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Thinking Globally and Reading Diversely: Issues of Gay and Lesbian International Literature for Young Adults

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Thinking Globally and Reading Diversely: Issues of Gay and Lesbian¹ International Literature for Young Adults

We live in a world where issues of sexuality, homosexuality, and GLBTQ² rights continue to capture worldwide political attention. Our world's current teens and children represent the political, economic, and educational leaders of the next generation and these same leaders will undoubtedly still be debating issues of foreign policy and terrorism as well as sexuality and GLBTQ rights on a global level. It only makes sense, then, that we prepare them for the leadership roles that they will fulfill. As educators, what better way to prepare them than through young adult literature? We need to provide readers with literatures that address and reflect not only all issues of sexuality, and other teen issues, but that also address and illustrate international, cross cultural and multicultural concerns. Young adults need to be prepared for the diversity that they will face in their coming leadership roles. The extant problem comes in the form of a lack of these literatures. Presently, international GLBTQ young adult texts either do not exist, or remain so difficult to find that it makes them ineffective or unusable.

Intersections: Identity, Culture, Sexuality

Teens need models with which to identify and that show them how to navigate the struggles that they face in their daily lives, and they find many of these models in young adult fiction. Books offer comfort and identification to those who find themselves isolated and rejected because “there is no risk of rejection from a book” (“Honoring” 40). Many authors agree that the power that fiction, or the story, holds over readers may

offer one key to young people's salvation, because readers identify with the texts. Three authors offer insight into this power of fiction. In a keynote speech, Laurie Halse Anderson notes that "[Teenagers] want [authors] to show them how to find the strength to go on. They desperately want us to give them the tools they need to go on" (Anderson 54). Anderson identifies that youths tend to seek identification with characters in novels and similarly look to authors for guidance through novels. Similarly, Susan Fisher Staples notes that the "story is a good way to provide insight into the lives of peoples from other cultures because the story is based on the stuff of the human heart, and the human heart speaks all languages. Story shows what we have in common, as well as what separates us" (Staples). Staples may agree with Anderson that teens identify with characters, but she also takes it a step further. She sees identification as a human characteristic rather than unique to teens. She also notes that narrative possesses the unique power to unite people through humanity, regardless of cultural difference, while simultaneously encouraging individuals to learn about the differences among cultures.

Marion Dane Bauer perhaps shows the potentially poignant power of writing most strikingly in the introduction to her collection of stories *Am I Blue?*:

One out of ten teenagers attempts suicide. One out of three of those does so because of concern about being homosexual³. That means that in every statistical classroom across the country there is one person in danger of dying for lack of information and support concerning his or her sexuality ... The *power of fiction* is that it gives us, as readers, the opportunity to move inside another human being, to look out through that person's eyes, hear with her ears, think with his thoughts, feel with her feelings. It is the only form of art which can accomplish that feat so

deeply, so completely. And *thus it is the perfect bridge for helping us come to know the other* --- the other inside as well as outside ourselves [*emphases are mine*] (ix-x).

Putting aside Bauer's use of the terminology "the other," an undoubtedly debatable term, she puts forth the most important effect of fiction as a tool to GLBTQ young adults: it remains a means by which they can survive. These three quotations in fact take us a step further in the discovery of the importance of international GLBTQ young adult literature: because teens identify with characters and situations portrayed in young adult literature, young adults of all nationalities, ethnicities, and sexualities need models of and from their own cultures and sexualities as well as from others'. They need authentic models⁴ as well as models that enlighten them about other cultures that will prepare them for a society rapidly and necessarily growing into a global and multicultural one, or as the National Association of Multicultural Education phrases it, that will "prepare students for their responsibilities in an interdependent world" (Roxburgh 49). Ideally, international GLBTQ young adult literature operates not only as a model for them as teens, but also on a cultural level and an individual level in terms of offering an outlet for sexuality crises. And when it is successful, when it is available and accessible, international GLBTQ young adult literature holds the power to change lives – to help create and grow the types of adults we seek for our future leaders.

Problems with Young Adult Literature

Young adult literature faces several problems that complicate the growth of international GLBTQ young adult literature. Although themes of homosexuality have begun to find their place in international young adult literature, the topic itself still generates controversy. One debate relates to the issue of “what is young adult literature,” an argument entirely too large to even review in the scope of this paper. Distinctions of child and young adult remain blurred. Precisely what ages belong to which categories and what issues each demographic faces remain at best unclear and as such what books for these groups should contain also remain fuzzy. But the greatest debate about sexuality in young adults and children’s literature is whether or not it can be classified as sexuality at all.

The biggest issue seems to be whether young adults and children even encounter issues of sexuality, or if they, instead, face issues of sensuality. Some authors argue that children at young ages have yet to distinguish between the sexual and the sensual. Jeffrey Garrett in his preface to *Bookbird’s* special issue *Sexuality in Children’s Literature*, notes that “For young people, what we refer to as ‘sexuality’ is inseparably woven together with a dense fabric of emotions, of longing, bliss, beauty, misery, death --- everything else” (“To the Reader” 2). Furthermore, in a separate letter within the same issue, Garrett suggests “that ‘sexuality as a category is quite alien to the world of children and young people. For all children and probably even most teenagers, ‘sensual’ and ‘sexual’ have not yet come to be distinguishable from one another” (“Young Love” 34). Powell, in an article discussing homosexuality and homophobia within his elementary school, observes that for children of this age the discussion has almost nothing to do with sex, of which they are only dimly aware. Their intrigue lies in attraction – “like” – and why. For

children, homosexuality can only be discussed on the level of love (Powell 16). Moreover, some argue that the issue of sexuality in itself exists as a primarily adult concern projected onto young adult and children's literature by adults ("To the Reader" 2, Fenwick 7). This idea becomes complicated in combination with attitudes on sexuality that vary within different cultures. In some ways, while these ideas offer good points, they may be moot points. Despite developmental understandings of sexuality and sensuality for children, themes of sex and sexuality remain important to teens. Regardless of whether we label issues as sexuality or sensuality, young adult texts that deal with sexuality and homosexuality allow young teens who sense they are different, but do not quite know how yet, to find comfort and guidance through characters who share their feelings but who also resolve their issues.

