oil intended for Allison

Lacey—dated a lot of girls and a lot of boys, class of 2008, let me make out with her

boyfriends when she had them

Brandon—flamboyant “new” gay, Class of 2009, works in fashion now

Rester—Michelle’s ex-girlfriend, class of 2007, once left school to break into Michelle’s

house when Michelle skipped school, she watched Michelle sleep

Zach—asexual, apparently, class of 2007

*Matt—dates (and stalks) Colin, class of 2004, likes *Wicked the Musical* a little too much*

Jeremy—Matt’s best friend, class of 2004, worked at Disney after graduation, does a

really killer Mickey Mouse impression

Tiffany—Matt’s Lesbian Best Friend, class of 2004, once ate a dog biscuit

Bethany—Tiffany’s girlfriend, class unknown, tried to stop the dog biscuit incident

We also shared a small-group culture. We all dressed somewhat alternatively, eschewing the polo shirts and wallaby shoes that were uniform at our school for band tees and Converse; our nonconformity lined up with the burgeoning “emo”¹⁰ movement in alternative pop music, and so we adopted that as an aesthetic. We wore lots of black and red and clothes with strange cartoon characters. We shared sharpies with which to draw on ourselves between classes; we shared mixed cd’s we would burn for each other; we shared eyeliner; and we shared books.

Brandon gave me my copy of Kirk Read’s *How I Learned to Snap* in all of its torn-back glory. I tried to return it, as I usually do, but he told me to keep it. After our rocky start, he and I made peace by singing show tunes over the telephone together; sadly for Allison who was

¹⁰ Adolescent-focused musical movement; “emo” is short for emotional and is associated with a melodramatic style of alternative rock.

usually on 3-way call with us, neither of us had great pitch, but luckily we have both improved since then. We still had our rocky moments; for example, the time we were asked to leave Ruby Tuesday's because he was discussing vibrators too loudly. His personality and openness just had a volume to it I was never comfortable with, but I came to appreciate his brashness.

"The Queers Who Came Before"

At Athens High School, I always felt a certain reverence for the older LGBTQ people that I knew or learned about—especially the ones who had graduated merely years earlier; they had a real “the queers who came before us” draw to me. In *How I Learned to Snap*, Read assures me that I am not the only one who felt that way. The first line of the titular essay calls Jesse Fowler, “the gay Rosa Parks of Lexington High School” (55). Jesse as a character is obviously “of” queer culture. Read explains that from Jesse he learned a new vocabulary—one comprised of melodramatic words like fierce and tragic. Read’s narrative is set in the 1980’s but the characters Kirk and Jesse brought a new reality to the tropes I found in other literature. Jesse used the vocabulary and had the outlandish appearance of the gay or queer men who were used for laughs, but the first scene with him is not necessarily funny, instead it shows the aggression and hardship that can characterize maturing into a queer identity. As a school bus drives pass, the students shout “faggot” in Jesse’s direction. Kirk, the narrator, sees this event and observes as Jesse gives the bus a hand gesture that can be interpreted as “fuck you” or “go to hell.” “I don’t have enough fingers for these children” he explains to Kirk. Read spends lengthy amounts of Jesse’s time on the page to discussing his appearance—the time he spent emulating Robert Smith

of The Cure, evoking the made-up face of Boy George or the red leather of Michael Jackson¹¹. He details the silver rings Jesse wears to make the point that in his small town—and in the larger heteronormative society—Jesse is not the norm, and in his resistance to homogeneity, there is strength and resilience; that in that resistance, Kirk finds a role model in Jesse.

Queer Spaces

While my peer group was important, and I took comfort from the recent graduates, just as Read did with Jesse, I was more transfixed on the vision of becoming a queer adult. As a “young adult” I was often predisposed with the idea of maturity and being more like an “actual adult” than I really needed to be at the time. I wasn’t sure how being a queer adult worked though. Zach’s mom seemed fairly “normal”—as did her partner Sarah, but I had been more or less taught being normal and queer was impossible. Even with the connection of non-heterosexuality, Zach’s lesbian mother was still not a gay man that I could really look up to or that could provide me with a certain kind of guidebook into the culture. She could be supportive and welcome me around her family, but the relationship is never quite the same as the one-to-one equivalence between two identities could be. Luckily, I had Tony.