While the issue of sexuality seems paramount in the debate about young adult literature, issues of culture also seem of a high importance, especially in relation to the issue of international young adult literature. Indeed the term "international young adult literature" presents a concept as problematic as that of the issue of sexuality in children's literature. In her article "Going Global: World Literature for American Children," Stan speaks about international children's literature, a term analogous to the subject at hand. She suggests that America uses the term "international children's literature" in an ethnocentric way to refer to all literature that is not American. More narrowly, the term references all non-American literature available to American children (Stan 169). Broadly then, these thoughts apply to international young adult literature as well. The concern seems to be one of one's own culture versus "the other" culture creating the argument of which is more important. Knowing one's own culture is certainly important,

but so, too, is learning a new one and having a good sense of both what differentiates and what unites cultures and people.

Given the state of publishing hegemony⁵, many also argue that the international GLBTQ young adult literature is not really “international” enough. The only really accessible texts American teens see include “Americanized” versions from the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada – cultures which are not that different from the English speaking United States. At the same time the accessible international GLBTQ young adult literature exists as a classic case of “something is better than nothing.” In many ways, we use the same argument that teachers make for using magazines and non-literary literatures to reach reluctant readers: reading is reading and with any luck a little taste will make them want more and persuade them to move up to better literatures. The same can be said of the international issue. Yes, Australian, New Zealand, Canadian, and British cultures are not that different from America’s, but they remain different enough to catch young readers’ attentions and with any luck get them hooked on wanting more.

No doubt, it has been a long and difficult road getting to the publication of so many good GLBTQ books for teens, and the struggle continues since so many stereotypes still exist within GLBTQ young adult literature. Yet, we cannot overlook the fact that just because publishers now publish these books does not mean that young adults read them. Nancy St. Clair, who teaches a compulsory unit on lesbian literature in her course “Women’s Lives / Women’s Literature” at Simpson College, notes that her students generally like the lesbian literature unit best and that she often receives comments like the following: “I wish I had known about these books when I was

younger, maybe junior or senior high would have been easier” or “when I was a kid, maybe thirteen or fourteen, I spent a lot of time in the library looking, but not sure of what I was looking for. It wasn’t like I was a great reader. I read Nancy Drew, but I think I must have wanted *Rubyfruit Jungle*” (38). While some GLBTQ young adult texts will make it into college courses, they generally do not appear in younger classrooms and often do not arrive on library shelves either. Too frequently these same books end up on banned or challenged lists rather than in the hands of teens⁶. Furthermore, even when texts escape being banned or challenged, since these texts do not often become school texts, teens have problems accessing, or finding, them.

Long Hard Road to Change

International literature available for young adults in the United States is certainly experiencing an increase with the growing awareness of and move toward a global culture. GLBTQ literature for young adults has also experienced exponential growth within the last few years, a trend which other countries, especially those that share in America’s cultural, linguistic, and economic hegemony like the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, seem to be following (Cart 1356). Not only is the history of GLBTQ young adult literature in the United States absolutely astounding, but it seems also to indicate that the time for change has come. As Michael Cart observes in his article “Gay and Lesbian Literature Comes of Age,” the decades after John Donovan’s ground breaking novel *I’ll Get There: It Better Be Worth the Trip* (the first young adult novel to address GLBTQ issues) saw a painfully slow increase in the number of GLBTQ interested young adult works published yearly from an average of four in the 1970s to an

average of twelve in the first five years of this decade. Perhaps most telling is that between the years 2000 and 2004, fifty-nine young adult novels of GLBTQ interest were published in the United States; that is thirteen more than were published in the first two decades following Donovan's book (Cart 1356). Perhaps more importantly, these novels are becoming more sophisticated. They no longer end with the GLBTQ characters living in complete isolation and despair but instead offer hope (Cart 1356). These facts indicate in some ways that the growth of international GLBTQ young adult literature remains merely a matter of time, yet the movement needs help. Without encouragement and vigilance no growth will take place. Indeed, that homosexuality remains a controversial, if not taboo, topic in so many cultures and has taken center stage in several political discussions indicates that now is the time to begin.