A Safe Haven

We’re on the couch. Anne Hathaway straddles Jake Gyllenhaal, and rips her shirt open. Michelle, Allison, and I scream and pull the blanket over our heads: variations on, “ OH GOD WE SAW PRINCESS MIA’S BOOBS!” The princess from The Princess Diaries had just bared her breasts in the back of a pickup truck, very abruptly, to the character of Jack Twist in

¹¹ 1980’s pop, rock, and R&B music performers notable for outlandish style and sometimes questioned sexuality

Brokeback Mountain. *We watched a lot of movies on this couch: To Wong Foo: Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar; Priscilla Queen of the Desert; and Another Gay Movie among many others. Allison's father, Tony, would occasionally stroll through to see how we were doing or to see what made us scream, in the case of Anne Hathaway's breasts.*

Tony is a gay man and he is Allison's father. He is relatable and very relaxed and keeps a very nice and well-decorated apartment. I have, at times, felt like he is my "gay dad." He has watched out for me at bars and clubs, and always made me welcome in his home. At one time, I even had a key to his apartment. In high school, I always knew that if I were thrown out of my home for being gay, as it happens in so many books and movies, then Tony would be who I would turn to for help getting on my feet. Along with the safe space created by my friends the safe space Tony unknowingly created for me—and likely for others within my peer group—to explore our identities through the consumption of media was invaluable. Beyond that, though, Tony is perhaps the first gay man who I ever came into contact with who was completely out and mostly successful. In my observation, many queer men in the South succumb to a society that tells them that they are "less than." In turn, they cope by allowing that to define them or turning to other, often self-destructive mechanisms. Tony was not the most successful man I had ever met, but he worked consistently, had friends and a family, and seemed happy and satisfied in his life. While representations on the page or screen might have meant a lot to me, Tony was the representation that really allowed me to see that everything really could be ok for a queer man.

While I was lucky to have some safe spaces and a safety net of accepting or self-identifying friends that not everyone has—especially in a small town in the South, my entire area was not always accepting of me or some of my friends.

An Unsafe World

ARTIFACT: A note from Brandon to Allison. It has stick figure drawings of all of us with an ideal partner in the margins; also, Green Day lyrics line the page. In the body, Brandon writes about how much he hates his class, “I wish this teacher would get run over by a bus” he writes. He is expelled from high school for this “terrorist threat.”

ARTIFACT: A petition to run for class treasurer. Colin Whitworth is written at the top as the nominee. The lines are filled with obviously Latino names.

A Good Little Boy

As bloggers Tom and Lorenzo once explicated in a review of *Mad Men* (Fitzgerald & Marquez 2013), there is a specific phenomenon among gay men that I have always felt that I was a part of; they refer to this as “the good little boy” trope and it refers to a non-heterosexual male’s need to overcompensate for something that he cannot change, something that society tells him inhibits his hegemonic masculine identity. This can manifest in several ways, but it is generally noted in their blog and in my life as the need to be seen as a “high-achiever.” In high school, I definitely followed this model of compensation for my sexuality in spite of my slightly countercultural fascinations. As such, I was very involved. One year, much to the chagrin of several teachers, I racked up over forty days of missed school days that counted as “field trips.” I was serving on philanthropic youth boards, job shadowing with the chamber of commerce, attending honor bands—there was no limit to the things I would do to raise the profile of my teenaged achievements.

One year, I decided that I was also going to run for a class office; not President or anything, because the popular girls were running and I wanted to win, so I settled on Treasurer. At Athens, there was first a petition that fifty people had to sign saying that they would like you to run before you were officially a candidate and could join the campaigning week activities. I was mildly horrified to find out the two days we had been allotted to get these petitions signed coincided with two days that I would not be in school, or even in town. I asked around, and finally begged one of my friends so much that she agreed to get the signatures for me. I called her my campaign manager.

“Did you have any trouble getting all the signatures?” I asked, noticing that most of them seemed to be the entire English as a Second Language Class. I only knew a few of them, but I understood their “otherness” too. It was more visible than mine, of course, but I wondered if something happened that these were all the signatures she could get.

“Not really...well...” Rachel said. She was usually on the quiet side, but her unsure tone was more than usual. I pressed on. “One kid said he wouldn’t sign it...that kid in your English class.”

“Why not? Besides, why does he matter?”

“He wouldn’t sign it because he heard that you dated a boy once...he might have called you a fag.”

I cannot explain the wash of warm redness that came over me when I heard that. I experienced a mixture of shame and of fear and of returned hate and anger that no one should ever even be allowed to feel. I wanted to do something, anything, to make him regret what he had said, but it was not that I really cared about what he had said. Society made me ashamed of

what I am, and it made me feel shame that people knew something that I had done. I felt fear because I was not out, people weren't supposed to know. I never outright denied things, but rather took to existing in a kind of liminal space of "is he or isn't he?" I felt those feelings because my coyness had failed, and that made me feel in danger of a lot of things: being outed, disowned, kicked out of my home, or even physically assaulted by the guy who called me a fag.

It is that societal pressure and those ignorant words that kept me from being able to name and own my identity for so long.

CHAPTER 7

CLAIMING IDENTITY, WORTH, AND LOVE

ARTIFACT: A Burnt CD. It is marked with hearts and swirls and the title of the soundtrack.

Across the Universe part 2. It is separate from its partner.

Being in a relationship inherently means giving things to the other person. Physical things, emotional things, spiritual things. Being in a queer relationship when you both live in a closet means giving these things, but giving them in another way: secret things. In my experience, this effect diminished with age, but in my queer adolescence, every romantic interaction had the extra melancholy and thrill of incredibly important necessary discretion.

First Boyfriends

The first guy I ever dated was between four and five years older than me. I had been compared to him frequently my freshman year of high school; that happens in a small town—all the gay men are inherently reminiscent to one another to the public consciousness. These comparisons, though, made him seem well-liked and interesting. In my mind they raised his stature to some kind of local legend or cult figure. I began embracing the comparisons, but was then told by some I may not want to do that. I began asking around about him; I learned that he had dyed his hair a weird shade of red and was working at a coffee shop. Eventually, I met him and he wasn't the legend I had crafted in my mind, he was just a gay man who worked at Target and was not really interested in me.

We had the same friends. Another thing that happens in a smaller town is that the queer-

identified people seem to gravitate towards one another. Although he and I were not friends, he stopped by my 16th Birthday Party. I had gotten a haircut—a faux-hawk, and stopped wearing the clothes I used to. I had begun to explore expression through fashion. I wore a lot of dark colors and a lot of plaids. He and I relaxed on the hill in my friends' backyard and talked. When he left, he told my friend Michelle that I had gotten cute. We were dating within the week.

We went on double dates with my friends Allison and Michelle. Ruby Tuesday, Starbucks, his car. I don't remember a lot of the relationship; it only lasted a few weeks. The highlights were the first time I kissed a boy; the time we bought a Halloween cookie cake and ate it and made out right after—we tasted like chocolate chips. He worked in the photo lab at Target; he printed me a photo of a billboard that someone had taken in New York for Project Runway and I used it as a bookmark for years, even after we had broken up. It was a sweet gesture that I connected to in a way I had never felt with the girls I had dated.