With the recent growth in GLBTQ young adult literature, America seems to have become a leader in GLBTQ young adult literature and perhaps a standard to which we can compare international GLBTQ texts as a starting point (though this may cause problems because of inherent cultural biases, simultaneously these texts all already contain cultural biases). The body of GLBTQ young adult literature remains comparatively small, though growing, but the body of criticism on those works remains even smaller and far from comprehensive. Christine Jenkins notes in an article, "As yet, few researchers have examined the full range of [GLBTQ young adult] titles published in the years from 1969 through 1992 or traced content changes over time" (Jenkins 44). She also lists the nine cumulative articles on GLBTQ young adult literature that have been published to that date in 1993. Since then at least one semi-comprehensive article has been published: Nancy St. Clair's 1995, "Outside Looking In: Representations of Gay

and Lesbian Experiences in the Young Adult Novel.” One book length look at young adult GLBTQ literature by Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins is forthcoming from Scarecrow Press. These comprehensive articles and occasional other critical articles mention one or two international GLBTQ young adult works individually, though never as a comprehensive group of its own, and usually not in the context as international texts. They generally accept the international text as an American one and discuss it as such. This undoubtedly relates to the fact that these texts are the “semi” international texts – the ones that share in America’s cultural and linguistic hegemony. To date, no comprehensive research articles have been written on international GLBTQ young adult literature. Thus, given the lack of available criticism for international texts and the need to evaluate the available international GLBTQ young adult texts, using the two most recent and comprehensive article on American GLBTQ young adult works seems a good place to start.

Nancy’s St. Clair’s article, “Outside Looking In: Representations of Gay and Lesbian Experiences in the Young Adult Novel,” studies shorter and more simplistic trends of GLBTQ young adult literature. As a women’s studies professor, St. Clair teaches a unit on lesbian texts. Her surprise at her students’ responses ultimately spawned her essay because she found herself wondering how many and what sorts of realistic young adult literature were available. Ultimately, she explains that GLBTQ young adult texts – until the publication of her article in 1995 – fall into three categories. The first category primarily contains the earliest texts; in this category books characterize homosexuals as suffering from a “tragic flaw” and the texts themselves often perpetuate stereotypes (St. Clair 39). Thus, homosexuals in these texts often view or feel their

sexuality as a passing phase or something bad, or wrong, and often have to pay a price for their sexualities through accidents, deaths (their own or others' close to them), or isolation (St. Clair 39-40).

St. Clair's second category consists primarily of texts from the 1970s and 1980s, which tend to be less moralistic and to show teen homosexuality as more complex (St. Clair 40). Here characters experience more development and their storylines broaden to include other characters. They also begin to experience their sexuality as something permanent that extends into very facet of their lives (St. Clair 41-42). Her final category contains many current texts and sees GLBTQ characters and issues portrayed sympathetically (St. Clair 42). These works often show GLBTQ characters or issues as secondary to the plot and narrative though other characters are often sympathetic to them (St. Clair 42-43).

While St. Clair's observations seem simple, they offer important insight; however, Christine Jenkins offers more detailed and complex observations⁷ about GLBTQ young adult literature in her article "Young Adult Novels with Gay / Lesbian Characters and Themes 1969-92: A Historical Reading of Content, Gender, and Narrative Distance." Jenkins breaks the works into several groupings. First, she breaks the works into two categories chronologically: an old group, those works published between 1969 and 1984, and a new group, those works published between 1985 and 1992 (Jenkins 45). She then looks at common characteristics of GLBTQ young adult literature in both groups and observes changes and similarities over time. Jenkins notes problems and lacks that these works pose. Finally, she concludes with a look to what the future of GLBTQ young adult literature needs to include. Ultimately, Jenkins observes some common

characteristics of GLBTQ works. GLBTQ characters tend to be exclusively middle class, white, and dominantly male; furthermore, they tend to be creative or artsy (Jenkins 45). Early books contain rural or isolated settings, though newer books likely maintain urban or suburban settings (Jenkins 45). Character casts also generally consist mostly of males, and characters almost always appear physical beautiful or of above average looks (Jenkins 46). In the older works, GLBTQ characters are the main characters, but more recent works have shifted those characters to secondary roles (Jenkins 47). Also, GLBTQ young adult books tend not to contain GLBTQ adults (Jenkins 48).

Aside from these common characteristics, Jenkins also notes some common problems among GLBTQ young adult texts. First, she points out that in addition to a general lack of women and lesbians, the lesbians that do make it into the texts seldom have any autonomy and frequently appear only as part of a couple while males in these texts have complete autonomy and seldom appear as couples (Jenkins 49). Gay males in these texts frequently exist as the endangered gay male; rather, their lives end or are endangered by gay bashing and they live in a dangerous world (Jenkins 49). Jenkins also observes that few of these books depict the natural progression of feelings and actions that most autobiographical works of GLBTQs recount⁸ (49). Furthermore, she points out that these texts almost never show the GLBTQ person living in or finding a GLBTQ community like the ones that exist in reality; too frequently GLBTQ teen characters accept loneliness as part of their lives and live in isolation (50). Finally, Jenkins notes that too few of these texts have included GLBTQ people with AIDS or HIV (Jenkins 50).

Rather than merely pointing out problems, Jenkins also offers some solutions about what GLBTQ young adult texts should include. First, she notes that texts need to look at the issue of friends and how GLBTQ teens and their heterosexual friends deal with the issue of sexuality and “coming out” (Jenkins 52). Also, GLBTQ young adult texts need to have GLBTQ characters of color. They need to show GLBTQ individuals as part of a larger network and community of people of various orientations and with varied problems that may or may not deal exclusively with sexual identity (Jenkins 53). To this end, GLBTQ texts need to show characters in interactions with peer characters of different genders (Jenkins 53).