With Matt, that first boyfriend, the best I ever felt was when he came to a marching band competition to support me; he told me he was proud of me; he hugged me, in public. If the entire relationship had been that, it would have been great, but all of those great feelings were marred by the fear I felt when I was on my own, not lost in the good feelings. I was afraid of facing my queer self; what did it mean for me to be gay? I was raised religiously—in a conservative Church of Christ, so it meant hell, maybe? It was scary and confusing, and would I be damned for being attracted to men or just for doing *things* with them? Maybe it wasn't too late to will myself into heterosexuality or at the very least bisexuality; then I could marry a woman, have a family, and be eternally saved. Right? My mind would pendulum violently between willing away any sexuality and trying to embrace what I knew was true—that I was definitely not heterosexual.

Another contributing factor to my dread and panic that I have realized in retrospect goes

back to one of the core issues of self-acceptance of subaltern identity: representation. To revisit Patrick from *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*: I was captivated by his queer identification but the part of his story that has remained with me the most is his romantic relationship, likely because I had not seen or read anything quite like it before. In the media I had been able to access up to that point in my life, nonheterosexuality was represented in one of two ways (if at all). The most common trope that I saw—the witty gay sidekick—was depicted as sexless; the creators of the character seemed determined to broadcast his gayness, but it was a point of humor, never reality; therefore, the characters were stripped of any actual desires, trading those in for quick wit. The converse of that is the problematic notion that all nonheterosexual identified people—especially gay men—are inherently “oversexed” and driven to frenzy or sexual madness by their unmanageable and perverse sexual desires.

A Realistic Romance

I, like most people, am neither sexless nor sex-obsessed, so those representations always rang false to me. Patrick, though, is not sexless nor was he oversexed. Patrick has a relationship that Chbosky treats as he would almost any teen romance with the added dimension and complications that are intrinsically part of representing developing queer identity. Patrick dates a schoolmate named Brad, who also happens to be the high school paragon of hegemonic masculinity: the quarterback.

Chbosky shows a relationship that is comprised of infatuation and love, and at times fear—for Brad is completely closeted. By positing a pairing of “out” and “in” in the queer relationship, the author allows us as readers to see two sides of queer identity interacting and represents a situation of queer romance that can be very real, and has been real in my life. Patrick

goes one step further than many of the queer characters that I had found at the time; often-queer characters who are allowed to break out of the chaste/hypersexual dichotomy are then relegated to merely pining for an object of desire, see the majority of *Is He or Isn't He* or *Pretty Things*. In *Perks* though, the queer characters are allowed to have a relationship with realistic depth, it came with good moments and bad moments, and even if it ends in a very negative way, it was important to me to see a real relationship between two queer young adults.

Queer Prince Charming

Another narrative that was sometimes missing or hard to find in the queer representations that were available to me was the idealized romance that heteronormative people are, in ways, bombarded with. Fairy Tales and Disney Princes and Princesses permeate cultural visions of romance and partnering, selling everyone a vision of Prince Charming¹² saving the princess as we grow up; however, in none of those stories does the prince ever find another prince for himself. While most queer individuals are not truly aware of their developing sexual identity at a younger age, the pervasive heteronormative assumptions represented by these aspects of culture manifest in formative queer identities as doubt and confusion. By creating a mythical norm through the media and tales that are focused at children, we limit their conceptions of identity—especially in terms of sexuality and gender expression.

Due to the pervasive nature of the Prince Charming romantic trope, there is always strength and interest to be found in representing these “traditional” narratives with subaltern individuals, and that includes LGBTQ+ people. The heteronormative fairy tale narrative shifts a

¹² Disney is famous for adapting classic fairy tales into modern cartoons; in these, there is invariably a character that meets some kind of “Prince Charming” mold. He is almost always white, wealthy, traditionally handsome, and straight.

bit as we grow up in society and becomes the box office mainstay known as the rom-com or romantic comedy. These narratives often follow a somewhat rote pattern of boy meets girl, boy and girl grow closer—seemingly heading towards a romantic coupling, through conflict the boy loses the girl, and finally and redemptively the boy and the girl reunite, ending the film on a “happy” note. These narratives form the scripts that inform our ideas of what a relationship should be; in a culture pervasive with these stories, it is natural to want them to become our reality. We want someone that we desire, but we want them to work for us, or for us to work for them—like the protagonists in the boy meets girl narrative, we try to place these scripts on real romantic relationships even though they (hopefully) last far longer than ninety minutes.