Taken in tandem, these articles offer a great amount of insight into the history of GLBTQ young adult literature in the United States; yet, we must keep in mind that both are a decade out of date. This leaves a large gap in which a great amount of progress toward the established goals has taken place. Indeed, several recent articles in magazine and newspapers have noted the growth and progress in GLBTQ young adult literature⁹. Recently, “Youth fiction grows up,” an article discussing GLBTQ young adult literature, appeared in *The Advocate* and quite rightly observed that “some of the most moving, courageous, and innovative new writing is in gay-themed novels for young adults” (Marler 168). Furthermore, on the topic of stereotypes, the article offers: “The sense I get from kids today is that there’s still a struggle to get through, but the issues of shame don’t exist as strongly as they used to” (qtd. in Marler 168). This may in fact offers some insight into the stereotypes that do persist in GLBTQ young adult literature like the coming-out plot; they still exist in fiction because they still exist as real problems with which teens deal: coming out to family and friends still offers a painful, scary, and

realistic reality for many young adults. Isolation and fear of endangerment remain real concerns, especially in a society that seems to not only be experiencing a conservative moral backlash against several of the liberal movements in America, but also seems to hold homophobia as the last, and a legitimized, form of discrimination (Powell 14).

While these issues still exist in reality they will undoubtedly appear in fiction, yet we need to encourage authors to make texts that explore new territory. For example, stories might move away from the coming-out plot exclusively and illustrate some of the other issues GLBTQs face in everyday life. Though American GLBTQ young adult texts have certainly progressed a great deal, even since Jenkins's and St. Clair's articles, they still have a long way to go. We still have too few texts dealing with characters of color, with characters coping with AIDS and HIV, with transgender characters, and with bisexual characters. In fact, Michael Cart adds to this argument:

We urgently need more serious attention to books for and about gay and lesbian and – yes – bisexual young people. We need more good novels that give faces to gay and lesbian young people; we need more good novels that offer them the shock of recognition, the knowledge that they are not alone; more good novels that also inform the minds and hearts of non-homosexual reader, that offer them opportunities for insight and empathy by shattering stereotypes and humanizing their gay and lesbian peers (“Honoring” 45).

While this statement rings true, we should extend it beyond the borders of our culture as well. As Roxburgh writes in an article where he justifies exactly why he continues to publish works in translation, because through reading international books people begin to see familiar things in new ways, “in order to see what these books have to offer, you must

leave the familiarity and comfort of our culture” (50). Additionally, we need to acknowledge the reciprocal natures of culture and sexuality. GLBTQ teens need to see portrayals of characters like them; they also need to see those characters interact within varied and diverse environments – with like and different sexualities and with like and different ethnicities, races, and nationalities. The same remains true of international teens. It is all very reciprocal. Yet, when one surveys the available literature, diversity sadly fails to jump off the page.

Arriving in Nowhere – Problems of Classification and Access

In her article, Stan discusses issues of access in terms of economic and infrastructural opportunities for the publication of young adult and children’s literature; however, it seems that her argument applies more to availability than access. In fact, at least in the United States, some international GLBTQ young adult texts remain available, but the real problem seems to be access – physical access – to these texts because of cataloging issues. International GLBTQ young adult books usually are not best sellers. Nor are they generally chosen as texts for middle and high school classes. This leaves teens to either find these texts on their own or to depend on the school or public librarian.

The problem, then, becomes one of access: how do students and librarians find these texts? Libraries are generally organized by either the Dewey Decimal system or the Library of Congress system. Both pose problems because they are distinctly American systems. In this particular application, they pose problems because they carry with them the inherent prejudices, phobias, and biases of the culture that creates them. Aside from the connotations of where within the classification systems GLBTQ texts end up, the real

issue seems to be that neither system has a specific classification for international GLBTQ young adult literature. Works may be cataloged by nation, as young adult, as children's, or perhaps as homosexual, but seldom as all. More importantly, too often we catalog works merely as the ambiguous "fiction." If a work does take another descriptor it may be another ambiguous term like "homosexual" or "friendship."

Perhaps this is complicated by the fact that works do not always fit only into one category. For example, how should the "crossover" text, a text like *Oranges are Not the only Fruit* by Jeanette Winterson, be cataloged? It tells the semi-autobiographical story of Jeanette's youth and young adulthood. Mostly it deals with her relationship to her mother and being raised in a fundamentally religious household. Yet, it also shows Jeanette's struggles with sexuality and how she negotiates her desire for females and a religion that tells her that her feelings are sinful. It remains a text which can be read by teens but is not necessarily a young adult novel – nor does it fit wholly into autobiography or fiction. How then should it be cataloged? Moreover, where should a book like Melissa P.'s *100 Strokes of the Brush Before Bed* fall in classification? It tells in diary form, through the entries of an Italian girl at ages fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen, of Melissa's sexual escapades. It depicts a teenage girl looking for love and instead, finding lots of sex in every variety: heterosexual, homosexual, group-sex, BDSM¹⁰, and more. In fact, and perhaps because of all the sex, it was originally marketed as erotica and is still sold in most American stores as erotica. However, most readers find it anything but erotic. Almost all its reviews see it as a poor text and most readers think that Melissa actually needs psychological help or that she suffers from depression. Yet, this book sold over one million copies and has been translated into more than twenty languages. Given all this

information, how should the work be cataloged? Is it a young adult text? Is this a text about sexuality? Homosexuality? Depression? Isolation? Italy? Perhaps it is all, but under the Library of Congress system it is only cataloged as Italian literature by an individual author and among booksellers it is cataloged as Italian and / or erotic literature. These represent just two of numerous problematic texts in terms of classification, but each holds potential for GLBTQ young adult readers.