When you’re queer though, you may not always relate to the boy-meets-girl script that persists in the societal view of romance, and oftentimes, there is no alternative to this storyline in major mediated culture for nonheterosexual individuals. David Levithan was the first subversion of the trope that I ever experienced; his book *Boy meets boy* takes the tropes associated with the boy meets girl storyline and transgressively reinterprets almost every cultural aspect of them. *Boy meets boy* takes place in an idealized high school that serves as a safe space for the characters—even those that face homophobia in their own homes. The characters queer the definitions of gender as well as sexuality in the comfort with which they subvert the expectations of high school characters written for a young adult audience. Most transgressively, though, Levithan dares to take the very central script of heteronormative romantic entertainment with his novel, setting Paul and Noah up as a queering of the boy meets girl trope as the title may suggest.

The part that has always stayed with me happens in phase three of the tired but renewed script, during the section of the novel when Paul is trying to win Noah back after “losing” him. Late in the book, he plans daily romantic gestures to show that he cares deeply and romantically

about the boy in question: “On the second day, I give him words...” (Levithan 159) as a writer this section has remained in my mind; he writes down unique words and their definitions and leaves them in places for Noah to find. He also gives him flowers, shares music and film with him, and does everything that society has taught us to desire when being “wooded” in the way the women of romantic comedies so often are. This relationship is the first that really showed me the kinds of grand romantic gestures that fictional heteronormative couples seem to employ all of the time executed by someone like me, by someone who I could imagine *liking* me. Whether or not we realize it, those gestures and those stories have the power to fill us with affirmation from our culture—affirmation that we have romantic worth, that in that way we are valuable, and that we should be treated as such.

Turnabout

We were in the car in the backside of a mostly abandoned parking lot; my Mustang is not the ideal place for this, but we lean his seat back and I twist my body over the center console to meet his lips. We had met online—on the social network Myspace. Neither of us were listed as interested in men, but we had mutual friends that tipped us off. He messaged me first and we had back and forth conversation for about a week or so before we met up.

Aside from the occasional unrequited crush, he was the first boy I had pursued or been with aside from the debacle that was my relationship with Matt. Near the end, I had broken up with Matt via text and tried to avoid him. I would see him driving by the Starbucks that I frequented, each time ducking beneath our table hoping he wouldn't notice. One day I found him and his best friend Tiffany at my car. I made Michelle keep driving, because it was deeply troubling and scary. I had avoided him after breaking up because he had started to scare me. He

was intense in how much he wanted to care for me and I wasn't ready; when I started to shy away he became more and more aggressive, until I found him waiting at my car—almost stalking me—and it was terrifying in ways. I was terrified of him, and I was afraid of what all of these complicated feelings could mean about me. Matt and I didn't speak for a while after the day I avoided him at my car, and never talked about that day or what would have happened if I had gotten out of Michelle's car.

It took me two years to deal with my identity and those complex feelings enough that I felt comfortable meeting someone. His name was Kindred and he was from two hours over. We decided to meet in the middle and go to a movie. He was cute and well-dressed, and I remember being with him the first time a waiter ever assumed the check was together, and I was not ashamed like I might have been before. He was smart and read a lot of books, like I did. In the middle of the movie, I texted him: if you want to, you should probably hold my hand ;). I saw his phone light up, and saw him check it. He didn't move immediately, and it was long enough for me to be mortified about what I had sent; I did not flirt like that! Then he reached over and took my hand in his. Even in a dark theatre, this ownership of my sexual identity and small rebellious display of public affection empowered me in a brand new way.

*Later, glowing in the yellow parking lot lights I told him I really liked him in between quick but passionate kisses; I told him he made me happy. When asked when I decided that I told him that it was the moment I saw how well his hand fit into mine, and it wasn't a cringe-worthy line like I had fed Zach about his eyes or a timid lie I told to Matt out of a need to connect with someone outside of myself, but words that I meant. As I changed the CD from disc 2 of the *Across the Universe* soundtrack, I offered him the disc—I wanted him to take something tangible, something real away from the night. Secretly, I wanted to share half of something with him—a*

link between us that was undeniable, like a makeshift friendship necklace or something. He took it, and after a few more intensifying meetings of our lips, even though we didn't want to, we parted ways.

Days later, I heard from Kindred. He was going back to his ex, Jess, a girl who I had known for years. He said he didn't feel what we had done was right or OK, or at least that he wasn't gay. While it stung, I understood. I had been in his shoes to some extent two years before. I still felt betrayed by the comfort I had felt with him and with myself while we were together.

Something I have realized as I have developed beyond the literature that I read growing up, and it's probably something those mythical "queers who came before me" or Tony or really any adult might have been able to tell me, but maybe it's the kind of thing that one should come to by themselves: it is impossible to have a successful romantic relationship until you are comfortable with your own identity. This is, in many ways, especially true of nonheterosexual identified or queer people. It's evidenced through the comparison of Patrick in *Perks* and the world of *Boy meets boy*. Patrick's relationship fails because his partner is Brad, who is not only intensely closeted, but exhibits signs of being disgusted by the notion of his sexuality, drinking to excess every time he interacts romantically with Patrick. Conversely, the idealistic world of *Boy meets boy* allows almost every member of the community—queer or not—to have some positive affirmation, leading to more comfort and ownership of their queer identities; tellingly, this idealized narrative ends in multiple successful relationships as a result of the affirmations offered by the near utopian safe-space of its setting.

Owning Queerness

ARTIFACT: A hand-made chapbook bearing pictures of me in various states of drag. It is hand sewn and made of paper glued together in a collage. The writing within it investigates various facets of my own sexuality and relationship to my masculine identity.

For me owning my queer identity was a long road, full of changing positionalities and things that have been left out of the narrative. As stated in Chapter 4, I have at various times identified as straight, gay, bisexual, and queer, even if I always on some level knew that my identity had some nonheterosexual component. Often, I feel that people conflate the idea of “outness” with the idea of ownership of one’s identity, but I don’t see that as necessarily true. Coming out of the closet is—and as long as it is necessary will be—a lifelong process (Sedgwick 1990, Adams 2011). As a queer individual whenever I meet a new person I always have to evaluate the question if/when should I come out to this person; with every new acquaintance there is a new closet. In my case, though, some of the people that I have not shared my sexuality with are the people I have known the longest—my family. Many people would, and have, argued that because I am not out to my family, I am somehow not taking complete ownership of my identity, but I do not feel that way. Sexuality can be a very private matter in some arenas, and coming out—especially to people who knew you “from before the closet” —people who were part of your life prior to the development of a queer identity—is a very personal matter. While there may be an element of fear to my lies of omission to my family, there is also an element of keeping part of my life to myself; I am not entirely sure I would be sharing the romantic side of my life much more were I dating a woman than I am while dating a man.

Furthermore, in order to interrogate identity in the ways that autoethnography and my correspondent performance work require of me speaks to an ownership of all of the intersectional aspects of my socially constructed being. The work in which I interact with myself has proven to be the most rewarding work of my entire academic career up to this point. In short, though, without the self-education that I gave myself through trips to Huntsville to read the books that for so long I only dared to open in secret corners, I would have never been able to confront and wrestle with my identity as I do today. Writing my queer identity is a natural progression from the reading of queer identity that I so passionately took to in high school, allowing a greater interaction with the concepts and realities of a queer life. Even now, my queer identity is ever-changing as a form of sexual, romantic, and political identity through the reading and writing that I do, and I imagine that it will continue to complicate itself in these ways for some time.