The problems of classification do not end with library cataloging systems. Other finding aids and web-based search services like amazon.com and bn.com which youths may use to find books do not necessarily index these works completely either. They do, however, tend to index them slightly better than the Dewey Decimal system or the Library of Congress system. They frequently index texts as teen, young adult, or children's and sexuality or homosexuality, but they frequently do not index by international or geographical location and the broad categories of sexuality and homosexuality; this still leaves too many texts for teens to pour over before they actually find the one they want. Moreover, these services do not always offer the selection of texts that some libraries may. They will likely have new or popular texts, but the obscure or somewhat dated ones will likely not be as readily available.

These issues may well reflect the issue that no one seems able to precisely define the concepts of young adult or child and a young adult novel or children's book, and if we cannot define these concepts, how will we make categories into which international GLBTQ young adult literatures may be classified for better access? It is a very complex issue, but without better cataloging or some improvement in awareness about these texts,

the number of them available will remain inconsequential since teens will not be able to access them to read them.

Some may argue, conversely, that we do not need to catalog these works as GLBTQ because it will force these works into a category as “other” and encourage separation. Perhaps this is true to some extent, but because something may be perceived as a bad thing does not necessarily make it so. Other diverse literatures, like African-American, Native American, and Latino literature, have faced similar dilemmas and have ultimately found value in having their own classifications. We must keep our focus on the bigger picture. The opposite and perhaps stronger argument is that by cataloging them as GLBTQ we offer teens access to comforting works that will ultimately improve not only their lives, but also our society. “Our society does not make it easy for young people, regardless of their sexual orientation, to find accurate, non-judgmental, comprehensive information about homosexuality...” Michael Cart writes, “but we need to remember that not only do gay and lesbian kids need to see themselves reflected in the pages of books but so also do straight kids need to meet and get to know authentic gay and lesbian people in the pages of books,” and the only way teens are going to be able to do this is if we make it easier for them to access GLBTQ books (“Honoring” 40, 43).

Problems of Culture and International

Building on the argument that young adult literature serves as a model and source of identification for young people, we must address the issues of providing international and GLBTQ examples in literatures for young adults. Perhaps because of a combination of geography, politics, and economics, America has a tendency to remain isolated from

the rest of the world. Indeed, Stephen Roxburgh argues that this isolation also stems from the resurgence of nationalism in our post 9/11 world and notes that “Americans don’t seem very interested at all in other countries and cultures, except, perhaps as vacation places or for the cuisine they offer” (49). These unfortunate truths of isolation and apathy trickle down even into children’s literature. As Stan points out in her 1999 article “Going Global: World Literature for American Children,” because America exists as an economic power with well established infrastructures, it holds a corner on the publishing market (168). As such, America exerts a great amount of influence over what gets published not only in the United States, but also in other countries. For this reason, Americans tend to read much less international literature, but conversely other countries read more international and American literature (Stan 174). In fact, although Roxburgh suggest that this problem has roots not only in economics but also in America’s cultural apathy, he also observes that “this aversion to books in translation is not evident in other countries ... Look at any major juvenile list in Western Europe (excluding England) and you will find a substantial, vital selection of literature in translation,” (50). Certainly, much of the American literature that other cultures read exists in translation, but it also remains that often because of the publishing power America holds, international texts are often “Americanized,” or edited to fit the American world view so that they will be more marketable in the United States, and as such do not always fully represent their own cultures (Stan 175).

While other cultures tend already to have a better sense of the international and too frequently find themselves dominated or excessively influenced by the American culture, they should also continue to expand publication of international literatures while

also fostering their own literatures. The debate, and rightly so, seems to exist between the need for texts that help teens identify with and learn about their own cultures and those that introduce them to other cultures; both share equal importance. Understanding one's own culture makes it much easier to exist within it and a cultural understanding of one's own nation can also be very helpful when interacting with other cultures. This point becomes particularly important in societies moving rapidly toward a global culture and market place with the expanding technological capabilities.

Given these factors, it is essential that we expand and encourage the American publishing industry to offer young adults more, and more authentic, examples of international texts. Simultaneously, other countries need to insure that their youth receive realistic examples of their own cultures treating the issues they must face in their daily lives. Because the American and Australian cultures differ, Australian children, for example, need examples of teens navigating issues of adulthood, including sexuality, within their own cultural settings and societies. Merely seeing examples of American teens negotiating these same issues within the American culture as represented in the American novels that permeate their culture will not nurture notions of cultural and multicultural identity. More importantly, these examples need to be as true to their cultures as possible.

Unfortunately, the American publishing industry has a tendency to underestimate young readers and to ethnocentrize texts (Stan 168). Roxburgh suggests that texts "exemplify a dominant cultural bias," which at best "acknowledges and celebrates diversity in [the American] culture" (49). An example of this perhaps comes in the wildly popular *Harry Potter* books and movies. Initially written and published by Bloomsbury

Publishing as British texts, Scholastic Publisher Americanized the books by changing British terms to American counter parts so that American children would better accept them. For example, Scholastic changed title of the first book in the series from the British *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* to *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* for Americans perhaps because American lay-persons and children have less knowledge of the historical and philosophical background surrounding the Philosopher's stone than British counterparts. Furthermore, given the fantasy nature of the *Harry Potter* series, with these changes the novels could just as easily be perceived as American texts. The *Harry Potter* movies, however, have successfully retained more British authenticity, and though the multi-sensual nature of film certainly affects perceptions, the movies' global success indicates an interest in other cultures.

As a culture, Americans seem to be stuck in a "tolerance," or worse, mode of thinking, rather than one of adaptation or integration. Bennett describes "A Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity" that illustrates one's stance towards difference from denial through integration (Bennett and Hammer 1). While designed for individual assessment, the model seems applicable to cultures and nations as well. Furthermore, since the model demonstrates intercultural attitudes, the model may also apply to the social cultural issues of sexuality.

In what Bennett terms the "Ethnocentric stages" people tend toward denial of difference, defense against difference, and minimization of difference (1). It seems that the United States, in its current culture, might land on the lower end of the Bennett's spectrum regarding its views on international GLBTQ young adult literature. When international texts do make it to the United States they seem to emphasis similarities – or

minimize differences. In other cases, like the *Harry Potter* example, difference is denied by the sheer act of “Americanizing” the texts. The United States’ publishing industry, and indeed cultures everywhere, needs to strive toward what Bennett terms the “ethnorelative stages” or acceptance of difference, adaptation to difference, and integration of difference (1). We can begin this shift – growth – toward the ethnorelative stages by starting to provide young adults with quality international GLBTQ texts. In this instance, the publishing market must take risks and step into the role of leader in sparking a cultural shift toward new attitudes.

The cultural hegemony the United States and Great Britain maintain over much of the global publishing industry¹¹ complicates this process. For instance, while non United States readers may have access to international GLBTQ literature in the form of some of the American texts available in translation, they, like American teen readers, would likely not have access to an international GLBTQ young adult text from perhaps Africa. Surely the reasons for this vary. In large part, too few international GLBTQ young adult texts exist because these cultures do not have the infrastructures to publish texts internationally. Furthermore, their publishing companies do not always produce texts that American and British presses are willing to translate into English for their audiences (Stan 172-175). Undoubtedly, the attitudes that cultures hold regarding homosexuality contribute to the lack of international GLBTQ young adult texts. In many countries, homosexuality remains a religious and cultural taboo. These realistic concerns and obstacles block the production and sharing of valuable international GLBTQ literature resources for young people. As solution to the practical and economic problems, Stan proposes the idea of co-production, a process whereby smaller countries may share the

costs and responsibilities of publishing works: a process that in itself fosters intercultural diversity and international cooperation. Similarly, given the growing global market place with the growth of the internet, world wide web, and other world-wide technologies, another possible solution would be to re-evaluate issues of copyright law and other production costs in the hopes of making the publication of little known literature more affordable and practical for smaller nations.

Looking Ahead to the Globally Interdependent Society

We live in a culture and society that finds itself slowly turning from fear and isolation, but in which some are tempted to fight this movement toward acceptance and community. Roxburgh observes that “the United States is an island bordered by two oceans and two friendly neighbors. Our shores are so comfortable, so familiar, that a majority of Americans have never been out of the country and probably won’t ever venture beyond our borders” (48). Perhaps some Americans do not travel because of the expense of it. Thus, books offer a way for people to experience other cultures without the expense of traveling. Another reason so few travel may stem from our apathy as a culture. The best way to defeat that apathy is to broaden the minds of the new generation; a feat almost always accomplished through reading good texts.

Yet, our culture suffers not only from geographical isolation but also from emotional, intellectual, and identification isolation. We presently live in a culture that only now is beginning to debate the issue of granting all its citizens equal rights; cultures that unfortunately still discriminate against GLBTQs without reprisal. As Nancy Garden points out, “it seems to me that GLBT youngsters may need books about themselves even

more now than they did back in the Stonewall days and earlier. And straight kids need them also, for such books are a route to their understanding of who their gay peers really are” (Garden 23).

Because of these cultural conditions we need to create more and better international GLBTQ young adult literature. As Jenkins notes, “If we as teachers truly believe that literature helps students understand themselves and the issues they face, then we have an obligation to provide our gay students with the same resources as we do other minority students” (Jenkins 43). To do this we need texts with diverse and mixed casts of characters and that explore issues other than coming out – that delve deeper into the lives and issues of GLBTQs. Julie Anne Peters quite rightly observes that “you are a person before you are a gay person” (qtd. in Marler 168). Indeed to further that, each of us is an American, Australian, Canadian, and so on before we are gay, and at the root of it all we are still just people – human. We need texts that look at and celebrate similarities and differences within individuals and cultures: cultures other than our own and even those cultures inside our own.

Appendix

Insights: Survey of International GLBTQ Young Adult Texts

Given the hegemonic state of America publishing it seems plausible that perhaps trends in literature and publication in other countries lag behind those in the American culture. Thus considering the relatively small number of available American GLBTQ young adult texts it seems logical that the extant international field of GLBTQ young adult literature would also be small. In fact, this sadly is the case. Thorough searches discovered fewer than twenty potential texts, most of which hail from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United Kingdom – supposedly less than real “international” texts. Moreover, most of these texts were quite dated – from the 1980s or early 1990s. Furthermore, most of them fall easily into the stereotypes and categories that Jenkins and St. Clair outline. When grouped by country, the texts reveal few common themes, characteristics, or stereotypes. Grouping them by gender, however, seems slightly more useful, perhaps because of the trends Jenkins notes (or at the very least in correlation with them). Yet, comparing the texts ranging from 1985 to 2004 chronologically, reveals the most commonalities; ultimately showing that these texts align well with the characteristics of American GLBTQ young adult literature.