As my formative identity developed throughout high school, I was able to seek out and gain access to more and more quality queer representations in literature and other cultural facets. As evidenced by my early ownership of *Boy Meets Boy*, I grew bold enough to bring them into my home, inhabiting the same kind of liminal neither in nor out of the closet space in my home identity as well as my social identity. While my growing access—older friends, safe spaces, the internet, and of course the eventual ability to drive—colored my perceptions of the quality and existence of these representations, it stands to reason that during the time in question (roughly 2003-2008) the representations themselves also grew. In high school, in addition to my growing access, I had the ability to see the availability of queer representation grow both as a result and independently of my increased access. Barnes & Noble started carrying more books, and even if more books were not being written, it felt as if they were being published by larger houses and given more commercial presence than they had been before.

Signs of Progress

ARTIFACT: A ticket stub shoved into the side pocket of my wallet. In all capital letters it says
THE PERKS OF BEING A WALLFLOWER

The growth and popularity of the genre is evidenced by pop culture artifacts that transcend merely young adult literature now. *Perks* has been turned into a film; the Fox network's television show *Glee*¹³ has displayed its own arcs of a gay "prince charming" myth as well as a full "boy meets boy" storyline through the characters of Kurt Hummel and Blaine Anderson; gay and queer representations are more present in a wider breadth than they have been before. Merely ten years ago, gay identity in popular culture was homogenized and tokenized in a lot of ways that often made it hard to realize or understand a well rounded or fully developed queer identity, but today culture shows movement towards a more diverse representation of queer voices.

I was pretty lucky in finding the representations that I did when I did. They became a "road map" (Myer 2014) to my identity in a way that other cultural markers like television and movies could not. Even then, I saw problems with the thin, repetitive depictions that I saw on television, but the literature I was able to sneak my way to showed a more diverse set of performance scripts. While *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* might have taught me the particular skill of saying "Fab-u-lous" with just the right amount of sibilant ssss,

¹³ A 2009 Fox network musical dramedy set in a high school and targeted primarily at young adults.

Looking Up

*I am sitting in a crowded café in a Barnes & Noble. I can't hide in the same aisles I did about ten years ago. They are no longer there. Huntsville has a newer Barnes and Noble in a new shopping center. It is bigger, and nicer, and the section title says "Gay and Lesbian" instead of "Lifestyles." I don't live in North Alabama anymore, but I am still there quite a bit. A lot has changed in ten years; the last time I remember counting, I think about one third of the states would let me marry a man if I was at that place in my life. By the time I reach that place, I'm sure the number will have grown. I open my laptop to type, and put the books that shared my laptop bag on the ground. As I am placing the books, *Boy Meets Boy* lies on top of the stack. For a moment, I consider turning the candy hearts of its cover face down, away from the possibly prying eyes of anyone who shares the café in the moment. It's a holdover from a time when I was less comfortable with myself because I thought the world was less comfortable with me. I think for a brief second about why I would turn the cover over, and how the idea of turning the cover over stigmatized my own identity by feeling the need to distance my public self from a book that so brazenly displays a queer title. I put the book onto the stack and look down at the three pastel hearts looking up to me—unashamedly beaming upward for anyone to see.*

I hope this work will be as useful to someone as the previous scholarship on queer identity in literature has been to me. My narrative strives to be accessible and readable and understandable so that if someone like me from eight years ago comes across it, they can still get something out of it, because I understand how difficult it can be to find safe representations when you live a life that is not open. I hope that it will inspire more research that looks at our identities through the representations we consume, and judges them not only with theory, but with interrogating the

effect they have on us as people and individuals. I can't wait to see where research like this goes in the future, and maybe, after a while, it won't be as important or necessary anymore.

If you're wondering where that road map has led me, well, obviously I'm writing a thesis, so there's that. I am still not out to my family, but I live the rest of my life in a pretty out fashion. I am working on research on queer identities, as you have gathered by now, and am pretty comfortable about it. I even talked about it on the radio. Despite my bumpy teen romances, I am in a relationship that is in its third year. Like any other, it's not always smooth, but it seems to be going pretty well. I'm proud of my identity and the way it has informed the person I am today. In short, I will always leave my book covers looking up.

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