Although most of the older texts fit into most stereotypes and the newer texts fit some of the stereotypes, the two newest texts have begun to dispel stereotypes. Not surprisingly then, male protagonists dominate these texts and finding lesbian texts proves difficult. Truly international texts are equally hard to find and seldom fit neatly into the young adult category. For this reason, I rely heavily on Jenkins’s and St. Clair’s articles, have actively tried to balance the genders, look primarily at texts from Australia, New

Zealand, Canada, and the United Kingdom, and have focused only on the following texts for analysis in terms of shared stereotypes and themes: from Australia, *Peter* (1991¹²) by Kate Walker, *What Are Ya?* (1987) by Jenny Pausacker, and *Out of the Shadows* (1998) by Sue Hines; from New Zealand William Taylor's *Blue Lawn* (1994), and Paula Boock's *Dare, Truth, or Promise* (1997); from Canada, Diana Wieler's *Bad Boy* (1989); and from the United Kingdom, *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) by Jeanette Winterson, and *Lucky* (2004) by Eddie De Oliveira.

A Close Reading of Three International GLBTQ Young Adult Texts

Too often these texts depict emotionally isolated characters. They contain all white middle class characters. Some books show main GLBTQ characters, while some others have secondary ones. Several of the older texts have rural settings, though the newer ones seem to have suburban or urban ones. Almost all the texts segregate gender – males with males and females with females. Moreover, with one exception, none of the novels ever show lesbians and gay males interacting. None of the texts show any transgender individuals. With the exception of *Lucky*, none show bisexuals. In these novels, lesbians primarily exist as couples, but gay males remain single and autonomous. All gay male characters exhibit sensitive, athletics, and artistic characteristics. All lesbians are beautiful and creative. These novels depict few if any GLBTQ adults. None of the novels show characters with AIDS, though a few mention it in the stereotyped fear of homosexuals being a magnet for the illness. None of the texts exhibits a real sense of community. Gay males exist in a state of fear within dangerous societies and find themselves endangered by potential violence. About half the GLBTQ characters come

from single parent families, some through the death of a parent and others through divorce. Several of the books show GLBTQ characters who find sympathetic friends. Almost none of the GLBTQ characters encounter families that are pleased with or immediately accepting of their child's homosexuality, though a few have families who eventually come to terms with and respect their child's sexuality. All the books illustrate intolerant societies that insight entirely too much fear and consequently isolation. Fortunately, most of these texts do not exhibit the GLBTQ character as tragically flawed. One or two of the novels acknowledged the old stereotype of homosexuality as a phase, though they do so in a way that makes certain it is not a truism.

Yet, for all the stereotypes and commonalties, three texts, *What Are Ya?*, *Out of the Shadows*, and *Lucky* remain worthy of mention for dispelling stereotypes and forging new ground. Originally published in Australia in 1987, *What Are Ya?* unfortunately falls into almost all the aforementioned stereotypes. However, it is a notable text for the mere fact that it was ahead of its time. Unlike most of the texts from the 1980s, the two main lesbian characters in the novel, Leith and Swallow, find a gay community and network of friends through a local lesbian group. Though this occurs at the end of the novel, in the last forty pages really, it plays a key role in the development of the plot and remains the longest narration of finding and maintaining a gay community.

The second and later (1998) Australian text, Sue Hines's *Out of the Shadows* is one of the best texts available, though presently *Bowker's Books-in-Print* lists the trade paperback edition as "out of stock indefinitely;" so sadly the text remains available only on the secondary market, as a library book, or as an audio book in America. Perhaps most importantly *Out of the Shadows* offers multiple perspectives. It tells the stories of two

teenage girls in Australia. In fact, it employs two narrators: Ro and Jodie. Both main characters tell the story; written such that sometimes the narratives overlap, the reader sees two perspectives of the same event. The story follows Jodie and Ro's budding friendship. It also narrates Jodie's coming into her sexuality as a lesbian and Ro's desperate search for forgiveness from herself as well as her acceptance of her mother's and Jodie's sexualities. Not only does it use dual narrators to this end, but through flashback readers see Ro's mother's account of coming to terms with her sexuality and explaining it to Ro. Most importantly, in this particular instance, Ro's mother did not come to her sexuality until her adulthood, so it offers a different perspective for readers to consider.

Though well written, fun, and an easy to read text, *Out of the Shadows* also dispels at least half the stereotypes of GLBTQ young adult literature and does more for the progress of the genre than any other current text. While it remains a disturbingly white middle class novel with artsy and beautiful characters set in suburbia, it also contains gay and lesbian adults who mentor teen GLBTQs. More importantly, the lesbian characters gain autonomy. Also, though Jodie starts out emotionally and physically isolated by the end she finds herself surrounded by friends, both straight and gay, with whom she can share her sexuality and her thoughts and feelings about it. Perhaps more than any of the novels teens in this novel honestly and openly, though perhaps awkwardly, discuss issues of sexuality with each other. To further the end of isolation, the text not only mentions the gay community, but the characters also visit a coffee house in a gay community at the end of the novel where a lesbian and a gay man, obviously life long friends, have a conversation. Not only does this break a stereotype, but the scene

also displays a fairly diverse crowd of lesbians, gay men, straight couples, and single people too (lacking only ethnic diversity) existing harmoniously. Breaking a further stereotype, the novel depicts a straight male, Mark, falling in love with Jodie, a twist not usually seen: “women are shown falling for gay men, but men are never shown falling for lesbians” (Jenkins 47). To some extent this novel also shows portions of the natural coming out process that Jenkins notes appear in autobiography but not in fiction (Jenkins 49).

The most recent of the texts, published in 2004, *Lucky* provides valuable insight into the state of international GLBTQ young adult literature. Though the text was published simultaneously in the United Kingdom and the United States, it seems less Americanized than many other international texts; the protagonist, Sam, at least maintains a distinctly British voice and tone. Likewise, while the text does tend too much toward the white middle class stereotype, it does at least show moments of diversity when the characters travel to London and visit Camden Town and Old Compton Street. Moreover, though it remains a far cry from a multicultural text, the protagonist at least experiences moments of cross cultural pondering. He wonders, for example, “if this was an English thing, or if it’s difficult to be yourself anywhere in the world. If we lived somewhere else, would it be a problem to get close to your male friends?” (De Oliveira 100-101).

Perhaps most importantly, *Lucky* is the first, and only, GLBTQ book that has a bisexual protagonist. A fairly typical British teen, Sam likes football, attends university, and hangs out with his friends, but he is a little confused: he likes both boys and girls. The novel discusses issues of labeling and sexuality through Sam who likes to sit on the

toilet and contemplate his life. During these sessions he explores his feelings as well as societal issues. Sam experiments with many labels, bisexual, omnisexual, and multisexual among them, but he chooses to think of himself as “unstraight;” unlike some critics he is very careful not to mistake himself for gay. While the text remains dominated by male characters, as an improvement it at least gives Sam a female best friend, though lesbians remain suspiciously absent from the text. Additionally, the text shows Sam not only struggling to figure out his sexuality, but also sharing that struggle with his group of friends. Moreover, Sam’s narrative comes closer to the natural process of discovery than many others; a fact that also influences the idea of community. While Sam does not necessarily find a large community of other GLBTQs of which to be a part, he does seek out a friend who is also “unstraight” and who has had more experience than Sam.

Notes

¹ In this instance I have used the terms gay and lesbian to stand for GLBTQ since cataloging, indexing, and searching use both terms are more frequently for ease. The remainder of this essay will use the more inclusive term GLBTQ.

² Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer / questioning. To be precise, gay and lesbian rights are really the ones at issue and in discussion on the political stage at the moment. Transgender rights have really yet to make it to the table and bisexuals generally find themselves classified as heterosexual or gay / lesbian depending upon the relationship they are involved in at the moment. Queer for these purposes may be considered as gay or lesbian. Questioning while not necessarily significant in the rights struggle is paramount to the issue at hand of young adult literature and describes an individual who is in the process (at whatever stage) of identifying his or her sexuality.

³ In his 1997 (three years after Bauer's) article "Honoring Their Stories, Too: Literature for Gay and Lesbian Teens," Michael Cart notes (on the authority of Paul Gibson and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services's Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide) "that 30 [sic] percent of the teenagers who commit suicide do so because of fear, confusion, anxiety, or even persecution resulting from their being – or suspecting that they might be – homosexual."

⁴ Authenticity poses a problem of its own as Susan Stan points out in her article "Going Global: World Literature for American Children." Because of translation issues, the publishing process, and economic factors, too frequently the "international" books that we deliver to the American child reader remain too far removed from their original form and sterilized, or cleaned up, for an American audience and market (175).

⁵ See Susan Stan's article "Going Global: World Literature for American Children." *Theory into Practice*. 38.3: (1999). 168-177. This issue will be discussed further in this essay as well.

⁶ It may prove a worthy research endeavor to explore if a GLBTQ text has ever been published that has *not* been placed on the ALA banned or challenged list.

⁷ My summary of Jenkins's points is very simplified in order to consolidate my argument. However, Jenkins makes a point of looking at all of the works and details how each fits into each of her

numerous categories and what it tells us both about the works and the categories. She even includes number charts. It is an article well worth a close reading for anyone interested in GLBTQ young adult literature.

⁸ While this is a valid and observant point, we must also consider the differences in genre. Unlike autobiography which generally reflects over a number of years, fiction generally focuses on a very specific time period. GLBTQ young adult fiction especially tends to focus on the coming out process / dilemma. As such, these novels simply cannot reflect the entire process, which is not as linear as Jenkins's article suggests and can take years to complete.

⁹ Some notable authors and texts have taken some relatively big steps. Julie Anne Peters at least mentions bisexuality briefly in her text *Keeping You a Secret*. Also, her novel *Luna* addresses transgender / transsexual issues. Likewise, many of Alex Sanchez's novels have been highly praised. *Boy Meets Boy* by David Levithan shatters many stereotypes, though it remains a problematic text because the story exists in a realm somewhere between modern realism and fantasy.

¹⁰ An acronym BDSM stands for the abbreviations B&D, D&S, S&M, which in turn stand for bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism. For more information on this topic, see "B/D," "D/S," and "S/M" in "A Descriptive Dictionary and Atlas of Sexology" by Francoeur.

¹¹ If indeed such a thing as a "global publishing industry" actually exists. Generally speaking publishing exists as a localized industry. Each country has its own, though some countries like America and the United Kingdom have more power, influence and acceptance in other countries. See Susan Stan's article, "Going Global: World Literature for American Children," for more detail.

¹² Indicates year of original publication / copyright date.

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